

Advice on college essays: Forget tears and Christmas

By Emily Farrell

Let's say you are at the top of your class and applying to an Ivy League school. You feel confident because you got 2200 on your SATs, are class president, run cross-country, and are in five clubs. All your life, "failure has never been in your vocabulary because you have succeeded at everything.

Guess what? I have bad news. Of the 30,000 applicants to that dream school, most have the same qualifications. Others have a quality you don't. One may be a stellar quarterback, another has wealthy forebears whose names are on campus buildings, some are geniuses from the swamps of Mississippi, and others have already performed with the New York Philharmonic. Your accomplishment? You broke the school record for the mile. And the kids in your school are slow.

Don't panic. Help is on the way. You can rise above the other applicants, be an individual that the admissions folks actually like.

Start by imagining how they feel. You hate to write one five-paragraph essay. How would you like to read 30,000? Most of them are so boring, you would need to sew your eyelids open. Why? These essays reflect all that success: When I became a leader through my role in the Spanish club. What football means to me. How marching band has enhanced my character. In other words, same experiences, same essays.

Have I just described your essay? Don't despair. You can set yourself apart. And you can write well without being Hemingway or Fitzgerald.

Just do as I say.

First, figure out what makes you different. Do you secretly collect antique coins? Do you have a special skill, like assembling Ikea furniture correctly

the first time? If you traveled for Habitat, great. But don't tell them what it meant to you. Describe someone you met, or how to apply roof shingles. (Just think how many people are glued to "This Old House." Everyone loves the process of building.)

Another topic is your relatives, a perfect choice, assuming your twin is not applying to the same school. But don't describe your grandfather's death and how much you cried. Nobody wants to hear that. What they would enjoy is his experience in Vietnam. Perhaps he established a huge restaurant empire starting with a food truck. At the end, just tell them he died, and skip your tears. Make them cry that he is gone.

Or write about crazy relatives – not your parents; you don't want the university to worry about heredity. Talk about your mean, cheap, scary great-aunt whose inheritance holds the family hostage. Describe her, even how she smells like ancient Chanel No. 5.

If you want to use a family tradition, skip Christmas. It has been done a million times. Instead, write about the classic family fight when everybody stormed out because the potatoes weren't cooked correctly, just like last year, when the turkey was raw.

In other words, move the reader in some way, either to a smile or a sigh. Remember, she usually is bored stiff.

Your objections? But this won't display who I am, you whine. Right. They really want to hear another essay bragging about accomplishments.

No, now they know how well you write and how interesting you are. I mean, did you ever beg for a five-paragraph essay? But I bet you love to hear a good story.

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(continued)*

How to make something worth reading? A few rules:

Make sure the opening paragraph pulls you in. Are your descriptions visual? Do you include the five senses? Do you use strong nouns and verbs? Be wary of adjectives and adverbs. They slow the reader down. Do any great lines walk off the page? Does your final paragraph answer the question?

Make sure you read your essay aloud to a friend. You will hear your errors, and your friend will be thrilled to find them. Keep your parents out of the process. Like the engineer dad who salivates over "helping" you with calculus, your mom will rewrite your essay so it sounds just like her. And Admissions can't tell, right? Sure.

Proofread. Don't repeat words. It's boring. Don't hit the thesaurus button willy-nilly. If you are unsure of a word, read the sentence to Mom. But just one sentence.

Spell-check.

If they want 500 words, don't go over.

And never, ever describe a single tear falling down anyone's face.

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