

# The all-important college application essay

By Reecy Aresty

College Admissions & Financial Aid Expert

The essay is the most crucial piece of writing the student will submit to a college. This is the college's first exposure to the student, and first impressions are lasting. A memorable essay contains the student's Kodak moments interlaced with some less than blissful adventures to create necessary drama.

Students must begin by choosing the right topic, one that will be well received by the admissions committee. The subject matter and its degree of difficulty say volumes about the character of the author, and the quality of the essay is dependent on their ability to respond to the subject matter.

Select a most thought-provoking, stimulating subject, as a "we dare you to compete for the privilege of attending our school" challenge. In other words, if there's a literary masterpiece inside crying out to be written, now is the time to unleash it.

Students writing about their favorite anything should be passionate about it. It's not enough just to say you love something or someone. You must explain why in no uncertain terms. If writing about how someone was admired, then how that person influenced the student's life, how the student appreciated or fashioned their lives in their light should be factored in.

Students often write about themselves, as the subject matter requires no research. However, a necessary and serious effort is sorely needed to make the journey stand out. Be it overcoming adversity or how the past summer was spent, the writing must appeal to the reader.

Students should avoid writing too vividly about any traumatizing experience. The essay can be gripping but not horrifying. Remember, the object here is to capture the reader's imagination. Highly controversial subjects such as abortion or the death penalty are best avoided.

Several years ago, one of my honor students wrote a "Pro Life" essay and expressed her views with such intensity that reading it left me with the impression she might be viewed as a danger to others with strong "pro choice" convictions. Students must keep their eye on the prize and never lose sight of the main objective – getting an admission ticket.

My all-time favorite essay question is the University of Pennsylvania's, "You've just written your 300 page autobiography. Tell us what's on page 217." Students should go back in time five or six years (about a third of their life), recall where they were, what they were doing, and then begin writing.

A most effective and creative approach is to begin in the middle of a sentence, preferably ending the thought by leaving the reader in a quandary, i.e. "...because that's the way it was arranged." Remember, this is page 217 from your autobiography. Open any autobiography, or any book for that matter to page 217. It probably won't start with a fresh sentence or a new paragraph. It is also important to leave the reader hanging at the end of the page: "...As he ran into the street, the car continued to..."

Essays should be critiqued, but written by the student. I cannot advise strongly enough against employing the services of a professional essay service or writer. Not only is this first degree cheating, but the risk/reward ratio isn't worth it. The admissions committees and the application readers are neither stupid nor naïve, and they're on to that scam. Students should never take the chance of throwing their futures away for the want of a better paper.

Some years ago, a family who chose not to take my advice, did just that. They felt it would be the sure-fire way for their son to get into an exclusive East Coast school. He had good grades, above

average SAT scores and would have otherwise been acceptable, but his writing skills were, at best, average. They hired a professional, and their son was accepted to his college of choice.

After the third week in English, his teacher couldn't believe that someone with his limited writing skills could have ever been accepted. He went to the admissions office, reviewed the application essays, and his suspicions were confirmed.

The young man was summoned to the Dean's office and confronted with the evidence. He reluctantly confessed that his parents had hired a professional. He was given the option to immediately withdraw from classes – or be expelled for the fraud he had perpetrated on the school.

Students should also avoid the much too popular topics that everyone else usually writes about such as, *How the death of a loved one or a pet had a profound affect on their life*, or *How growing up in an Italian neighborhood was difficult because they were from a different ethnic background*. Growing up in the ghetto or in a refugee camp is a far better topic, because if you did, then you actually did overcome a life-challenging situation – and that will make a far more impressive essay.

Always be sure to adhere to the school's requirements. If a 300 to 500 word essay is asked for, don't write 501. Schools often do a word count, and students should always (I said always) follow instructions.

For more than 25 years, noted financial advisor, Reecy Aresty, has helped thousands of high school and college families to obtain the American Dream; a superior education at a cost far less than they ever dreamed possible. He is the author of the highly acclaimed admissions and financial aid manual, "How To Pay For College Without Going Broke," also available in Spanish and updated from its previous edition, "Getting Into College and Paying For It." For further information on admissions and financial aid, please visit: [www.paylessforcollege.com](http://www.paylessforcollege.com)