

Woolf College Consulting



THE WRITE STUFF

Essay Writing Essentials

By Betsy F. Woolf

What is it about the college essay that strikes fear into so many hearts?

The difficulty in imagining that a high school senior, with such limited life experiences, can actually have something to say? The fear that a teen's future rests on the strength of 500 well-written and poignant words?

Well, yes -- and no. Although the essay is an essential part of the college application for many schools, it's not the single factor on which a college acceptance rests. A great essay alone will not overcome a lackluster high school GPA or an attempt to skulk through high school taking the easiest classes offered.

So why spend so much time crafting an essay? "Because it's the one chance for a student's personality and character to shine through," says Paula Tevnan, assistant director of admissions for Lehigh University, whose recruitment territory includes Westchester County. "It's the one way to differentiate yourself from other students."

And what about the topic? "The student doesn't have to write about how he saved the world or did some grandiose event," says Tevnan. "I've seen essays on a small moment in a student's life or even retelling a conversation. What's important is to make sure the student isn't just repeating the list of activities that's already in the

application. And we can tell when a student has done several drafts; the essay just flows better.”

If you check out the website for Connecticut College in New London, CT., you’ll find about 15 college essays from admitted students, including an essay by an undergraduate from Larchmont. They demonstrate exactly what Tevnan is talking about: individuality, personal insight, good writing, and often, an interesting twist on a typical teenage experience, like going to summer camp, using the Internet, participating in crew, and playing with paper dolls.

So what kind of essay questions will students have to answer? Generally, they fall into one of the following five categories:

*** Describe a significant experience, event or achievement and its impact on you.**

Here’s the chance to reflect on a significant event and what the student has learned from it. This can include something that’s happening at school, an extracurricular or work experience, a summer experience (the summer between junior and senior years yields lots of essay fodder), a family experience or dynamic, a volunteer experience, a struggle or disappointment that has been overcome, or a particular achievement or talent.

*** Why have you selected this college?**

The answer to this question requires research; mining the college’s Internet site is a great place to do it. Just like anyone, colleges like to be flattered and want to know that students aren’t applying frivolously.

*** Name a significant person who has had an impact on you – or if you could be any person, who would you be?**

Students can write about people they admire, such as a family member, friend, teacher, coach, literary or historical figure, clergy, mentor, and employers, but the essay must talk about how that person has had an effect on the student.

*** Describe a particular local, national or international issue or a piece of literature, music or art that has meaning for you.**

This question is for the student who is passionate about a cause or has been moved by something in the news or culture. Colleges like to hear that students care about something other than themselves.

*** What would you bring to the diversity of the college campus?**

Diversity doesn't only mean black, white or Hispanic, or whether a student lives in Katonah or Kentucky. It can just as easily be the Westchester student who is an online NASCAR racing fan or the business student who spent a summer doing science research.

When it's time to submit the essay, Tevnan recommends students do two things before hitting that *Submit* button:

1. **Give it to someone** – a parent or teacher, for example - to check for spelling and grammar. Tevnan tells the story of one student who submitted a well-written essay except for one thing: he referred to an activity as “peasant-hunting” when what he was talking about was “pheasant-hunting.”

2. **Make sure the right essay is sent to the right school.** “We understand that students use the same essay for multiple applications,” Tevnan notes, “but make sure the essay has the right college or university name on it. Otherwise it looks like the student is either sloppy or just doesn't care.”