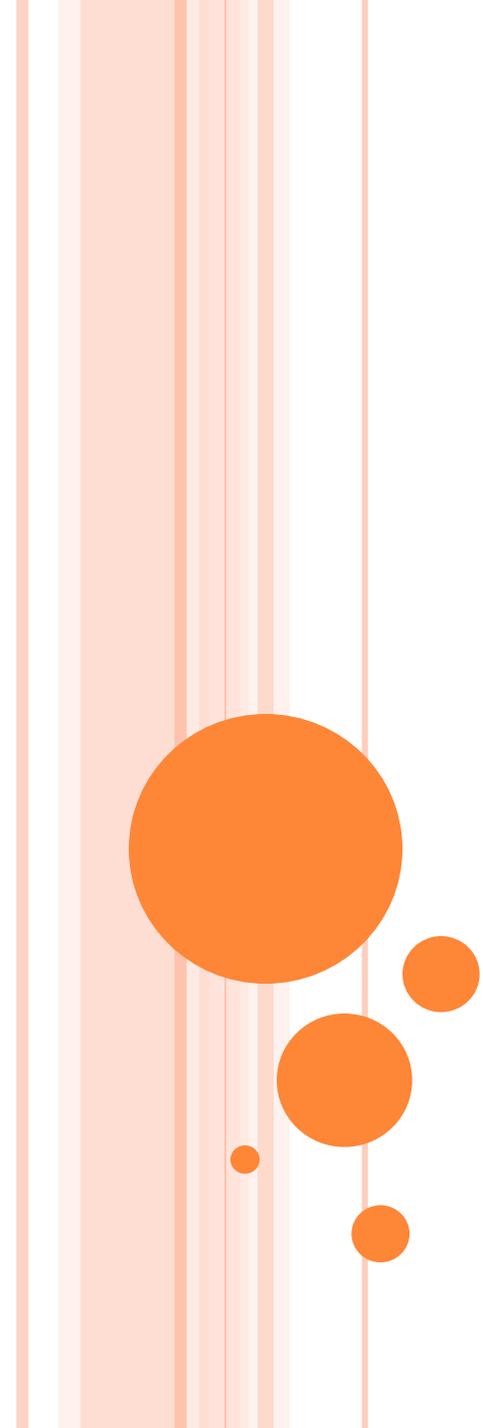


# WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY: *DO's* & *DON'Ts*



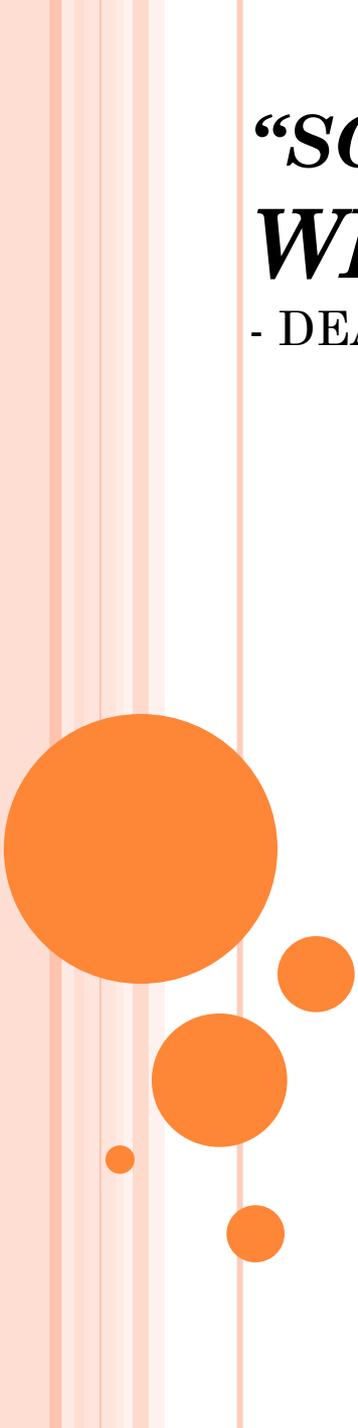
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"I read your college application essay. First of all the word 'COLLEGE' has two 'L's."



**WHAT IS THE AVERAGE %  
OF TIME AN ADMISSION  
OFFICER SPENDS ON THE  
ESSAY PORTION OF YOUR  
COLLEGE APPLICATION?**

**33%**



***“SOMETIMES WE LET STUDENTS  
WRITE THEMSELVES IN.”***

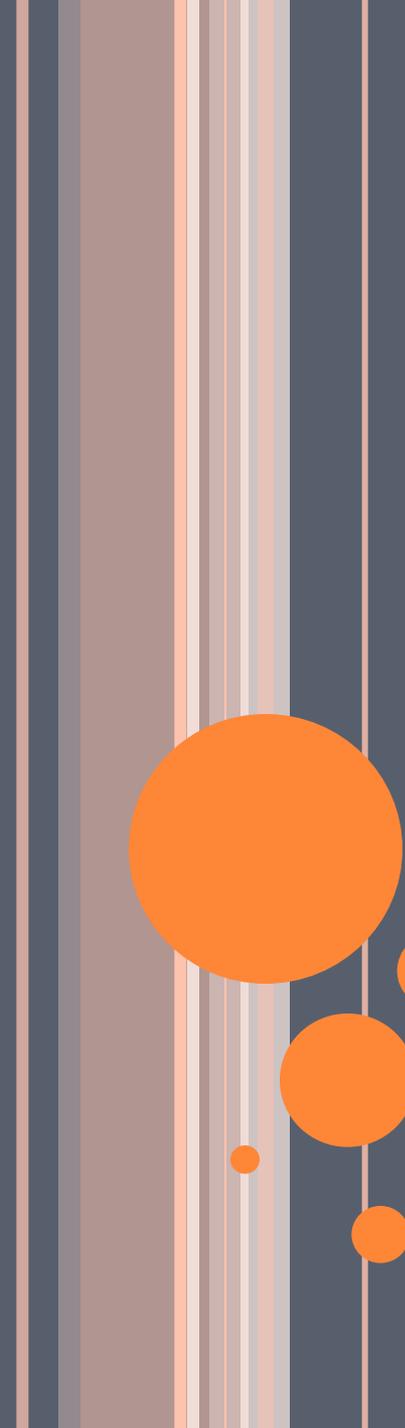
- DEAN OF ADMISSION, SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

***“THE ESSAY GIVES US  
SOMETHING THE NUMBERS  
DON’T REVEAL.”***

- DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION, GORDON COLLEGE

***“THE ESSAY CAN BE A  
POWERFUL ‘TIPPER’  
IN CLOSE CASES.”***

- DIRECTOR OF ADMISSION, BATES COLLEGE



# COLLEGE ESSAY: *DO's*

# *GIVE THE ADMISSION OFFICER A REASON TO KEEP READING*

- Put a lot of time and effort into your *introduction*
  - One technique is to **create mystery or intrigue** in the first paragraph
- Do ***not*** give away the whole story right at the beginning
- The intro can **shrink** when you need to be concise
  - One vivid sentence might do:  
*"My favorite science project was a complete failure."*



# 1. KEEP YOUR FOCUS NARROW

- The essay should prove a single point
  - The reader must be able to find your main idea and follow it from the beginning to end
- Essays that try to be **too comprehensive** end up sounding **watered-down**



# *FOCUS ON THE MESSAGE*

- The key to an effective essay is to focus on the *MESSAGE* you wish to tell the reader
- Don't get so involved telling a detailed story that the important message gets buried



# *KEEP IT PERSONAL*

- The college wants to learn more about *you*, not one of your friends or one of your relatives
- It should be *your story* that can come from only *you*
- It should *not* be a story the student sitting next to you can tell, and the person next to them, and the person in the high school in the next town, or the next state...



# PROVE IT!

- Develop your main idea with *vivid and specific facts, events, and examples*
- There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:
  - **Boring and Generic:** *"I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."*
  - **Much Better:** *"During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."*



# BE SPECIFIC

- Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details
  - **Boring and Generic:** *"I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family. I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."*
  - **Much Better:** *"My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. That kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."*



# *SHOW, DON'T TELL*

- A GOOD example:
  - *“When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away.”*

This passage shows us how the author *feels and thinks*, more so than if the author had spelled it out for us



# *KNOW YOUR SUBJECT*

- Any factual errors in the essay will reveal that you really haven't thought deeply about your choice
  - For example, writing that you want to attend Syracuse University to major in international business would be a blunder (*NOTE: Syracuse doesn't have an international business major*)



# *ANSWER THE QUESTION*

- Many students try to turn a 500-word essay into a complete autobiography; not surprisingly, they fail to answer the question
- *Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to answer the question*
- After you are done writing, ask yourself:

*Is every single sentence crucial to the essay?*



# *VARY YOUR SENTENCES AND USE TRANSITIONS*

- The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph
- Also, remember that transitions are not limited to words like *nevertheless*, *furthermore*, or *consequently*



# USE ACTIVE VOICE VERBS

- *Overuse of the passive voice* makes prose seem *flat* and *uninteresting*
- The *active voice* is *shorter* and *more direct*
  - **Passive:** *The tray of food was dropped by the waiter.*
  - **Active:** *The waiter dropped the tray of food.*

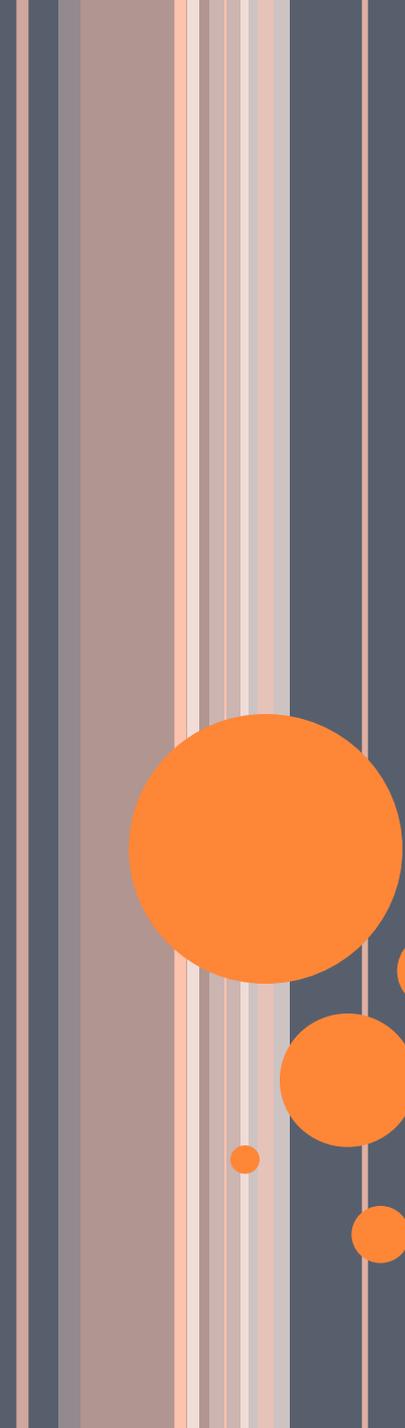


# ***CONCLUDE EFFECTIVELY***

- The conclusion is the **last chance** to persuade or impress admission officers
- Make it interesting for a long lasting impression

***Avoid summarizing!!***





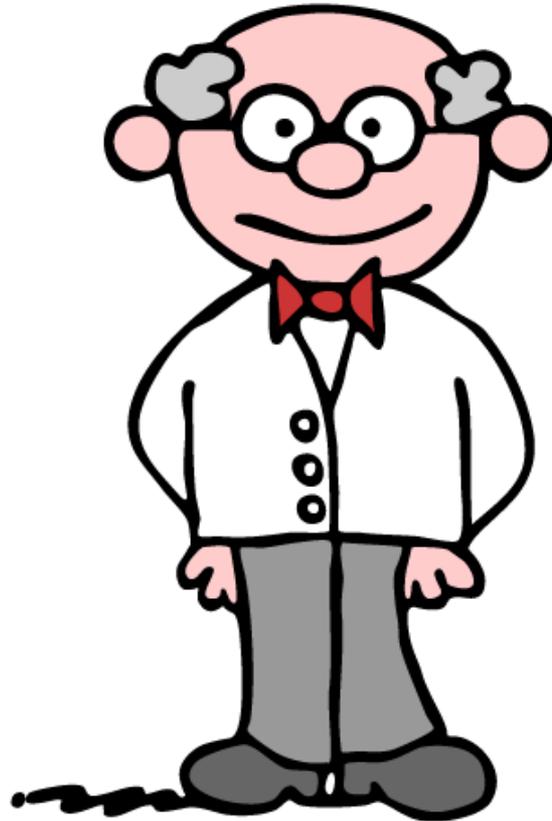
COLLEGE ESSAY:  
*DON'Ts*

# *DON'T TELL THEM WHAT YOU THINK THEY WANT TO HEAR*

- They read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor
- *Bring something new to the table*, not just what you think they want to hear
- Don't go overboard with flattery
- Be sincere
- They're not looking for a new way to view the world - they're looking for a new way to view *you*, the applicant



**DON'T VISUALIZE THE**  
**ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE AS A**  
**BUNCH OF STUFFY OLD**  
**PROFESSORS**



# ***DON'T BE CYNICAL OR CONDESCENDING***

- Don't use sweeping generalizations, such as "*all Americans are conforming cowards*"
- Don't be offensive

*If you think it's offensive,  
it probably is*



# ***DON'T WRITE A RESUME***

- **Don't repeat** information that is found elsewhere in the application
  - Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, resume, travelogue, or laundry list. **Yawn.**
- Don't mention your GPA or SAT / ACT scores in your essay
- For example, **DON'T** say this:
  - *"During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."*



# ***DON'T TELL THE STORY OF YOUR LIFE***

- Some of the best essays – the memorable and unusual ones – are *very focused*
- It should *not* be the story of your life, but a **small glimpse** of it, one that is rich with meaning and alive with imagery
- Essays about your family, your trip to France, or your extracurricular activities, *can* be effective as long as they are *focused and specific!*
  - For example:
    - A single Christmas Eve mass or Yom Kippur service
    - A meal of boiled tongue in Strasbourg
    - One day of scooping ice cream at Lime Rickeys



# *DON'T USE 50 WORDS* *WHEN 5 WILL DO*

- Eliminate unnecessary words
  - If you wrote *"in society today"* consider changing that to *"now"*
- Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct
  - **Too Many Words:** *"Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world."*
  - **Much Better:** *"I'm a slob."*



# *DON'T BORE THE READER*

- Do: be interesting
- Admission officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they often skim
- However, don't try to be so memorable that you come off as too eccentric



# ***DON'T USE CLICHÉS***

○ If your essay says any (or all!!) of the below, ***TAKE THEM OUT:***

- *cutting edge*
- *I learned my lesson*
- *I always learn from my mistakes*
- *I know my dreams will come true*
- *I can make a difference*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ is my passion*
- *I no longer take my loved ones for granted*
- *These lessons are useful both on and off the field (or other sporting arena)*
- *I realize the value of hard work and perseverance*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ was the greatest lesson of all*
- *I know what it is to triumph over adversity*
- *\_\_\_\_\_ opened my eyes to a whole new world*



# AGAIN, DON'T USE CLICHÉS!

- *As I finished the race, I realized I had learned **the value of hard work** and appreciated the fact that I could accomplish anything **if I set my mind to it.***
- *Working in this atmosphere made me appreciate **the value of diversity.***
- *With each member contributing something valuable to our purpose, I soon recognized the **importance of teamwork.***
- *As the young child embraced me in gratitude, I discovered the **true value of making a difference in people's lives.***
- *That summer in New York truly **broadened my horizons.***
- The only way to improve upon the above sentiments would be to enrich them with concrete details and use a more personal perspective

It is not about telling them what you've done, but *it's about showing them who you are.*



# *DON'T USE A QUOTE FOR QUOTE'S SAKE*

- A lot of people think they can make their essays weightier by sticking a high-minded quote at the beginning
- The admissions committee doesn't care what Benjamin Franklin said or what John Lennon sang
- Unless you are going to use a quotation as the basis for your essay overall, it's best to stick with your own words

*You have a limited number of words:  
Make them your own!*



**DON'T USE PREPACKAGED,  
PREDICTABLE, GENERIC  
STATEMENTS.**

- For example, don't say:
  - “*I chose College X because College X is committed to learning and I want to learn. Learning is important.*”



# *DON'T RELY ON "HOW TO"* *GUIDES*

- You can use them to get your creative juices flowing, but *don't adhere too rigidly to their formulas*
- *Definitely don't use their example topics*
  - The “*what my room says about me*” essay is *way* overdone



# ***DON'T “THESAURUS-IZE” YOUR ESSAY...***

- Do use your own voice
- Admission officers can tell Roget from a high school student
- Big words, especially when misused, detract from the essay and makes the essay sound contrived
- Powerful ideas are often best expressed in simple and elegant prose

***Remember: Good writers use the best words, not the biggest words.***



# ... HOWEVER, DON'T USE SLANG

- Write an **essay**, *not* an e-mail
- Slang terms and an excessively casual tone should be eliminated
  - No LOLs, LMAO, BTW...
  - ...and definitely no FML!
  - **Avoid words such as: very, a lot, cool, awesome and nice**



"I think I use the Internet too much. I find myself writing 'com' after each period."



# *DON'T PLAGIARIZE*



"I plagiarized it because I thought it bears repeating."



**DEFINITELY DO NOT**  
**BUY IT OFF THE INTERNET!**

- Admissions people CAN tell.
- And they mark the essay “DDI” when they’ve concluded that “Daddy did it”.



# ***DON'T RECYCLE ESSAYS***

- *Don't* use the same answer for entirely two different questions (*lazy!!*)
- Admissions officers from Northwestern can tell if they are handed an essay that answers Duke's question



**DON'T MENTION**  
**COLLEGE X IN COLLEGE**  
**Y'S ESSAY**

- Don't write: "*I can't wait to wear a Harvard sweatshirt...*" in an essay to UMass. Oops!



**MOST IMPORTANTLY:**  
**DON'T FORGET TO**  
**PROOFREAD!**

- Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing
- It's *distractng*... isn't it?!



# AND -- DON'T RELY ON YOUR COMPUTER'S SPELL CHECK

- It can miss spelling errors like the ones below:

*"After I graduate **form** high school, I plan **too** work for a nonprofit organization during the summer." Oops!*

*"From that day on, Daniel was my best **fried**." Oops! I hope Daniel wasn't fried!*





QUICK “QUIZ”:  
*WHAT’S WRONG?*

# WHAT'S WRONG?

- *I entered onto the scene of this terrestrial sphere on a vernal evening in 1994.*
  - **This is not a vocabulary test.**



# WHAT'S WRONG?

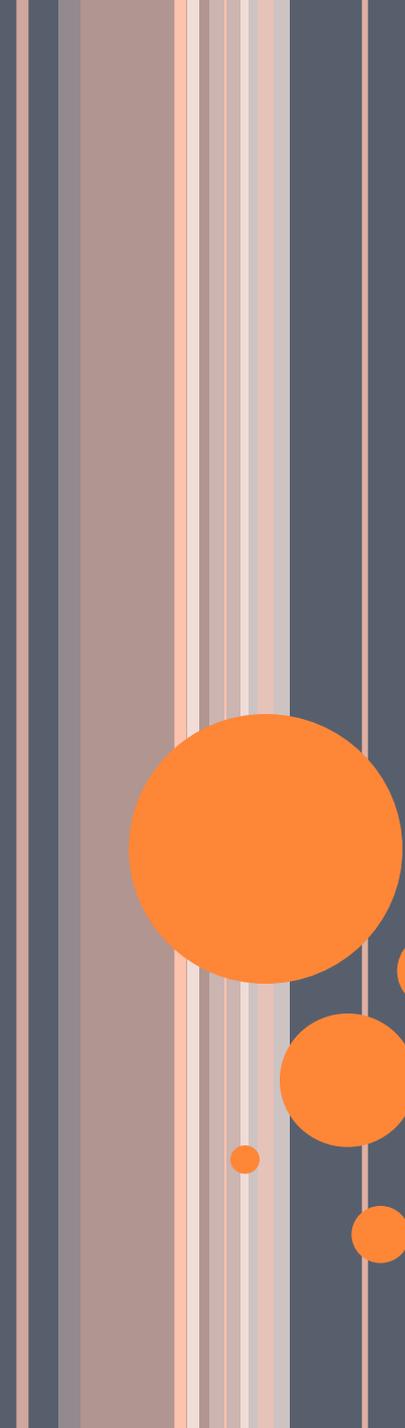
- *As a high school sophomore, I was our church's representative to the Youth Fellowship. I helped organize youth group events, the largest being "The Bishop's Ball," a state-wide event for 300 young people. I also played high school junior varsity soccer for two years. As a senior I will be playing varsity soccer, but in the off-season. As a junior I coached a girls' soccer team for the town.*
  - Do not write a resume. Do not repeat things that are best reserved for another part of your application.
  - The writer would have been better off focusing on *ONE* of these things: for example, one particular moment of one soccer game that she coached.



# WHAT'S WRONG?

- My favorite book is *The Great Gatsby* by Charles Dickens.
  - **Get your facts straight.**  
(F. Scott Fitzgerald wrote it!)





# RESOURCES

# *ADDITIONAL RESOURCES*

- College Board gives great tips about writing a college essay. It also offers critiques of sample essays.
  - [www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html)
- Sometimes, the best tips are given directly from the colleges themselves. For example, check out:
  - [http://apps.carleton.edu/admissions/apply/essay\\_tips/](http://apps.carleton.edu/admissions/apply/essay_tips/)
  - <http://www.hamilton.edu/admission/counselors/loras-tips-for-a-good-college-essay>
- Connecticut College compiled a number of essays they believe “worked”:
  - <https://www.conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/>



# *SOURCES*

- The College Application Essay by Sarah Myers McGinty
- [www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html)
- [www.essayedge.com](http://www.essayedge.com)
- <http://www.mefa.org/uploadedFiles/guidanceCounselors/Essay%20Tips.pdf>
- <http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/06/23/tip-sheet-essay/>
- <http://www.bacallcartoons.com/>

