

Question: How to write a good college essay? Answer: Be true to yourself.

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Sarah Riley's first attempt at writing her college admissions essay didn't go so well. The senior at Walton High School in Marietta tried writing about a friend's mother who died. It represented the serious, weighty topic students assume admissions officers want to read.

"But it didn't connect with me," Riley said. "It just felt boring and weak. It was like I was trying too hard."

So she started over. This time Riley, who wants to study pre-med, wrote about her fascination with medicine. She wrote about watching medical shows and documentaries while her friends watched *Gilmore Girls*. She described going to medical anatomy camp and included a humorous story about carrying a cup of urine past some college students.

"This is the hardest part of the application," Riley said. "It's so weird to be writing about myself. You're trying to think of a significant experience, and it's hard because you want something meaningful. But you want to come across as funny and smart. It's a lot to do." Welcome to the college admissions essay, which high school seniors are scrambling to write this fall. The essay is an opportunity for students to share something about themselves that cannot be found in any other part of the application. Admissions officers try to gain insight into the applicant after reading 150 to 500 words.

Students applying to the University of Georgia write four essays, each limited to 200 words. Topics include selecting a musical piece that represents the student's "theme song" and the open-ended "tell us an interesting or amusing story about yourself that you have not already shared in your application."

"The essay is not something that gets you admitted or denied," said Nancy McDuff, associate vice president for admissions and enrollment management at UGA. "It can help you get in, but it can also work against you."

When McDuff and her team read the essays, they're looking at how well students communicate their ideas and describe the information they're sharing.

"If I want to read a great literary work, I'm going to read Faulkner," McDuff said. "What I want to do is read the students' words. I want to get to know the students."

A strong essay shows what students are interested in and what they're committed to, said Jean Jordan, dean of admissions at Emory University.

Many students write about church mission trips, but most have trouble taking it beyond a travel diary, Jordan said. Students should address what they will do with the lessons learned and what actions they took because of the experience, she advised.

"My first advice is to be less concerned about what we want and more concerned about what you want us to know about you," Jordan said. "You can write about more mundane topics. What's important is to make it your own."

Jordan recounted students who wrote strong essays about overcoming struggles in academic classes or how they learned about their neighbors through a newspaper route. Mary Elizabeth Morse, a senior at Pace Academy in Atlanta, wrote six essays for seven colleges. She's using the same essay for multiple colleges.

One essay was about an Outward Bound experience the summer before her junior year. Without the stress of school or her friends nearby, Morse said she was free to be alone with her thoughts and learned what she's capable of.

That experience became her essay. She wrote the first draft in about 2 1/2 hours, has finished a second draft, and may do one more.

At Northview High in Johns Creek, teachers include college essay writing skills in their lessons. Students write in journals during the first five minutes of class and assignments include writing 15 sentences, each starting with "I am ..." to get them used to writing about themselves, said Brian Rawlin, an English teacher.

Students often struggle with grammar, use weak vocabulary, and include text messaging lingo in their essays, he said. English teachers provide students with editing to correct grammatical mistakes, but they will not adjust the essays for content, he said. If students turn in essays rife with errors or fail to answer the questions, it shows they're not serious about the college, Jordan said.

"We don't expect perfection," McDuff said. "We know 17- and 18-year-olds are a work in progress. That's why they're applying to college."

Essay Writing 101

Writing college admissions essays can be stressful. Here are some tips to make the process a little easier:

- ◆ Keep a journal during high school. Your writings could provide good essay topics.
- ◆ Stay focused and personal. Don't just give the admissions people a laundry list of what you've done. Write to show them who you are.
- ◆ Avoid "thesaurusitis" -- using a thesaurus to include more impressive words in the essay. Don't use a word you don't know.
- ◆ Remember this is your essay, not your parents' or teachers'. You can go to them for editing advice, but the essay must be your words and thoughts.
- ◆ Proofread closely. Spell check won't catch that you wrote "form" instead of "from."
- ◆ Make sure the essay clearly describes you. If you lost it, a friend should know by reading it that it's yours.

Source: Emory University, University of Georgia, Northview High, College Counseling Center of Atlanta, and Towles Educational Consulting.

Blog advice

Admissions officers at many colleges write blogs to answer students questions and provide application tips. These blogs also include samples of essays that have left a strong impression.

University of Georgia's blog can be found at: ugaadmissions.blogspot.com

Georgia Tech's blog can be found at: gatechadmissions.blogspot.com

Emory University's blog can be found at: emoryadmission.wordpress.com