



The Honesty Test for College Essays

By Kevin McMullin, Collegewise Founder and President

Here's a college essay exercise that will help you find your best stories. It works best when you're faced with a prompt that asks a specific question like, "What has been your most significant failing, and what did you learn from the experience?" rather than an open and general one like, "Relate a story that will help us get to know you better."

Imagine that admissions officers could accurately measure the level of honesty in an essay response, and that the more honest your answer, the greater your admissions advantage.

If points were being given for honesty more so than anything else, what would your answer be? No exaggerated life lessons learned. No drama injected where none existed. No profound observations that never authentically ran through your head. Just the unvarnished, plain-and-simple truth.

Is there any reason *that* can't be your reply?

Sometimes brutal honesty is not the way to go. If you think your biggest failure was the time that you tried to steal a test but got cold feet before going through with it, best to keep that to yourself. And any revelation that could raise concerns about whether you're healthy and mature enough to live in a college environment is worth getting a second opinion from your counselor before you share it.

But I've brainstormed hundreds of essays with Collegewise students over the years. And I would often say something like:

"Forget about the essay for a second. It's just me and you talking. What's your honest answer to the question?"

Nine times out of ten, the honest reply that question generated was the gateway to finding the best story. Those students had great answers to the prompts—they often just needed reassurance that honesty was welcome within college essays.

If you're having trouble starting your essay or you want to double-check whether or not you're on the right track, try the honesty test. And then consider sharing the results in your ensuing story. The honest version is usually the best version.

Want more expert essay tips from Kevin? Check out his blog at wiselikeus.com.

