## COLLEGE ESSAYS

The college essay represents the most time-consuming, difficult, and important part of your applications. While your scores and grades have already been set in stone and there is little else that you can do to help you improve them before you send in your application, there is always more that you can do to help improve your essay. Moreover, the essay -- along with your teacher recommendations -- is the place where you will come alive to the admissions officers, where you will become much more than merely a series of letters or numbers on a page.

### WHAT MAKES A GOOD ESSAY?

Every successful essay has two very important elements: (1) The essay shows fluent writing so that you demonstrate good technical control of language. Colleges are very concerned about the writing proficiency of their students, and the essay -- along with the English teacher recommendation and the SAT-II test in writing -- is one of the only ways for a student to demonstrate those good writing skills. (2) The essay should reveal an honest and thoughtful portrayal of yourself, your values, your accomplishments, and your goals.

**Here are a few practical hints for your writing:**

-**Leave yourself plenty of time to write your essays**. You may even be wise to have a draft or two of your essay completed by the time that you return for your senior year. If you aren't yet to the point in the summer before your senior year to begin writing a coherent essay, use your summer reading and writing journal as a springboard for ideas. Begin writing about incidents, activities, or people that have shaped your life and your values -- you'll get credit from your English teachers for being introspective and some of the ideas may evolve into essay topics.

**-Ask a teacher, advisor, parent, or counselor whose judgment you trust to read your essay.** They will be able to point out mistakes and to give you an outsider's opinion about what is most or least compelling in the paper.

**-Show, don't just tell.** Make sure that you use anecdotes and examples to back up what you say about yourself. It's not enough to say that you care about children -- what have you done in your life to show that you do?

**-Tell, don't just show.** An anecdote alone is not sufficient for a college essay. At some point, you need to reflect on your purpose, explain what you took from the experience.

-**While it is good to use your essay to "flesh out" some of the things that may be elsewhere in your application** (i.e. you might write your essay about something that happened to you during a summer experience in France that you've included in your application), **don't merely use your essay to reiterate things that are already clearly spelled out** -- it's a waste of an opportunity.

-**Don't take anything for granted.** Unless you tell the admissions office that you spent an entire summer working in a nursing home, they may never know. As long as you are honest and not arrogant, you should feel fine about being your own advocate. Feel good about being enthusiastic and positive about yourself.

**-Use inclusive language.** You have been instructed in your English class about how to use language that will not be regarded as sexist. You should heed those warnings now. Don't alienate half of your audience by use of masculine pronouns to refer to all people.

**BE HONEST:** If you do not think that you and what you have accomplished in your life should earn you a place in a particular school, then don't apply to that school. Far too often students feel that they have to market or package themselves in a particular way in order to impress colleges. Usually, this simply isn't the case. If you are a genuinely interesting, kind, and complex person, you should be able to write a sincere essay that expresses all of your complexities, and you should trust that the colleges will be impressed by it. On the other hand, if you try to imply things about yourself that simply aren't accurate or true, colleges are likely to see through it and regard your application with a cynical eye.

**HOW LONG SHOULD THE ESSAY BE? I**t should be more than two thirds of a page and less than three full pages. Any shorter seems like a cop-out; any longer risks becoming cumbersome to read.

**WHAT SHOULD YOU WRITE ABOUT?** Anything that is of real interest to the student can make for a good essay. Here are some possibilities:

-**Autobiographical:** Think of a moment or series of connected moments in your life that has had some kind of powerful impact on you, that has somehow shaped who you are now. Be careful of the obvious (i.e. "How my trip to France taught me independence"), but if the paper is genuinely reflective it can be an interesting subject.

**-Social or Political interests:** Think of a political cause or social idea that you believe in. These are most effective when they are somehow tied to some of your other interests and activities.

**-Intellectual interests:** Think of a particular author or topic that you have studied in depth that has had a powerful effect on you. Be sure to explain how you have studied or followed that concept beyond the curriculum.

**WHAT SHOULD YOU NOT WRITE ABOUT?** Remember that this is one of the only chances that you'll have to present yourself and that you won't have a chance to call and explain your topic. There are some topics that you are well advised to beware of:

**-Your girlfriend.** Although she may be very dear to you, she most likely won't come off as impressively to an admissions office.

**-Controversial political issues.** While you might stir up a debate in the classroom or on dorm with a bold statement for the superiority of your religion or the legalization of various drugs, it is likely that admissions officers will only be offended.

**-Your greatest athletic achievement.** Unless there is a truly fascinating interior twist, any essay about an athletic contest will tend to run into others of the same topic.

**-Your summer trip to Europe.** While your summer trip might have been a very important moment in your personal development, it is probably the most common essay that colleges receive. If you insist on writing about it, make sure that you have a new angle - don't simply write about how you learned to appreciate other cultures or to be an independent person.  
  
**-Anything that sounds elitist.** Some college admissions officers assume that students who attend expensive private schools may be spoiled and may not appreciate the advantages that they have received. Writing about your experience at the country club or a description of the family maid can reinforce some stereotypes about private school students (as can an essay about a very expensive trip to Europe, mentioned above).