

College Essay Pearls of Wisdom

Goals for your essay:

1. Distinguish yourself from others with similar grades, activities, and ACT/SAT scores
2. Paint a picture of your personality and character
3. Show the admissions officer what you can contribute to their institution

Things to DO

1. Answer the question. Or, as my high school English teacher would write, ATFQ.
2. Get to your main point fairly soon.
3. Avoid clichés like the plague.
4. Explain any acronyms (e.g. SLCs, POLs).
5. Write like you talk.
6. Use transitions between paragraphs.
7. Tie together the beginning and end of your essay.
8. Use concrete examples from your life to speak to your thesis.
9. SHOW don't TELL.
10. Start with a hook- quote, anecdote, or description.

Things to AVOID

1. Going over the word count.
2. Trying to impress the reader with great accomplishments; struggles of normal people are more compelling than the victories of super-students.
3. Overly sensitive topics such as death, divorce, or illegal activity that can pull the focus from you and how you dealt with a problem or obstacle (BUT if a particular challenge has had a profound impact on who you are, you can write about it) .
4. Cliché topics such as mission trips, sports events, injuries, and especially pets.
5. Trying to be funny (and failing).
6. Generalities: "The most important person/thing in my life..." or "I'm so lucky..."
7. Do-good experiences unless used a background for a more specific and revealing moment or event (BUT if these experiences are crucial, think about original ways to highlight them.)
8. Avant-garde, experimental, so –clever-it's-confusing essays.
9. Making excuses for test scores or lower grades than you would like.
10. Rewriting your resume in prose form.

Mechanics

1. Use positive language
2. Write in the simple past tense and first person
3. Vary your sentence structure
4. Use as few words as possible
5. Make sure you understand the words you're using
6. Avoid qualifiers: just, about, kind of, somewhat, I think, I believe...
7. Avoid the passive voice