

What the Admissions Officers Love to See

This article is excerpted from *College Essays That Made a Difference* and viewed at *The Princeton Review* <http://www.princetonreview.com/college/apply/articles/process/EssayBook3.asp>

Jennifer Wong, director of admissions at Claremont McKenna College: Please use your own "voice," especially when writing your personal statement. This should not be an exercise in packing in as many SAT-prep words as possible! Write about something that you care about, something that gives us a window into your perspective/experience. Students who take some calculated risks in their essays, and in doing so, really show their personality.

John Latting, director of admissions at Johns Hopkins University: Get your pen and paper or saddle up to the word processor; the important thing to keep in mind is, don't write as if there is a correct answer. Don't 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.

Lorne T. Robinson, dean of admissions and financial aid at Macalester College: Be yourself. Use your own voice. "Own" your essay rather than letting 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.

Alyssa Sinclair, assistant director of admissions at Middlebury College: Most students should "write what they know," and not worry about being completely original in their subject matter. In most cases, we care more about how a student writes about a topic than the topic itself. Ideally, we love to see truly fine writing that reflects mature thought, a mastery of the language and mechanics, and a topic that reveals a great deal about the applicant simply because it tells a good story. Essays of that caliber are fairly rare, so we also enjoy pieces that possess the elements mentioned above but may not have them in equal share.

Joel Bauman, dean of admissions at New College of Florida: Once you've written your essays, let them sit for a few days. It's very tempting to hit the "send" button or drop them in the mail, but it's definitely a good idea not only to proofread for mechanical errors, but also to consider whether there is a real point to each essay. Are they well developed? Do the ideas flow logically? Our college writing consultant points out that she can teach someone how to use semicolons, but she can't teach them how to think. We're looking for some sort of organized, well-reasoned argument, without typos or grammar errors-looking for the ability to reason and think clearly and make a reasoned argument on some topic. The greater the evidence of thoughtfulness, the better. The essay should show some level of sophistication, technical skill, and reasoning ability. We love to see a clear sense of engagement-that the student hasn't just fulfilled her or his obligation to submit an essay, but has really thought about it and obviously cares about the topic. We also get a big kick out of colorful metaphors-although these, in and of themselves, will probably not make the difference in an admission decision.

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

Jim Miller, dean of admissions at Bowdoin College: Keep it narrow, get readers' attention right away, and stay on task, on point. We like to see things that are personal and simple. People try to get complex. Things that are meaningful come across that way as you read them.

Janet Rapelye, dean of admissions at Wellesley College: I'm a complete sucker for the grandparent essay, i.e., what I learned from them, what they taught me, what they taught my family. In my 22 years in admissions, I haven't read a bad grandparent essay. I like to hear about gratitude for someone in your life, such as a family member or favorite teacher.