

We interviewed admissions officers at 13 highly selective schools about college applications and essays. They told us what they like and don't like to read, the number of essays they read each year, and just how much the essay counts. The following professionals dedicated their time to answering our questions:

Tom Parker, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid at Amherst College
Mark Davies, Dean of Admissions at Bucknell University
John Corona, Associate Dean of Admission at Colgate University
Mitchell Lipton, Dean of Admissions and Records at Cooper Union
Michael Zalel, Application Committee Chair at Deep Springs College
Duncan Murdoch, Dean of Admission at Franklin W. Olin College of Engineering
John Lattig, Director of Admissions at Johns Hopkins University
Lorne T. Robinson, Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at Macalester College
Carol Lunkenheimer, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at Northwestern University
Stephen Farmer, Director of Undergraduate Admissions at University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill
Parke Muth, Senior Assistant Dean of Admissions at University of Virginia
Martha Allman, Director of Admissions at Wake Forest University
Margit A. Dahl, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at Yale University

For ease of reading, we introduce each officer's response to the questions we ask with the name of the institution he or she serves.

SUBJECT MATTER AND WRITING

Which themes continually appear in essays?

Amherst: We give four or five different options. I look for an experience or interaction that they have had that led them to a particular value or interaction, a reflection.

Bucknell: There are number of commonly used topics, but students will tend to write about meaningful experiences or key people in their lives.

Cooper Union: Human Rights/Civil Liberties, volunteerism, and most recently, involvement in the Middle-East.

UNC: Many students choose to write about school activities such as sports or band, significant people in their lives, or summer experiences such as mission

trips or Governor's school. While these themes are used more often than others, the theme itself does not necessarily determine the quality of the essay.

UVA: I am not sure that theme is the correct term to describe the types of essays we often get. There are, according to the Russian Formalists, only nine plots available, so essays tend to fall into these forms. The most common of these would be the maturation plot, also known as the bildungsroman. In this plot, the student grows from having undergone an experience that challenged him or her.

Wake Forest: Personal struggle/triumph and epiphanies—often resulting from community service or international experiences—are very common.

Yale: The most common ones are probably [about] the things that students do the most in high school. Our essay topics are very open and we let [students] talk about things that are very meaningful. We're not one of those colleges that asks for offbeat topics and asks applicants to come up with a creative answer. We certainly get ones about important people, grandparents, family experiences, that sort of thing.

There are terrible essays on wonderful topics and wonderful essays on very ordinary topics. The topic itself does not make the essay.

What do you love to see?

Amherst: Pure pleasure and genuine intellectuality.

Bucknell: Honesty. Experiences that have made a significant impact on one's life always grab the reader's attention.

Cooper Union: Essays written with passion and emotion. Those which discuss a personal matter/conflict/growth. Essays with humor—they're refreshing.

Johns Hopkins: We start at the beginning. The first sentence is read carefully, the first paragraph is closely read, and then it's open-ended from there . . . if it's high quality, we'll examine everything. The very first sentence should accomplish a lot. . . the essays I remember do that—similar to a short story. Some students don't dive right in; they try to set up their case, crafting what turns out to be dry prose. They don't have time to do that.

Macalester: I enjoy reading direct, honest, concise writing.

Northwestern: Writing with a natural voice. Don't be formal if you're not formal. If you're funny, be humorous. We're trying to get a sense of what you're like; stay with your natural voice.

Olin: We love to see that students understand Olin's unique mission and want to contribute to our community.

Subtle humor done well can make a big impact in an essay. One essay we received a couple years ago from an applicant compared Olin to pizza on Thanksgiving. In his essay, he noted that while everyone has turkey, stuffing, and cranberry sauce on Thanksgiving because that's the tradition, his family realized that they didn't really like turkey, etc. all that much; what they liked best was pizza. The family started a new tradition of having pizza on Thanksgiving. The student observed that this was an applicable analogy to Olin—a new and innovative college that's a better fit for him because it's a new and different institution. He did an excellent job of using subtle humor, a great theme, and actual substance in his essay.

UNC: Creativity, honesty, humor, and an authentic voice.

UVA: I love to read essays that show rather than tell, that focus on details instead of abstractions, and that have a voice. This is, of course, quite a tall order for a short essay.

Wake Forest: Clear, descriptive, beautiful writing. Thoughtful essays that reveal a creative, serious, and engaged student.

What topics are risky? And when, if ever, is risk-taking a good idea?

Bucknell: Though it is important to be confident, excessive arguments about how qualified and talented a candidate is do not sit well with the reader. It is important to stay away from strong political and religious views because you cannot predetermine that the reader shares your beliefs. The only risk worth taking is telling the committee about overcoming a personal obstacle. If you want to write about enduring personal problems, then be sure to include how you overcome [the problem] or it may be assumed that you have not changed or achieved success.

Cooper Union: Mistakes made (even ones that had legal repercussions) and what has been learned from them. While this topic is risky, I would prefer to know the truth about an individual, his or her failures and how he or she has

subsequently grown. Other risky topics include: abortion, politics, and affirmative action. Some admissions counselors will undoubtedly compare their own ideals [to the student's] and may not be as objective [as others].

Deep Springs: It's risky to use a non-essay format (e.g., a collection of poems). It had better be very good. Anything that uses tricks to avoid thinking through things in a structured, rigorous, and interesting way is bad.

Macalester: I really don't want to know about their sex lives.

UNC: Few topics are too risky, but it depends on how well the student presents the topic. If a student chooses a controversial topic such as abortion, does she support her arguments well? If a student tries to use humor, is it effective?

UVA: Any topic can be risky. I think the grand narratives (meta-narratives for the post modern crowd), are difficult to write about well in a limited amount of space. Man's inhumanity to man would fall into this category. I am being a bit tongue-in-cheek, as I do not wish to discourage students from writing about what they care about. I have seen great essays on almost any topic and terrible essays on almost any topic. (I have read over 25,000.)

Wake Forest: Shock value in college essays is not desirable. Avoid profanity, sex, violence, and gory details.

Yale: I think it's not so much the topic as it is [how the student] deals with a topic; I don't think that there's any individual topic that can't be dealt with. I think some kids do take risks in essays. They don't always work, but I appreciate the courage to try. Don't waste 50 percent of your essay space with a poem; it's ultimately going to serve you a little better to write some prose.

What experience would you like students to write about more often?

Bucknell: Stories that deal with life experiences or information that won't appear anywhere else in the application always capture our attention.

Cooper Union: Things that move them emotionally and philosophically. Experiences that they have learned from and are now richer from. Travels—who did they meet, what did they see, what did they learn? What they expect to gain by going to college other than preparation for a job.

Deep Springs: The ideas they are curious and excited about.

Johns Hopkins: Students assume we want to know about them personally—and we do—but we want the essay to be a window on their lives, their community, school, teachers, and [general] situation. Students rarely reflect on their schools or neighborhoods—more on family and friends. We want to learn about the context of the application. Where is the student coming from? We prefer the essay to talk about one's own situation; it helps us balance the traditional admissions measures—grades, scores, etc.—in the application.

UNC: There are no specific experiences we would like students to write about more often than others. We simply want students to choose experiences that are important to them, rather than ones they think we want to read.

UVA: I would encourage students to focus on what our greatest writer calls "a local habitation and a name." In other words, a student should focus on the details and on a level of language that permits details to speak.

Wake Forest: Intellectual epiphanies—the "Ah-ha" moments that made a concept or idea come to life.

What bores you?

Amherst: Students playing the college application process too safely . . . it's refreshing to see a kid being himself or herself—you don't have to climb Mount Kenya . . . as long as it's sincere.

Bucknell: How an essay is written can be boring. Think of the best teachers who can make any topic interesting. The word essay derives from the French essayer, "to try," so try to teach us something about yourself. A college essay needs to be unique. Tell us things about yourself that only you could say, without using too many of those thesaurus-type words that we do not use in everyday conversation. Even when writing about a common topic, present it from your own perspective with descriptions of your own reactions and perceptions, the setting, the circumstances, and so forth. Imagine yourself as an admissions officer who may have read 40 other essays that day. How will your essay stand out to keep our attention?

Cooper Union: Reading about *The Catcher in the Rye*, Holden Caulfield, *The Great Gatsby*, or Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*.

Deep Springs: Essays that amount to a list of activities or achievements.

Macalester: Indirect, misleading, or meandering writing.

Northwestern: The class trip to Europe. We don't tend to have repetitive stuff since we change questions.

Olin: It's always very clear when students are writing things they think we (the readers) want to hear about. Stay away from canned responses.

UNC: Essays that don't have a voice.

UVA: The standard five-paragraph essay that does not let a voice come through.

Wake Forest: The passive voice. Colloquial writing. Run-on sentences. Essays that read like book reports. Attempts to mask bad writing by being cute and clever. School essays that are reworked to fit the college essay question.

Yale: Superficiality. There are many students who, for whatever reason, do not go beyond the superficial. They'll tell us what they've been doing [and] keep it fact-based. They don't get it to a reflective level.

What's the most ridiculous achievement you've ever seen listed on an application? What's the most ridiculous essay topic? Were these students admitted?

Bucknell: One student listed that he once held his breath for 58 seconds; there was no context to it, and I think the world record is over five minutes, so I still wonder why he listed it. I do not know that there is one most ridiculous essay topic above all others, but the writer should avoid outrageous, unsubstantiated claims. I do not remember if those students were admitted, but it probably doesn't matter how good their essay is if their high school transcript doesn't show a challenging schedule and successful results.

Cooper Union: Most ridiculous essay topic: Someone wrote about olives, the different kinds and the pleasure attained from eating them—and yes they were admitted.

Deep Springs: Domesticating a stray animal. Not admitted. Our essay questions are fairly narrow and seem to discourage people from "ridiculous" essay topics.

UVA: Listing a dramatic performance in kindergarten as evidence of interest in theater.

I don't find our essays to be ridiculous. Students often try too hard to impress us with the size of their vocabulary and if they do not really comprehend

the connotations of the words they took from the thesaurus it can be comic. Some of the latter types have not been offered admission.

Which mistakes appear so often they do not count as strikes against the applicant?

Amherst: [They] do count against you. The hastily and poorly done essay is pretty close to irrevocable.

Bucknell: I do not want to say what mistakes are okay, because the writer should try [to do] the best possible work he or she can, without thinking that we will let a few particular things slide. Shoot for "A" work and, if you fall a little short, you'll still get an "A-minus." If you shoot for a "B" and fall a little short, you'll get a "B-minus." Which would you rather have?

Cooper Union: Misuse of hyphens and dashes. Writing "3" instead of "three."

Macalester: Mistakes are mistakes. When they're made, they're noticed.

UNC: Readers recognize mistakes more often than not, although they do not always count as strikes against the applicant. Spelling errors, poor essay structure, and misuse of pronoun "their" and adverb "there" are some of the more common mistakes.

UVA: As a highly selective school, we don't see all that many mistakes anymore. Grammar checks and spelling checks have helped many a student in the last few years.

Wake Forest: All mistakes count as strikes against the applicant.

What writing tips would you offer to your applicant pool?

Bucknell: The essay is your one chance to be a little creative with your application, as opposed to listing your address and birth date and enclosing letters of recommendation that you will never see, written by someone else. Have fun, make your essay lively, and let us into your head a little. Make the essay about yourself so that we learn about you, not someone else. Spell-check and grammar check, to catch variations such as its/it's, to/too/two, their/there/they're, begin/being, perfect/prefect, and now/own/won. Be concise so that we know what it is you are writing about, instead of covering multiple topics with no

unity. Finally, begin early, during the summer, so you can revise your essay as needed, while you are not in the hectic time of your life known as senior year of high school.

Cooper Union: Keep it personal, do not include what is already obvious—i.e., what is stated on an activity sheet or resume, and check your spelling and grammar. If you're applying to Cooper Union, make sure to remove all of the "Carnegie Mellon's" from your essays!

Deep Springs: Style is important: be engaging, interesting, and show a certain vivacity.

Johns Hopkins: Get your pen and paper or saddle up to the word processor. Don't write as if there is a correct answer [or] be too cautious. It seems to me that we work hard to craft questions that prevent that, but we see students who are too cautious. Be adventurous intellectually—write unconventionally. Applicants have more freedom than they think, and it's in their interest to use that flexibility.

Macalester: Be yourself. Use your own voice. Own your essay rather than let someone else tell you what to write. Address any questions the admissions committee may have about your application up front. Tell your story, if you have one.

Northwestern: Answer the whole question. For example, we have a question that asks what an applicant would do with five minutes of airtime—what would they talk about and why? Kids don't answer the why part; they go on about the subject but there's no analysis, no reflection.

Olin: Simple grammar, punctuation, and spelling are important. Get multiple people to proofread your application and essays.

UNC: Writing is a process. Don't expect to write your essay in one sitting. Proofread. Let your own voice come through; this is our opportunity to get to know you.

Wake Forest: Be sure that you answer the essay question. Write clearly and concisely. Check closely for spelling, grammatical, and punctuation errors. Plan your essay well in advance.