



Five Ways to Go Wrong in College Essays

By Kevin McMullin, Collegewise Founder and President

When a Collegewise counselor loves a college essay, it's very rare that the rest of us here feel the same level of effusiveness about it. Like college admissions officers, we're a diverse group with very different tastes, backgrounds, and stories of our own. What moves or otherwise resonates with one person is never guaranteed to do the same for everyone else. Even the infamous "Costco Essay" by the applicant who got into five Ivy League schools this year didn't get universal praise here (or from many high school counselors and admissions officers I know). Some of us thought it was engaging and creative. Others, me included, just didn't care for it that much.

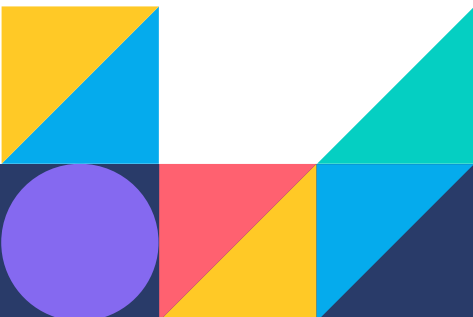
But we almost always all agree on the essays we don't like. And admissions officers are the same way. While it might be frustrating to think that you can't write an essay guaranteed to be a hit with any admissions officer, avoiding these five ways to go wrong will help you make sure you don't inadvertently hurt your chances.

1. Trying too hard to impress

Many students try to inject deep meaning into stories, often in the form of life lessons they supposedly learned from the experience. And many of those messages reek of insincerity. Did that two hours spent serving food at a homeless shelter really teach you the importance of helping others (especially if you never did another community service project)? Did you really not know that teamwork was important until your field hockey team made it to the playoffs? Were you actually surprised that the culture was different when you visited a foreign country? You likely wouldn't be riveted if someone started telling you those stories. And neither will the people reading them.

2. Generalities, generalities, and more generalities

"Hard work is important" is a generality. It could apply to anyone because it has no details. And without details, it's impossible to get to know you. I once read an essay where an applicant spent 600 words explaining that it's important to prepare when you go camping. It could rain. It could snow. You could get lost, etc. It's all true, of course, but I didn't need 600 words to understand that concept, and more importantly, I wasn't getting to know him any better. I would have been a lot more interested to read about his specific preparation, how he used what he'd learned in the Boy Scouts, or how it had paid off when a trip to the woods went awry. Generalities don't always hurt, but they never win people over.



3. Unlikable traits

Would students and faculty enjoy living, learning, and working with you on a college campus? That's what admissions officers are wondering when they read your essay. And no matter how diverse the readers, nobody likes a snob, a complainer, a know-it-all, etc. Essays about the hardship you experienced when your parents refused to buy you a brand new car, why your teachers are to blame for your academic deficiencies, or how much smarter you are than your fellow students—nobody will read those and say to themselves, "Now that's a kid I want to spend some time with!" Unlikable to one is often unlikable to many.

4. Same old story

It's impossible for anyone to like a story they've heard (or in this case, read) more than a thousand times. But that's what some tales are like for admissions officers. This isn't fair to applicants because you have no way of knowing that thousands of other people are writing exactly what you're writing. But the surest way to avoid that fate is to pay attention to #1 and #2 above. Those mistakes are what lead to overused essays.

5. Who is this?

There's nothing wrong with getting help with your college essays. But there is such a thing as too much help. When you let too many people offer their suggestions, revisions, or, in the worst cases, sentences or even paragraphs to your college essay, it starts to read like it was written by a committee. Teenagers think and write differently than adults do, and colleges are expecting to read the words and thoughts of a 17-year-old who has not been to college yet. Go ahead and seek advice on your college essays from people who know you and who know what they're talking about (your high school counselor, English teacher, or a qualified private counselor are good sources). But don't shop your essay around and assume that everyone should get a vote. Pick 1-2 good sources and then get to work. When too many other people have gotten involved, it takes you out of the story. And that's a hard story to like.

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

