

# How to Write the College Application Essay

# It's Gotta Be You

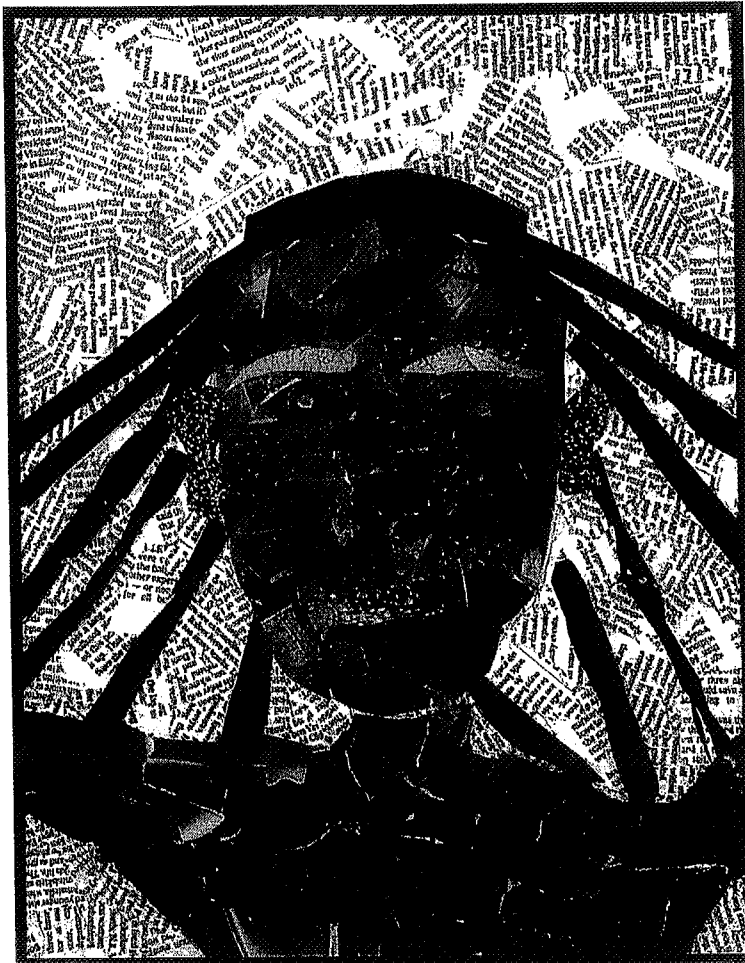
by Zoë Kashner

**H**ow much does your transcript say about you? How about your SAT scores? In certain ways, not much. No matter what your grades and test scores are, they don't capture—or communicate—who you really are.

Almost any college or university you apply to wants to know more about you than your grades or test scores can tell them. This is why they have you write an essay. The essay question may be "Describe a person who influenced you," or "Tell us why you and this school are a good match,"—some colleges don't even have a specific question, but will ask, "What more do we need to know about you?" Whatever the question, the essay gives you a chance to show aspects of your personality and abilities that can't be easily quantified—your sense of humor, your dedication to social justice, your strong sense of tradition and family.

I graduated from college a year ago last June, but I clearly remember the agonizing process of writing the essay. I'd stare at the computer screen, my mind filled with questions. What makes me different from other people? What kind of essay will let them see that I'm mature enough for college, and have the brains and personality to do well there?

These are big questions, and I can't answer them for you. But you can answer them for yourself. To help get you started, I consulted the experts at some popular colleges and universities, and have put together a strategy that



"SELF PORTRAIT" BY KIMBERLY LINDSEY Lincoln, RI

should make the essay-writing experience a lot easier, and maybe even fun!

## Putting Pen to Paper

Most application essays require no research, no five-paragraph structure, and no bibliography. However, waiting until the last minute to write is not a good idea. You need time to brainstorm, to write multiple drafts. It's the one part of your application that can truly reflect your personality, and it's worth making the effort to show yourself clearly.

"The hardest part is getting started," says Steve Colee, director of admissions at Macalaster College. "I sometimes advise students to do a quick and informal survey of people they trust,

maybe teachers, or parents if they have that kind of relationship. They should ask: "When you think of me, what qualities stand out?"

You might also want to try keeping a pad of paper with you at all times. Write down ideas as they occur to you. If you keep a journal, read over your old entries. Write letters. Practice getting your thoughts down on paper.

## All About You

"The key is for people to write what they think is important for us to know, not what they think we want to hear," notes Eric Kaplan, associate dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. Write about things that interest you. Include details of your academic accomplishments, but don't just reiterate your statistics.

Be patient with your own false starts. I wasted two weeks working on an essay entitled, "What I Learned From Failing the Driver's License Test Six Times." It may seem to you, as it did to my mother, to be the perfect humorous starting point, but it didn't work for me—I found my repeated failure to legally take the wheel more infuriating than funny. The point is, if humor is your strong suit, go for it. If not, don't feel that you have to be a comedian. The same goes for "meaningful moments" about the death of the dog you hated, or the trip to China when you were 2 years old. If you initially choose a topic that just doesn't work, brainstorm again, and find something else.

## Editing Yourself

"Presentation is important," says Kaplan. "We read the essays very

carefully.” This means that a spellchecker isn’t going to cut it as your sole editing device. Even if you’re a grammar pro, you probably want to have several sets of eyes run over your final draft.

Remember to write clearly and plainly, as well. The easier your essay is to read, the more attention the reader can pay to what you have to say.

Don’t forget to back up general statements about your interests with examples. Don’t just say, “I feel ready to take on the challenges of a big-city education.” Explain how you thought your decision through, and what it means to you. Make sure to give enough information about yourself that the reader isn’t left thinking, “Wow, this was a polished essay, but I don’t know anything about the writer!”

And be creative, but not at the expense of clarity or communication. “In the past, we received a lot of essays that are very creative,” says Michael McCawley, associate director of admissions at the University of California at Santa Cruz, “But we really need to know more about the student in particular areas.”

### **Do Not Freak Out. Repeat: Do Not Freak Out.**

Colleges and universities work under the assumption that as a high school graduate, you still have a lot to learn. “We aren’t looking for something flawless,” says Kaplan, “We understand that you’re 18 years old. We aren’t expecting Fitzgerald.”

Don’t be afraid to be young and inexperienced. If you’ve never traveled the world, never fought off a bear, never discovered the cure to a rare disease, it’s okay! “We like youthful optimism,” says Kaplan. “We love it when students don’t yet know what they want to do.”

I sure didn’t know what I wanted to do with my life when I was 18 years old. I ended up writing my essay about my five fabulous career fantasies: botany, book criticism, forestry, art, and world travel. Reading it over five years later I realize it was a little dewy-eyed and not exactly brilliant. Despite this, I can still see myself in it—and that’s the key.

# Three Real Essays: *Two That Work, and One that Doesn't*

## **■ An Essay About a Change in Your Life**

I used to be a pretty deep guy. I watched foreign films, read Nietzsche, and stayed up all night “contemplating jazz.” I was Jack Kerouac living in a fire hut on top of Desolation Peak. I was Gary Snyder seeking enlightenment in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand. I was Ken Kesey, Jimi Hendrix, and Timothy Leary all rolled up into one gigantic mess of pseudo-intellectual, adolescent, fancy boarding school beat poet wannabe. I was a moron.

I blew off my schoolwork, not because I was lazy, but because I thought that schoolwork was shallow, too insignificant for me, the vivacious intellectual, the dharma bum, the Zen lunatic wanderer. How could my teachers expect me to do homework when life around me was all so futile, so meaningless? I was sure that I was a tortured soul destined to lead a life full of angst and pain.

That was last fall, more than a year ago. In February of last year, I left my hipster friends and their coffee-house conversations behind, to move back to the suburbs of Philadelphia and my conservative, unhip public high school. Suburban Philadelphia is not the easiest place in the world to be sixties cool and stylish. There aren’t many smoke-filled coffee houses or hippie wanderers. It’s clean here, upper middle class—you know, the Ford Explorer, Saturday evening Mass. country club for dinner scene. I came back to Philadelphia because it isn’t all that “hip,” because there is nothing “profound” to do. I came home to get myself together. It

was time to grow up.

I’m not as cool as I used to be. I never do anything very exciting or off the wall, at least not by my old standards. My friends from boarding school have for the most part become nothing more than distant memories. They’re all off in New York City or Mexico pretending to work on their spirituality, but really just partying their lives away. I stay home a lot. I’m at the library a couple of nights a week. I read, I write letters, I do some painting.

Last weekend, I watched *The Color Purple* with my mom, collected some weather data for a chemistry project, and had a tea party with my little sister. I’ve been spending time with the people I met in my high school production of *Arsenic and Old Lace*, too. I feel balanced; I feel like myself, I no longer want to tend bar in Tangiers or meditate in Sri Lanka—all right, maybe I do, but not right now. For so long, I wanted to be other people, to be a cultural icon, a legend in my own time. But in reality, I’m nothing like Keith Richards. Honestly, I’m a little scared of sex and drugs. I worry about pimples, whether my parents are still happily married, where I’m going to be next year.

I came home. I grew up, I got my life back together. I’m still trying to find balance, but I no longer feel like a reckless child. I was sure that I could get away from myself by just pretending that I was someone else. But right now, I’m not looking to be “on the road.” I’m pretty happy being right where I am.

### **Why It Works**

This writer provides convincing details behind a basic change in his life—improved academic performance. The essay shows maturity, a sense of humor, and a refreshing lack of pretentiousness.

### **Writing Your Own**

Have you learned something new about yourself during high school? Everyone has gone through changes, and explaining the details of your experience can make a great essay.

# ESSAY DOs

- Choose a subject that you're passionate about.
- Write several rough drafts.
- Answer the question asked.
- Tailor your essay to each college or university you apply to.
- Include specific details that make the experience yours and no one else's.
- Develop a structured essay—draw the reader in with an enticing opening, develop your ideas logically, and end smoothly.
- Write plainly, and with correct spelling and grammar.
- Write something you'd like to read. Remember, your essay is being read by other human beings, not machines.

# and DON'Ts

- Never express cynicism about the point of writing an essay.
- Never write about how you couldn't figure out what to write about.
- Never write something witty that says nothing about what's important to you.
- Never rely solely on a spellchecker.
- Never break the rules about length, topic, or format.
- Never let parents, teachers, or friends get so involved that the essay stops being about you.

## 2. An Essay About Someone Important To You

I have always wanted to take his picture there in rehearsal, when he stands in the middle of a semicircle of upturned eyes and open mouths, waving his endless arms as though he were swimming through the music. At eight-thirty in the morning, when the rest of us are barely awake, Johannes Somary is at his lovable best. The sun opposite me shines on the sopranos and altos and silhouettes his aristocratic nose, shaggy brows, and frizz of hair against the window pane and the morning sky.

"Roll your R's!" he says. Then he stomps and wiggles, bellows and whispers, puts his fingers to his chin as if in prayer and opens his blue eyes so wide they seem to leap out directly into mine, to discover that mine are closed; I am nodding asleep to the march rhythms of Handel's Mass in Time of War. But not for long. He goes through every conceivable contortion and exertion to energize our eighty sleepy faces. It is as if his wild gestures could conduct electricity as well as music through the drowsy air into our voices. Sometimes I wonder what he would do if we returned in kind, bugging our eyes out, wriggling and twisting our bodies to the music. As it is, we continue to hold our notes too long or not long enough and we refuse to "dance" with the 3/4 time.

Every once in a while he launches into a boiling tirade. He "Swisses out." Then he reverts to European discipline: "If not every person is in this room at exactly eighteen minutes past eight o'clock, there will be no concert." He is the quintessential Swiss in other ways as well: we must learn to speak English, not Americantese, we must not be "cool" when singing Haydn, we must

get eight hours of sleep, be prompt, attentive, enunciate our consonants, and think about nothing else. This is the law according to Somary.

It works. His ridiculous energy and steaming rages do make us sit straighter, hold our scores higher and try a little harder. When he pleads, "Both feet on the floor—you cannot hope to sing if you do not support yourself," there is a second or two of shuffling and creaking as 160 legs are crossed and uncrossed. Then he spreads his own feet wide and arches his back a little, sticking out his pot belly and hitching up his belt. He's forever tucking in a stubborn shirt tail set free by quick tempi or forte passages. There is a lot of child in him. He can glower as furiously as a two-year when he says, "Elephants have memories, people have pencils—write it down!" Or he can smile so widely and coyly that I am afraid his grin will devour his ears and, like Beethoven, he will have to conduct from memory.

Of all my teachers, I feel the most loyalty to him because he devotes his entire self to his work. He does more than just wheedle a Haydn Mass out of us at a sleepy hour. His endless arm is as ready to wrap itself around my shoulders with a reassuring squeeze as it is to gyrate in 4/4 time, and he gives advice and drops of Somary-wisdom as freely as musical instruction. When he sits behind his messy desk after rehearsal and we sprawl—legs, arms, charter, book bags—on the couch in his comfortable office, he looks like a complacent Swiss Buddha, nodding and smiling those blue eyes at us, always there, always quirky, always inspiring to me.

### Why It Works

This is an essay about someone else, but we learn a lot about the writer as well. She respects dedication, discipline, and kindness. She enjoys writing, and does it well. All these details make the essay a good personal statement, one that will impress its readers.

### Writing Your Own

Choose someone you respect, and make a list of notes about him or her. Include details about what the person looks like, how he or she behaves, things he or she says. Use your notes to develop a strong portrait of someone you admire.

weak opening—  
needs better lead

### 3. An Essay About Yourself

what does  
this mean to  
you?

If someone were to ask me to describe myself, I

would have to say that I am a person of many interests. I enjoy a simple life, yet I am not afraid to try new things.

passive voice!

I have been fortunate enough to become exposed to a variety of life-styles at a very early age. During my travels to Europe I was able to visit Germany, Italy, and Switzerland. There, I learned about different cultures and how other people live. Watching and meeting people is one of the many things that I enjoy.

what?

Since the age of four, I have been dancing with "Dance Capri," a countrywide Italian-American folk-dancing group. My involvement in this organization has introduced me to people who are interested in the same things I am. We enjoy learning about our Italian heritage and pride ourselves in keeping up the folk-dancing tradition.

what does  
this mean to  
you?

Along with dancing, traveling, and meeting new people, I enjoy skiing and gymnastics. I usually ski in Vermont during my vacations, but last year I had the opportunity to ski in Quebec, Canada, for a week. I have always been on gymnastics teams, during the school year and the summer, and although I never won any special honors, I enjoy competitive gymnastics meets, especially the balance beam. For me, competing with a team has taught me what working for one common cause and reaching one common

This is the  
4th "enjoy."

goal are like.

One of the most relaxing hobbies I enjoy is

cooking. When time permits, I bake and I prepare special meals for my family. I learned how to cook through various cooking courses that I took when I was younger. In high school, I could only fit one food preparation class into my program.

Travel, dancing,  
sports & how  
cooking!

Along with this class, I enjoyed a variety of other courses in high school. However, the ones I liked the most were jewelry, Italian, and history. I believe, though, that I made the most out of every course I took in high school.

General info is  
not necessary.  
They already  
have your  
transcript.

Out of school, I invest a good deal of time in various part-time jobs. My work experience includes cashier and hostess work in an Italian restaurant, and my present job, which is working as a Gal Friday in an insurance office. I also baby-sit when I have the time.

Again, another  
new topic

High school was and still is a time of growing and maturing for me. Although working hard and getting good grades has always been my first priority, I also established and set many of the values that guide my life today. I can confidently say that in my senior year of high school I am ready to meet the challenges of college. I am ready to move on, and I see a bright future ahead of me.

A heavy topic  
that deserves  
some  
attention

#### Why It Doesn't Work

Did you enjoy reading this? Do you feel like you know the writer better? Probably not. This essay lists the writer's myriad interests, but says nothing about why they matter to her. There are many interesting essays hidden in this piece, but we don't get to read them. She could have described visiting Italy, and her experiences there as an Italian-American. She could have explained what it is

about cooking that enthralls her. She could have explored the idea of tradition and explained why it matters to her. By mentioning so many different activities without delving into the details on any of them, the writer sells herself short.

#### How To Avoid Writing This Essay

Any one of us could write an essay like this—general, distant, and

unfocused. Re-read this piece and circle items that could be developed into a strong essay (e.g. "Although I never won any honors, I enjoy competitive gymnastics meets"). Cross out items that are too general, or unsubstantiated. When you write your own essay, try to be just as tough. It's scary to reveal things about yourself, but it's better than not giving the reader details they need to understand your point of view.