



Three Common Pitfalls to Avoid When Writing the College Essay

1. Don't describe your traits or tell your readers that you're passionate about something; show them. Anybody can describe him or herself as a natural leader, sensitive and caring, hard-working, or persevering when the going gets tough, but to be convincing, it's best to tell a story of a situation you found yourself in where one or more of these traits became apparent. In general, avoid using adjectives about yourself; instead try showing yourself in action, perhaps confronting and responding to some sort of challenge. Or you might discuss an issue you've been thinking about, making clear why it touches you personally. This type of essay provides a window into the kind of things you care about and think about much more effectively than would general declarations of your passions or your values.
2. Everyone knows that clichés are to be avoided. The problem is that they've become clichés precisely because they're often true. Nevertheless, you don't want to bore the admissions officers with an essay topic they see too often. Avoid the sports essay about how you achieved a distant goal by working harder than you ever thought possible. This may be true, but it won't set you apart from the crowd. Neither will claims to the effect that having achieved one goal, you now know you can do anything you want to if you work hard enough. It simply isn't true. The death of a grandparent is another topic to be avoided unless it engendered some really unique and personal reflection or insight. The loss may well have made you recognize the value of life and loved ones as never before, but it's done the same for many others, and unless you can speak about it with brilliance and originality, it will not give the readers insight into your unique attributes.
3. Don't try to be someone you're not. Appropriate use of a few words that are relatively new to your vocabulary can make your writing sound sophisticated, but overloading your essay with unusual words when you can convey your thoughts clearly and concisely with common ones will only make you sound pretentious and in some cases make your essay difficult to understand. If you haven't had any earth-shattering experiences, resist the temptation to make something up. Admissions officers are looking for authenticity, and nothing rings true like the truth. If you really love computer games and believe their merit is too often overlooked, you will probably write a better essay in defense of computer games than you would be able to write on a phony topic like, for instance, how the one visit you made to a nursing home with your school choir changed you forever. If an experience left you feeling conflicted, don't pretend it didn't.

Admissions officers like to see students grappling with dilemmas and contradictions, but that doesn't mean they have to solve them. Writing about a realization that one of your endeavors had negative as well as positive consequences will reflect well on you because it will reveal you to be an honest and truly thinking individual.