

The Two Biggest Mistakes Students Make on Their College Essays

By Dr. John Leddo, graduate of Yale University and Phillips Exeter Academy

Mistake 1: Listening to Guidance Counselors, English Teachers and Websites on How to Write College Essays

Nature of the mistake: Every year college applicants are faced with writing college essays. They've never done this before, so naturally they seek advice from "experts." They go to their guidance counselors because it's the job of guidance counselors to "counsel" students on college applications. They go to English teachers because students have to write essays, and who better to help with essay writing than English teachers? They go to websites for advice from students and others on "what has worked in the past." Very often, at least with the students I've worked with, they come back with very consistent advice, "Write a personal essay that says who you are. Start with a story, and then end with a lesson." If everyone is saying the same thing, it must be correct, right? Wrong!

Why it's a mistake: To understand why this is a mistake, let's look at the big picture. Every year, each college receives thousands of applications for admission from students that it doesn't even know. It cannot accept all of the applicants, so it has to select which students to say yes to and which students to say no to. Logically, the college is looking for the best students from its applicant pool: the ones who stand out. One of the challenges is that there will be many students who look similar on paper. Lots of students have good grades. Lots of students have good SAT or ACT scores. The essays can help students show why they should be the ones the college should pick. Here's the problem. The guidance teacher or English teacher who gives advice to a student on what he or she should write is giving the same advice to every other student. The website the student visits for tips is giving the same tips to every other student who visits the site. That means that students who follow these recommendations are writing essays that sound like other students' essays (I know, I read hundreds of them a year). If a student's essays sound like every other student's essays, that's the statistical definition of average. A student won't stand out by sounding average. Good colleges are not looking for average.

What's worse, these essays may actually *hurt* a student's chances. Why? Think about this from the college admissions officers' point of view. Each year, the admissions officers have to read thousands of students' essays. That's a very big chore. How would you feel if they all sounded very much the same? To be very honest, when I read these essays, I often have the reaction, "Not another one of those!" A student doesn't want the person to have a negative reaction when reading his or her essay. Let me give you some examples of some common themes in the essays I've read over the years:

“When I was young, my grandfather died. I was devastated for a long time, but then I realized life must go on, and now I try to live life to the fullest.”

“When I was young, my family moved to a new country/state/neighborhood. I had to leave my family and friends behind. At first, I felt out of place in my new setting, and I had trouble making friends. But then, I realized I could make friends anywhere and now I have lots of friends.”

“A couple of years ago, I entered a robotics competition (or had to give an important recital or play in a big game in sports). I worked very hard, but during the competition, my robot broke down (or performed badly in the important event). I was devastated. I was determined never to let that happen again, so I worked very hard for a whole year. The next year when the robotics competition came (or next recital, big game), my robot (I) performed much better. I learned that if I can work hard, I can accomplish anything.”

Now, I realize, to each student, the event being described was very significant in that student’s life and the final outcome was a great personal triumph. Here’s the challenge. To the student, this was a life changing moment. To the college admissions officer, this is one of 500 essays telling pretty much the same story. Who wants to read the same essay 500 times? What’s worse, is that two sentences into the essay, I already know how it will end. Why? Is the student really going to write that 10 years after his or her grandfather died, the student is still devastated? If so, that doesn’t say, “Pick me for your college.” That says, “I need some counseling.” So, of course the student is going to say how he or she now lives life to the fullest.

What to do instead: Remember, the whole college application is a sales process. The college is the customer, and the student is the product being offered. This selection process is similar to when multiple candidates apply for jobs at companies, multiple products are offered to consumers for purchase, or multiple candidates run for public office and appeal to citizens for their votes. In each case, the decision maker (in this case, the college) has multiple options to choose from and needs to decide which to choose. Therefore, the college essays are actually sales pitches, appealing to the colleges to pick the students who write them. (This is another reason why listening to English teachers and guidance counselors is not a good idea: they are not trained in sales.)

The bottom line is that, no matter what the actual essay prompt is, the essay prompt is actually saying, “We get a lot of students applying to our schools. Why should we pick you?” The student’s essay must respond to this question. The first rule in sales is always to know what your customer wants to buy. In this case, good colleges are looking for top students who will succeed in their programs, bring value to their communities, and represent them well upon graduation. Importantly, this must be done through a process of show, don’t tell. The student doesn’t want to brag about how great he or she is. That just makes the student sound arrogant. Instead, the student should set a grand vision for his or her life, what great things s/he’s done to date to achieve that vision (which means the best-prepared students are those who understand this

early on and build a resume of great accomplishments that can be cited in the essay) and what his or her plan for how college will help the next phase of the student's progress.

At the end of the day, there's only one criterion that matters in reviewing a student's essay. Would an admissions officer read the student's essay and conclude, "That's the student we want at our school!"? If the answer is yes, then the essay is a success. If the answer is no, then the essay needs to be redone. This is why writing about how a student overcame the death of a loved one or moving to a new location and having to fit in is a bad idea. Everyone suffers losses. Doing so doesn't send the message, "I am a future leader in my field." However, a student dedicated to a big goal with an in-progress plan and accomplishments toward achieving that goal does seem like a future leader.

Mistake 2: Recycling Supplemental Essay Prompts

Nature of the mistake: Colleges generally have supplemental essays as part of their application processes. Most students apply to several colleges. (I've seen students apply to as many as 20 different colleges.) This means that students can easily have to write 50 supplemental essays. Who wants to do that? Since the supplemental essay prompts of different colleges are often similar, students reuse their essays from one college application to another, making only minor modifications.

Why it's a mistake: A few years ago, the Washington Post ran story around the time college decision letters were coming out. The Post's reporters had sat in on college admissions committee meetings while admissions decisions were being made. The story revealed the inner workings of these committee meetings and what the admissions committees were looking for when deciding which students to admit. One of the factors the committees used was evidence that the student really wanted to go to that college. After all, just as colleges have more applicants than they can admit, students apply to more colleges than they will go to. Students turn down colleges just as much as colleges turn down students. Therefore, colleges wanted to know if they were really the students' first choice or some other college's backup choice.

What message does a recycled college essay send to an admissions officer? Not, "You are my first choice," but "You're not really worth the time to write an essay that specifically states why I want to go to your school." Why would a college want to accept a student that sends that type of message? Sometimes, students ask me how a college admissions officer would know if an essay is recycled. I answer, "Suppose you're a college admissions officer who's been on the job for ten years and reads thousands of essays a year. You don't think they can tell which essays are recycled?" A recycled essay is vague and written generally. It says things like, "I'd be honored to go to (fill in the name of the school) because of its top-ranked program and world-class faculty and the great education I know I'll receive there." These are things a student can say about any school. This is no more effective than telling every girl in the cafeteria that she's

the most beautiful girl in the school and then asking her out. She's heard the line before and she knows that the boy is using the line on other girls. She won't feel special hearing it again and a college won't feel wanted, knowing that the student is submitting the same essay to all the other schools the student is applying to.

What to do instead: Just like a student must answer the question, "Why should we pick you?" in his or her essay, so must s/he answer the question, "Why do you want us?" The only way to do that is to make the supplemental essays personal. That takes a lot of research. Many students pick schools for the wrong reasons. They look at college rankings. They look at location. The bottom line is that college provides the knowledge base and the resume needed for the next phase of the student's life: either a job or a graduate program. When I ask students if they can name a professor in the department they plan to study in or a lab or project that any of the professors in their departments are doing, students invariably come up blank. They plan to go to a college and be trained for their future professions, but they don't know who will teach them, what classes they'll take, or what labs or projects they might work on.

Students need to thoroughly understand the schools they're applying to. They need to understand the resources available, so they can intelligently speak to how the college will help them achieve the grand vision they say they want to pursue. By giving detail, students can show that they took the time to learn about the school and they know how going to that school will help them succeed with their goals. This signals to the school that they really want to go there and shows that they have a plan for success at that school. This shows the school that they are a good fit for the school's programs. That's a compelling story to tell to the school.

About Dr. Leddo

Dr. Leddo has been involved in education for nearly 40 years. Each year, he provides college counseling to students, helping them 1) build their credentials through tutoring, test preparation, and unique and innovative extracurricular activities, 2) select the schools that are right for them, 3) establish relationships/get internships with those schools, and 4) prepare their college applications. He has been featured in the Washington Post, in numerous magazine articles, and in the book, Brand Up: The ultimate college playbook for college & career success in the digital world. Because of his lifelong dedication to helping students realize their potential and achieve success, his fees are less than half the industry average for comparable services. You can contact Dr. Leddo at john@myedmaster.com or calling him at 571-242-6986.