Ten Tips for Writing Powerful College Application Essays

Tip 1. College essays are fourth in importance behind grades, test scores, and the rigor of completed coursework in many admissions office decisions (NACAC, 2012). Don’t waste this powerful opportunity to share your voice and express who you really are to colleges. Great life stories make you jump off the page and into your match colleges.

Tip 2. Develop an overall strategic plan. College application essays should work together to help you communicate key qualities and stories that make you come alive and stand out in front of admissions readers.

Tip 3. Keep a chart of all essays required by each college, including supplementary responses and optional essays. Note: the Common Application changed its essay topics for the 2013-2014 application cycle, so make sure you have the correct prompts. Look for patterns between colleges essay requirements so that you can find ways to use essays more than once. This holds true for scholarship essays.

Tip 4. Read the prompts all the way through. Each prompt may have different questions or probes. Some answers may be implied, but must be clearly evident to a reader.

Tip 5. Plan to share positive messages and powerful outcomes. You can start with life or family challenges. You can describe obstacles or failures you have overcome. But, you must focus on your growth and development, including leadership, initiative, accomplishments, and service. College admissions officers do not read minds, so tell them your powerful life stories and demonstrate the personal qualities you hope to bring to their campuses.

Tip 6. Always write in the first person. Remember, these are autobiographical essays, even when you talk about other people, events, or places. So use the one-third and two-thirds rule. If you choose to write about someone, some place, or something else, you must show how it or the person affected you for the majority of the essay. Your essays show why you belong on and will enrich diverse college communities.

Tip 7. Follow Dr. Joseph’s Into, Through, and Beyond approach. Lead the reader INTO your story with a powerful beginning—a story, an experience. Take them THROUGH your story with the context and keys parts of your story. Make sure the reader understands your continuity, development, leadership, and initiative. End with the BEYOND message about how this story has affected who you are now and who you want to be in college and potentially after college. The beyond can be implied in many pieces that are so strong that moralizing at the end is not necessary. But make sure to read the prompt and answer all components.

Tip 8. Use active writing: avoid passive sentences and incorporate power verbs. Show when possible; tell when summarizing.

Tip 9. Have trusted inside and impartial outside readers read your essays. Make sure you have no spelling or grammatical errors. Ultimately submit what pleases you.

Tip 10. Most importantly, make yourself come alive throughout this process. Write about yourself as passionately and powerfully as possible. Be proud of your life and accomplishments. Sell yourself!!!