

# WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY: *DO's* & *DON'Ts*



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"I read your college application essay. First of all the word 'COLLEGE' has two 'L's."



**WHAT IS THE AVERAGE %  
OF TIME AN ADMISSION  
OFFICER SPENDS ON THE  
ESSAY PORTION OF YOUR  
COLLEGE APPLICATION?**

**33%**



***“SOMETIMES WE LET STUDENTS  
WRITE THEMSELVES IN.”***

- DEAN OF ADMISSION, SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

***“THE ESSAY GIVES US  
SOMETHING THE NUMBERS  
DON’T REVEAL.”***

- DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION, GORDON COLLEGE

***“THE ESSAY CAN BE A  
POWERFUL ‘TIPPER’  
IN CLOSE CASES.”***

- DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION, BATES COLLEGE

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# COLLEGE ESSAY: DO's

# *GIVE THE ADMISSION OFFICER A REASON TO KEEP READING*

- Put a lot of time and effort into your *introduction*
  - One technique is to **create mystery** or **intrigue** in the first paragraph
  - One vivid sentence might do:  
*"My favorite science project was a complete failure."*



# *KEEP YOUR FOCUS NARROW*

- The essay should prove a single point
  - The reader must be able to find your main idea and follow it from the beginning to end
- Essays that try to be **too comprehensive** end up sounding **watered-down**



# PROVE IT WITH ANECDOTES

- **Anecdote:** A short, true story that demonstrates a point
- Develop your main idea with *vivid and specific facts, events, and examples:*
  - **Boring and Generic:** *"I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."*
  - **Much Better:** *"During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."*



# *KEEP IT PERSONAL*

- The college wants to learn more about *you*, not one of your friends or one of your relatives
- It should be *your story* that can come from only *you*





# *KNOW YOUR COLLEGE*

- Any factual errors in the essay will reveal that you really haven't thought deeply about your choice
  - For example, writing that you want to attend Syracuse University to major in international business would be a blunder (*NOTE: Syracuse doesn't have an international business major*)



# ***ANSWER THE QUESTION***

- Many students try to turn a 500-word essay into a complete autobiography; not surprisingly, they fail to answer the question
- ***Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to answer the question***
- After you are done writing, ask yourself:

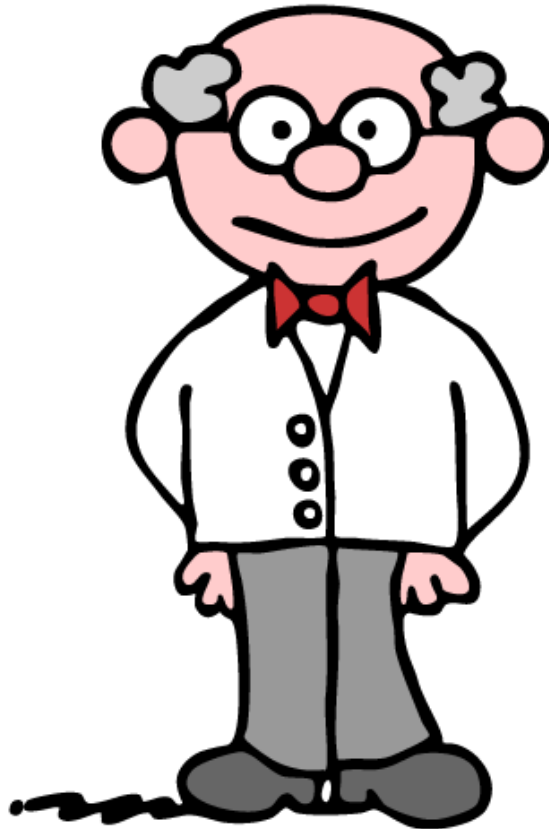
***Is every single sentence crucial to the essay?***





COLLEGE ESSAY:  
*DON'Ts*

**DON'T VISUALIZE THE**  
**ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE AS A**  
**BUNCH OF STUFFY OLD**  
**PROFESSORS**



# *DON'T TELL THEM WHAT YOU THINK THEY WANT TO HEAR*

- They read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor
- *Tell something interesting about YOU*, not just what you think they want to hear



# ***DON'T WRITE A RESUME***

- **Don't repeat** information that is found elsewhere in the application
- **NO:**
  - *"During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."*



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# RESOURCES

# *ADDITIONAL RESOURCES*

- College Board gives great tips about writing a college essay. It also offers critiques of sample essays.
  - [www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html)
- Sometimes, the best tips are given directly from the colleges themselves. For example, check out:
  - <http://www.admissions.umich.edu/essay/tips/>
  - <http://www.virginia.edu/undergradadmission/writingtheessay.html>
- Connecticut College compiled a number of essays they believe “worked”:
  - <http://www.conncoll.edu/admission/essays.htm>
- The University of Chicago is known for its provocative essay questions – take a look, it could get your creative juices flowing:
  - <https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/apply/essays/>





# *SOURCES*

- The College Application Essay by Sarah Myers McGinty
- [www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html)
- [www.essayedge.com](http://www.essayedge.com)
- <http://www.mefa.org/uploadedFiles/guidanceCounselors/Essay%20Tips.pdf>
- <http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/tip-sheet-essay/>
- <http://www.bacallcartoons.com/>

