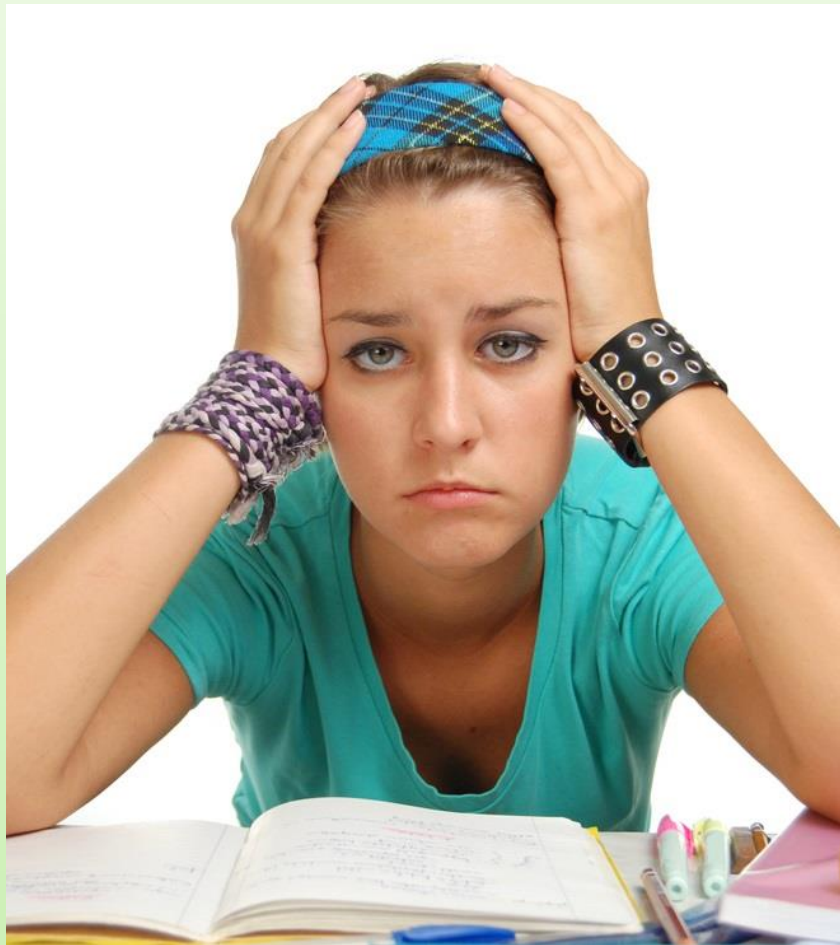


Common Mistakes & Helpful Strategies For Tackling Your College Essay



by Sumaiya Olatunde
Founder of H2D Counseling

The advice provided here is specifically geared toward writing the college application essay. While there are similarities to writing essays for graduate school and scholarship applications, there are differences as well. Some of the information here may not be appropriate for other types of applications.

If you are like many of my students prior to working with me, you have already searched the internet and read books looking for an example of “the perfect college essay” with the hope that recreating it will get you into your dream college. The internet is saturated with tips and tricks on writing a college essay, and you probably have found a ton of information. The only problem is that much of this information misses the whole point of writing the essay and what colleges hope to learn about you from it.

In fact, calling it an “essay” is somewhat of a misnomer. Although you are expected to use proper spelling, correct grammar, supporting evidence and good transition sentences, you are not being asked to submit the kind of essay that you learned to write in your English class. A good essay for a college application has three essential components – and it is not an introduction, a body and a conclusion. These three essential components are *effective* writing, being *familiar* with the colleges you are applying to and authentically representing who *you* are.

~MISTAKE #1: FOLLOWING RULES FROM YOUR ENGLISH CLASS~

The purpose of the college admission essay is to give personality to your application and to help admissions officers connect with you as a person. They are not looking for perfection. An essay with exceptionally advanced writing may be regarded as a red flag that someone other than the student wrote it. This is more common than you would think, and colleges are on the

look out for just that. So, scouring the web for an essay will not help you much with writing your own essay, because colleges want you to tell them about yourself in your own voice. Your college essay needs to be original (i.e., **do not plagiarize**), believable (i.e., do not exaggerate) and concisely on topic (i.e., less is often more). It also needs to sound like it was written by a person your age.

~MISTAKE #2: LOSING YOUR OWN VOICE~

I have had too many students give me a draft of their essay after they read “successful essays” from students who got into schools like Harvard or Stanford. Nine times out of ten, these drafts were written pretty well. Yet, I still needed to advise my students to start over because they attempted to copy the tone of other students’ essays. Nowadays, students have gotten it in their heads that they should write very dramatically with lots of exclamation marks peppered throughout the page. You are not writing a Broadway play. The college essay should sound familiar to you and those who know you. It should sound similar to your normal speaking voice.

~MISTAKE #3: TRYING TO BE UNIQUE WHEN YOU ALREADY ARE~

Another area that students struggle with is choosing a topic. Many students make the mistake of believing they need to be like so-and-so who has a more exciting life or has been through harder times to write a strong essay.

They think their own life is too boring and uninteresting to impress a college. This is completely false. The fact of the matter is, what makes a great college essay is not the topic or having a specific writing style.

The essay can literally be about anything. A good topic really depends on the student and how well they connect to their own story. That means, a topic for one student is not going to be right for all students. Even if the other student's essay got *them* into your dream school, you still need to find out what will work for *you* based on your own life.

~MISTAKE #4: NOT DOING YOUR RESEARCH ON COLLEGES~

Your essay is your chance to convey to colleges that your admission will be of mutual benefit. Spend time reviewing each college's website to explore what they offer and their campus culture. The more thoroughly you research a college, the more you will be able to show what makes you a good fit for their school and vice versa. If you have questions that are unanswered by the website, contact the school directly. Avoid guessing or winging it, because you only have one chance to get it right.

~MISTAKE #5: FAILING TO FOCUS ON YOU~

The goal of the essay is to convince an admissions officer that you are who they are looking for and worthy of taking a spot in the next cohort of students. However, the challenge is doing it in an unconventional way. A

strong essay is *not* one where you say everything you think they want to hear. Furthermore, anything you already covered in the rest of your application is typically not a good essay topic unless you can elaborate considerably. One of the biggest mistakes that students make with writing their essay is to talk about people, events and places in their lives without sharing *how* they themselves were impacted. Your essay is your chance to tell your story, something about you that colleges would not otherwise know, in your voice and from your perspective.

When writing your college essay, make sure not to leave yourself out of the process. There are many benefits to writing your college essay. It may be the first time that you have ever had someone's undivided attention to talk about what you think is important. Writing your essay may help you a little more to figure out who you are, what you value and what you want your future to hold. It can feel overwhelming and stressful, but rest assured that the colleges that get excited about the real you are the right ones for you.

~TIP #1: DO YOUR RESUME BEFORE YOU START YOUR ESSAY~

Before I discuss essay topics with my students, I help them create or update their resume because it helps them to recall activities and accomplishments they have had during high school. After we have a resume, it is easier to begin the essay writing process. I typically start by brainstorming with my students about topics that come from their own lives. Most students

need to talk through options to get to a good topic. Once we decide on a good topic *for them*, my students begin writing their first draft. **There is *never* just one draft.**

You should have someone you trust review all your essays, including your supplemental essays and short answers. The key is choosing someone who is knowledgeable about the college application process, because their advice will influence your decisions. You also need someone who will give you *constructive criticism*. Getting feedback about your writing may sting, but it will help you to present your best quality work. So, do not take it personally and keep your eyes on the goal.

~TIP #2: GET FEEDBACK FROM SOMEONE YOU TRUST~

At the end of the day, you have the final say on your essay, as you should because no one knows you better. However, if you hired a college admission consultant, like me, we are here to help. You trusted us enough to hire us, now trust our judgment. We only want what is best for you and your future. Good luck!

About the Author:

Sumaiya Olatunde has over 20 years of experience helping students of all ages with a wide range of educational needs. Ms. Olatunde is an

Educational Consultant and Advocate as well as CEO of H2D Counseling LLC. She is a National Certified Counselor with two master's degrees – one in Counseling from Johns Hopkins University's School of Education. She has a background in molecular



biology and biological anthropology with degrees from UC Berkeley and the University of Michigan. Ms. Olatunde uses her training in college counseling, school counseling and crisis counseling to help students and parents minimize their stress throughout the college admission process. She is a member of several professional organizations, including IECA, NACAC, PCACAC, WISER, COPAA and LDA.

Go to www.h2dcounseling.com for more information and additional free resources. Check out what other students and parents have to say about us! If you have further questions and would like to contact us, please visit our website. We look forward to hearing from you!

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