

Five Overused College Essay Topics

1. “How community service taught me the importance of helping others...”

Colleges appreciate students who are concerned about their communities. But a claim to have learned how important it is to help people needs to be substantiated with evidence of a sincere, long-term commitment. Otherwise, your message loses some oomph. If you had a community service experience that really meant a lot to you, say so. And be honest. Otherwise, consider doing a good deed for admissions officers and avoid the community service cliché.

2. “Hard work always pays off” and other life lessons learned while playing sports.

A lot of athletes try to inject meaningful life lessons into the experiences they write about in their college essays. But if the whole point of your essay is that hard work pays off, you’ve just written the same essay that thousands of other varsity letter holders will write. And you probably would never say to your friends, “I feel very fortunate to have participated in athletics because the experience taught me about hard work and commitment.” So be original. Tell your athletic story that nobody else will be able to tell.

3. “How my trip to another country broadened my horizons...”

A lot of applicants recount their trips to strange, uncharted lands. Like France. These students were inevitably confronted with the challenge of adapting to the bizarre customs of their foreign hosts. Maintain your perspective. Visiting a country and noticing that it is different is not a story that you own. And if your parents took you on an African safari, we’re jealous (and some admissions officers will be, too). But a safari doesn’t make you a worldlier applicant, and it won’t help you get in.

4. “How I overcame a life challenge (that wasn’t really all that challenging...)”

Essays can help admissions officers understand more about a student who has overcome a legitimate hardship. But far too many other students misguidedly manufacture hardship in a college essay to try and gain sympathy or to make excuses for things like low grades. That’s not going to work. If you’ve had a hardship and you want to talk about it, you should. Otherwise, it’s probably better to choose a different topic. And please don’t write a eulogy for your pet. Ever.

5. Anything that doesn’t really sound like you.

Your essays are supposed to give the readers a sense of your personality. So give your essays a sincerity test. Do they sound like you, or do they sound like you’re trying to impress someone? Don’t use words you looked up in the thesaurus (there really is no place for “plethora” in a college essay). Don’t quote Shakespeare or Plato or the Dalai Lama. If your best friend reads your essay and says it sounds just like you, that’s probably a good sign.