

Help Your Seniors Understand The College Essay Prompt

By Kim Lifton



The Class of 2017 should be making progress with their college plans by now. How are they doing on those college application essays?

The essay can be the most daunting part of the application process. But it doesn't have to be. You can help your students move forward in the process, and make their lives a little bit easier if you:

- ☐ Make sure your students understand what the prompt is asking.
- ☐ Tell students that reflection is the key to standing out in any application essay.
- ☐ Explain that the essay must be personal and focus on the student who writes it.
- ☐ Set realistic expectations for the essay. Sometimes parents and counselors are harder on the students than the admissions team that reads them.

Why is Everyone So Anxious?

As admission to the nation's most selective schools becomes increasingly competitive, the college essay has been rising in significance as well. Because of this, there's a lot of information on the web and in books, and many well-meaning adults out there trying to help your students.

Unfortunately, so much of the information about the essay is confusing, gimmicky or simply inaccurate. We know that's not helpful to you or your students. They become so anxious and frustrated they cannot

think – or write. They shut down.

The good news: You don't have to do as much as you might think to get them on the right track.

Admissions readers are not grading essays for powerful prose and sentence structure. They want to know who the applicant is. And they want students to answer the question and show reflection. This can be especially difficult for a teen who is angling to get out of the house and would rather focus on the future.

Consider what Calvin Wise, the director of recruitment for Johns Hopkins University, has to say. When he reads a good essay, Wise gets excited and will share it with colleagues. He doesn't see any reason to share grades and test scores. Just like admissions officers at other highly selective schools, Wise expects 4.0 GPAs and top scores on the ACT, SAT and AP exams.

"We need to dig deeper," Wise says. "That's where the essay comes into play. That's where we find out more about the student. We are looking for your story. Academically, we are glad you've done well. We want to know who you are. What did your experience mean to you? How did it shape you?"

If you want your students' applications to stand out, make sure they write essays that reviewers will take seriously. If you teach them how to reflect, the writing process will be easier.

Teach Your Students How to Reflect

The real work on the essay comes at the begin-



ning of the process. First, make sure each student understands the prompt.

Ask your student to take a look at these instructions for the Common Application personal statement:

✓ The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores?

Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so.

There are five prompts that a student can choose from. It does not matter which prompt a student selects, or which one you like best. The key question is always: What do you want colleges to know about you? This is your student's opportunity to shine, to offer readers some insight into who she is beyond grades, test scores and activities.

If your students understand what each prompt is

asking before they start writing, they will be in a much better position to reflect and answer the prompt to help round out their applications for college. It's a thinking task as much as it is a writing task. Students need to let colleges know what they want to share with them.

Now take a look at these two examples from the Common App.

The first is the question most students selected last year. It's the first one on the list of prompts.

Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Ultimately, an essay responding to this prompt is not about a student's background, identity, interest, talent or experience; it's about why that background, identity, interest or talent matters to the student.

Admissions officers read these essays to find out something they don't already know about your student. They can tell from the application if an applicant is on the lacrosse team or in the school

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orchestra, or if he worked as a researcher, a hospital aide or a bagger in a grocery store. What they don't know is how those experiences affected any student or what yours learned about himself. They have no idea how your student has changed. The essay is the place to share such insights.

A student can respond to this prompt by sharing any type of story or topic— a description of a significant conversation, a time when they realized something personally important — anything that truly and vividly demonstrates who they are. A student need not climb a mountain or travel to another country. Babysitting or making meatballs with grandma, navigating an icy highway or playing basketball with friends works too.

✓ **Colleges Want to Know How Your Students THINK!**

✓ The why (the learning or insight) is more important than the what (the experience). When working with your seniors, keep asking the key question we use with our students, and make sure each one of them has a clear answer before settling on an essay topic. Again, the question is this: What do you want colleges to know about you beyond your grades, test

scores, extracurricular activities? You can break it up, or expand on it, too:

- ☐ What do you want college to know about you? Why? ★
- ☐ What did you do? Why? Why would a college be interested in this? What does it show about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application?
- ☐ What did you learn about yourself?
- ☐ How does this experience show who you really are?

If you get stuck, "why?" is always a good question. We ask our students "why?" all the time. We also tell them that no matter how they use the essays in the admissions process, colleges don't measure how good they are with rubrics; it's part of a holistic review process. They want to know how the applicant thinks. To stand out, essays do share a few common features, regardless of the prompt — or the school. They:

- ☐ Answer the question.

- ☐ Show
- ☐ Sound
- ☐ Illustrate about
- ☐ Demonstrate

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- ☐ Showcase a positive trait or characteristic.
- ☐ Sound like a high school student.
- ☐ Illustrate something meaningful about the student. ✓
- ☐ Demonstrate reflection.

For the application year 2016-17, the Common App offered four other prompt choices as well. The University of California asks students to choose four out of eight Personal Insight Questions. Many institutions in Texas use the ApplyTexas application, with its own personal statement prompts.

Scores of schools have begun accepting the Coalition application, which also offers four personal statement choices. And many state universities ask their own personal statement questions on their independent applications. While we cannot predict what the admissions process will look like in the future, all evidence indicates the essay will remain — and it will continue to grow in importance.

You Can Help Students Dig a Little Deeper

Sometimes students don't dig deep enough to write a reflective piece. Here are some examples of what we tell our students when we're not sure they're being reflective enough in their personal statements:

- ☐ If you chose this story because it happened on a trip to Kenya, then it's about Kenya. If the same story would have been equally meaningful if it had taken place in your grandmother's backyard, then the story is about you.
- ☐ If the essay is meaningful only because you won the championship, then it's about the winning goal. If it would have been equally meaningful if you hadn't won, then it's about you, and what you learned or demonstrated about yourself.
- ☐ A sad story about poverty, lack of opportunity or uncommon obstacles is not enough to draw readers in. Show us how you faced these challenges and what that demonstrates about your character. ✓

You can get more information about helping your



students prepare for the essay in our new eBook, the first in a series called the Inside Scoop on Writing Anything books.

We wrote *How to Write an Effective College Application Essay - The Inside Scoop for Parents* so parents could help prep their children for the essay; it's filled with useful information about the essay's role in the admissions process and practical tips for assisting students on the essays. You might find it valuable, too.

Please let your parents know about the book, and tell them about our free monthly parent chat Q & A webinars. We record them for those who cannot make the chats.

Do you have questions? Want to discuss the essay with colleagues? Join our college essay forums on:

- ☐ LinkedIn College Essay Discussion Group
- ☐ Facebook College Essay Chat for HS Counselors

Kim Lifton, president of Wow Writing Workshop, is a former journalist who keeps her finger on the pulse of the college admissions industry. A national expert on the college application essay, Lifton blogs for Wow and industry trade publications; she speaks at schools and industry conferences throughout the U.S. Wow is a national company that helps students, professionals and nonprofits handle any writing challenge. High school students use the Wow Method to write application and graduate school admissions essays. Wow also trains professionals who work with students on the college application process. You can reach her at Kim@wowwritingworkshop.com.