

# Writing the College Application Essay

by Zoë Kashner

Look at it as a chance to tell your side of the story

## 1. Why the Essay Is a Good Thing

**B**y the time you are filling out your college applications, your high school record is pretty well set. You have your grades, and your lists of activities. You've created good relationships with teachers that are now yielding strong letters of recommendation, or ... you haven't. At this point, there's little you can do to change your record, and if there were any missteps, faux pas, bumbblings, blunders, or even giant mistakes, you sort of have to live with them. But here's the good news:

**With your college application essay you get a chance to explain** any missteps, faux pas, bumbblings, blunders or mistakes. Your grades and letters of recommendation reflect other people's opinions about you, but with the essay, you can tell your side of the story. If not quite an opportunity for redemption—if redemption is required—it's pretty close. And if your record is close to perfect, the essay gives you an opportunity to round out your profile, to add interest to those long, boring lists of A's and sky-high test scores.

So, don't worry, be happy: Done well, the essay can only help. And if you relax a little, it shouldn't be that hard to write. After all, aren't you just finishing many years of school? Haven't you spent a lot of that time writing? Everything you need for success on your essay is already there in your head—your knowledge, thoughts, and feelings, and the writing skills you have been practicing for years.

## 2. What's the Big Idea?

**T**here are two types of college-application essay questions. The first, and most common, asks you to write about any topic, as

long as it reveals something about you. With the whole world to choose from, coming up with a strong, clear idea can be difficult.

**Start by putting yourself in the position of your reader**, a nice, smart admissions officer who wants to know you better. Imagine the questions that admissions officer may have about you.



Shawn Hall/Painting Scholastic Art Award 2000

"It's important for the essay to be legible, but we aren't making fine literary distinctions. We believe we can teach people how to write."

—Marilyn McGrath Lewis, director of undergraduate admissions, Harvard University

Why did you quit orchestra in 10th grade? What did it take to raise your grade point average from a C one semester to an A the next? Write down the answers. Just take notes.

It's also OK to ask others for help. People who know you well can tell what you what they think is interesting about you. Again, just take notes.

After a few days, look over your lists of thoughts. Which ideas seem central to the way you think about yourself? Start with one of those topics.

The second type of essay asks you to respond to a specific question. Make sure you answer the question that is asked. Use brainstorming skills to provide supporting examples and details for your main point.

## 3. Write It

**O**nce you've settled on an idea, it's time to get your thoughts on paper. The best way to do this is simply to start writing. Often called "free writing," this technique asks you to write in a sustained way without censoring yourself. And it works. **Write without stopping for at least three full pages.** You may wind up discovering a whole new topic that is more interesting, and more heartfelt, than what you started out with.

You can also free write if you feel

# Three Real Essays

Two That Work, and One that Doesn't

yourself freezing up when faced with a specific question. In that case, free write about and around that topic.

The result of your free write will be rambling and disorganized but full of substance. Read your work over carefully, and try to find your main point, then write it down in one sentence. Ta Da! You have a thesis.

After you've found your thesis, identify the parts of your free write that are worthy of inclusion in an essay. If your thesis can stand alone as an opening, start there. If it needs an anecdote to introduce it, that's fine too. **Your first draft should be more carefully written than your free write, but don't parse every sentence.** In this first draft, it's important to make sure that all the details and ideas get full expression.

## 4. Revise

**R**evision is not spellchecking. It is a close review of your first draft. Look for major errors, lack of flow, poor transitions, or weak organization. Use the checklist on page 14 to make sure your essay meets the basic elements of good writing.

## 5. OK, Now Proofread

**O**nce you have a strong second draft, **check for spelling and grammar mistakes.** This is important! Errors alienate your readers, and alienation is not your goal.

## 6. Be Yourself

**R**emember: You are more prepared for this task than you may feel. Keep in mind that your favorite school is recruiting high school seniors, not Nobel Laureates. **No one expects you to be older, more experienced, or more knowledgeable than you are.** They only expect you to be yourself.

## 1. An essay about your choice of subject

**A**dults tend to label adolescence as a difficult stage in development, but adults often have trouble knowing just how to help teenagers with their problems. Some of my friends realized that we were the ones best suited to helping one another with our growing pains. We would sit informally and discuss problems that seemed monstrous to us, but when we analyzed them we discovered that they were not so unusual or upsetting. Based on that realization,

"We're looking for the essay to bring the rest of the application together, to bring the application to life."

—Tami Hrasky, senior associate dean,  
Grinnell College

we decided to formalize our discussions and open a peer-counseling center

where any student could come to discuss any problem. My experience in peer counseling has helped me to mature and develop new interpersonal skills, and I have gained confidence in my ability to handle my problems more successfully in the future.

When I first became involved in peer counseling, I was the one receiving help. When my brother, John, had informed me and my parents that he was not going to attend college, I felt an increased burden to achieve to compensate for my brother's lack of motivation. As a result, I became depressed. I discussed my problem with other students in the peer-counseling center, and realized that I was placing an unnecessary burden on myself because, in reality, my parents never asked me to work harder. I simply felt guilty about my brother's decision, and that caused my depression.

By working through this problem, I realized the value of sharing my concerns and decided to help the

other students feel better about themselves. When my friend told me about the problems she had at home with her mother and her stepfather, I asked her to come to the center. At first she was reluctant to reveal herself because she was afraid others would not understand, but her need to share was more compelling. The example of my own success helped me to persuade my friend that by discussing her problems she could deal with her situation at home more effectively and also feel better about herself. As one of her peer counselors, I was able to understand her needs. As a result, I could help her formulate a plan of action to overcome her difficulties.

I know that the experience I have gained through peer counseling will be of use to me in whatever career I pursue. The ability to listen, analyze, and develop a plan of action is essential to everyday problem solving. I am confident that when I go away to school I will be able to deal with my problems and share my strength with others.

### What Works

This writer knows what she wants to tell us. She participated in a meaningful activity, which helped her grow up. She provides concrete examples, and frames her ideas in a straightforward and organized way.

### What Could Be Better

Perhaps because of length requirements, the writer doesn't include details that may help the reader understand the depth of her experience. Instead of telling us a story, and letting us draw the conclusion that she has matured, she spells it out for us in a way that makes this essay a dry read.

## Essay Editing Checklist

Make sure the following statements are true for your essay.

- You can clearly state the point of your essay.
- Your writing stays focused on this point.
- You answered the question you were asked.
- Your first two sentences are engaging; they make you want to continue reading.
- Your conclusion sums up the essay.
- The words you use came from your heart, not a thesaurus.
- You avoided the passive voice.
- You carefully proofread for grammar and spelling.
- Two other people have read and critiqued your essay.
- Every sentence has a reason for being there.
- Anyone who reads your essay will know it's about you and by you.
- The essay sounds like you, not someone you think you should be.

### Web Surfing for Essay Help

These two sites offer excellent, ethical help with your essay:

<http://www.ivyessays.com/undergrad/index.html>

E-mail in your essay and get a substantial letter back offering criticism and suggestions. The site charges \$75 for one critique, up to \$400 for a former admissions officer to guide you through the whole process.

<http://www.northfork.com/essaywiz/> The Essay Wizard is a former teacher who "won't write it for you." You first click through about 10 pages of advice. Then the Wizard can critique your essay—\$50 for a one-time critique, \$75 for the whole process.

## 2. An Essay About a Childhood Experience

A creek is no place for shoes. I think it's unreasonable to ask children to keep their shoes on in such a place. My bare feet were always covered with calluses from walking down the rough pavement of Peardale Street and around the corner, past the weeping willows, but not as far as the Lindsays' squeaky old swing set. It was hard to see from the road, and as far as I could tell, nobody ever went there—except for me. Large pines nearby stood tall and erect, looking down at the ripples and currents that nudged each other playfully, like the children in the back seat of a car on a long drive. Stones and pebbles lined the shallow bottom and allowed the water to glide in creative patterns over their smooth surfaces. Larger, moss-covered rocks dotted the bank and provided ideal spots for a child to sit and watch and wonder.

The creek taught me things; it was my mentor. Once I discovered tadpoles in the eddies and pools that lined the small rivulet. A cupped hand and a cleaned-out mayonnaise jar aided me in scooping up some of the more slothful individuals. With muddy hands and knees, I set them on the kitchen counter, and watched them daily as they developed into tiny frogs. I was fascinated by what was taking place before my eyes, but new questions puzzled me. Dad was usually responsible for assuaging these curiosities. He told me about different kinds of metamorphosis and how other tiny creatures lived in the water that I couldn't see without a fancy magnifying glass.

By the creek, my mind was free to wander. I remember sitting on a mossy rock and watching the birds; I used to pretend I was one. As my body lay still, my imagination would take flight. High above, looking down on the stream from the heavens, the wind whistled over my face and the sun warmed my body. When my eyes flickered open, it was usually time to go home. Sometimes I even did.

I was always up for a challenge. My

sister and I used to jump from rock to rock, in a kind of improvised hopscotch obstacle course that tested our balance and agility against one another. She was four years older, and I had to practice every morning when she was at school in order to keep up. On the rare occasions that I outdid her, I wore a goofy smirk for the rest of the day.

The creek was frontier. The stream extended far into the depths of the woods. I thought that if I wandered too far into its darkness, I might be consumed and never heard from again.

"What's most important is for you to write about something you care about."

—Chris Ellertson, Director of Admissions,  
Trinity University, Texas

Gradually overcoming my fear, I embarked on expeditions and drafted extensive maps, using my father's old compass, a sheet of paper, and a few colored pencils. As my body grew in height and weight, my boundaries grew in extent and breadth.

Years later, I happened to be walking to a friend's house by way of the creek. It occurred to me that what was once an expedition was now merely a shortcut. Although I had left this stream behind, I found others: new questions and freedoms, new challenges and places to explore. But this creek would remain foremost in my memory, whatever stream, river, or ocean I might wade.

### What Works

This essay is intricately detailed, which allows the reader to experience vicariously what the writer is describing. Each paragraph starts with a straightforward sentence, letting us know what the writer has gained from her connection to this special place.

### What Could Be Better

What are the "new questions and freedoms, new challenges and places to explore"? A few choice details extending this last section would round out this essay.

### 3. An Essay About an Experience Abroad

On a sunny day in 1992, I borded a plane to

spelling error in the first sentence!

begin my trip around the world. I felt both excited and scared not knowing exactly what lay ahead. I embarked upon eleven foreign lands which included:

Hong Kong, China, Japan, Indonesia, Thailand, India, the Seyshelles Islands, Kenya, France, and Eng-

spelling error

land. Although each country had its own personality, Kenya touched me in a special way. What I saw and felt on the first day the jeep headed out on the Masai

vague thesis

Mara was more fulfilling than my highest expectations.

The sun rose quietly out of the tall grass on the savanna waking all forms of life to greet its warmth.

The sky's hue changed to royal blue and white clouds floated easily in the heavens. Along the horizon, a herd of elephants swayed through the grass. As we came

closer, I discovered baby elephants trailing like a caboose behind their mothers. Every elephant walked

in the same direction as if a destination was awaiting them. Suddenly, my heart rose for just beyond the jeep

a pride of lions lounged in the shade of a tree. The male lion looked like a great king, wearing his royal

headdress, while watching his heirs tumble in the grass. In the distance, appeared hundreds of prancing

gazelles. Immediately three of the lions dashed away to

capture their prey. Preceding their departure, a vulture

flew overhead as a sign to us that the prey had been

missing commas

slaughter of generic details

trite

unoriginal imagery. Did the writer really witness this?

caught. The scene created mixed emotions for me. On one hand the killing made me angry, yet on the other hand, I knew it was necessary for the lions' survival.

From observing the wildlife of the Masai Mara, I realized that the lives of the animals were only a simplified

version of our own life as humans. Everyday we fight to survive. Basically, our motivation for success is our

desire to survive physically and mentally. We create organizations, such as governments, to supply order in

our communities. We depend on family and friends to give us love and support. Most of all we need food,

clothing, and shelter in order to live. Our life may have more complications, but at the core humans and

animals are both motivated by their desire to survive. The idea of all these animals as a metaphor for my life

made the gap between us closer. For once, I was in the cage and the animals were free. I saw myself in the ani-

mals. I identified with the pride of the lion, the exuberance of the gazelle, and the peace of the elephant. I

discovered the qualities we both share. I felt at one with, not only the animals, but the universe.

The colors of the land and sky were fading with the dying sun as the jeep headed for camp. The cool air

blew through my hair as I watched the day come to an end. In the twilight, I closed my eyes and imagined the

day to come.

dubious conclusion, given weakness of previous details

too many "big ideas," none are fully explored

can a gap become closer?

#### What Doesn't Work

This essay is unoriginal in both execution and meaning. The details are abundant, but so generic, they seem to have been lifted from a Discovery Channel show or a greeting card. The absence of original observations makes the rest of the essay in which "the lives of animals" are compared to those of humans equally

trite and forced. It is as though the writer felt he or she ought to use this special experience as the subject of an essay—after all, how many applicants have trekked to Africa?—but had no specific passion for it. Add to that the many spelling and punctuation errors, and you have a weak performance.

#### How to Avoid Writing This Essay

Remember: details are important, but they must be precise and original. And they should be used in support of a point. Always, decide what your thesis is, state it clearly, and organize your ideas based on that thesis. All the details should relate directly to the thesis.