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PLUS:

*How to  
write a  
winning  
essay.*

ART: MELISSA GRIFFIN

# PERFECT

It's only a couple pieces of paper. But when it comes to attending the college of your dreams, those few sheets are the most important documents in the universe. It's your college application—your chance to introduce yourself, show your qualifications, and relate what you can contribute to a school.

**A**t a typical university, a handful of admission officers may be responsible for reading thousands of applications. That means you may have only 15 or 20 minutes to make a good impression. How can you do it? It helps to know the application and what colleges look for in each part.

## STEP 1 INSTALL YOUR PERSONAL DATA

The first few items on the application—name, address, citizenship, and so on—seem like no-brainers. But you'd be surprised how many people make mistakes. "There are often sections of an application that a student just omits," says Susan Klopman, dean of admission at Elon College in North Carolina. Read all the questions carefully before you start filling them out.

The personal data section may give you the option of stating your ethnicity, which you should do, particularly if you're a minority student underrepresented at the school. You also may be asked if either of your parents attended the school since many colleges give special consideration to children of alumni. And don't forget your Social Security number, which schools often use to identify applications.

## STEP 2 DISPLAY GRADES AND TEST SCORES

This portion asks for details about your high school. You'll need to give your school's ACT/CEEB number (a code used by computers when scoring SAT and ACT tests), which you can get from your guidance counselor.

In this section, you must also list your SAT or ACT scores, grade point average, and/or class rank. You might be tempted to sweeten your GPA or test scores a bit. Don't. "The fact is, we're going to get a transcript," says Randall W. Dahl, associate vice president for academic affairs at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater. And colleges don't look kindly upon liars.

## STEP 3 HAMMER DOWN YOUR ACTIVITIES

Most applications require a rundown of the extracurricular activities and organizations you've participated in over the past four years. This does not mean you should list every club meeting you've ever attended. "It's better to have several that you've contributed to





BY TRACEY RANDINELLI

# APPLICATION

Think of your college application as a house with many rooms to build and fill. Be sure not to spend all your time working on one area and neglecting another part.

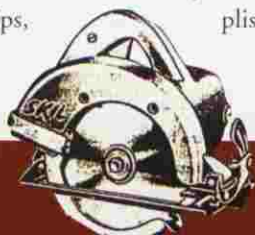


than 16 that you haven't done much in," says Judi Robinovitz, a Florida-based certified educational planner.

Start by listing all your activities, including volunteer work, internships, part-time jobs, and other out-of-school interests. Then pare down

your list to activities in which you've played an active role. Include the amount of time you've spent on each activity, the leadership positions you've held, and the honors and accomplishments you've collected. Be specific: As yearbook advertising director, did you sell a record number of ads and

increase profits? As band president, did you convince the school administration to budget money for new tubas? It's important to distinguish yourself from other qualified applicants, says Robinovitz. "Thousands of people are president of their class. You need to show what you've done to make your presidency special."





## STEP 4 NAIL THE ESSAY

Because the admission process is so competitive, the essay can sometimes make or break you. "Other things being equal, a really good essay could pull you into the class," says Dodge Johnson, a college planner in Malvern, Pennsylvania.

But don't let that intimidate you. Admission officers want to gauge your writing ability, but

they're also trying to get to know you, your interests, and your goals. Do not write an essay that says what you think a college wants to hear. "When you write about something you think will impress the admission committee, the phoniness is obvious," says Michael McKeon, dean of admission at Seattle University in Washington.

A great essay doesn't need to be stuffy or boring, either. Dr. Douglas Christiansen, dean of admission at Purdue University in West Lafayette, Indiana, once read an essay by a student who wanted to eat a hot dog at every major league ballpark in the U.S. "I've remembered it for years," Christiansen says. "It talked about having goals that are just for fun, because, hey, life is fun."

Even if the school doesn't require an essay, think about including a personal statement, particularly if it explains an extraordinary circumstance that has negatively affected your grades. (For more essay-writing tips, see "Writing a College Essay in 3 Easy Steps" below.)



## STEP 5 TACK ON RECOMMENDATIONS

When choosing a teacher to write your recommendation, select someone who knows you well. "The person should be able to write more than just what a wonderful student you are," says Robinovitz. "He or she should be able to describe contributions you make outside the classroom."

Make an appointment to speak to the teacher, or perhaps ask him or her to lunch. During the conversation, you may suggest a teacher stress a



# WRITING A GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY IN 3 EASY STEPS

## STEP 1 PICK A TOPIC. ANY TOPIC

For many students, deciding what to write about is the toughest part of the essay process—after all, how many significant experiences has a 17-year-old really had?

"One girl said she wished someone in her family had died so she'd have something good to write about," remembers Amy Storrow, director of Essay Experts in Houston.

Often, the smaller, seemingly unimportant moments in your life are the most meaningful. "Learning how to drive could be significant," says Sanford Kreisberg, founder of Cambridge Essay Service, a consulting company in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "So could the first time you argued with your parents, or the first time you realized you didn't have to fight with your younger sibling."

Educational planner Judi Robinovitz stresses the importance of telling the reader how the experience has changed your own life. "If you want to talk about your grandmother's Alzheimers disease," she says, "you'd better talk about how it affects you."

## STEP 2 WRITE IT DOWN

The most important thing to remember is that you're not writing a term paper. "A conclusion that repeats the essay's main points may show that you know how to write a five-paragraph essay," says educational consultant Dodge Johnson, "but it sure is boring." A few tips:

- **Fill the essay with detail.** Use words and descriptions that appeal to all five senses. Include action verbs whenever you can.
- **Don't forget who your audience is.** In all likelihood, your essay will be read by a group of adults in their 20's and 30's and beyond. Use descriptions and language your readers can relate to. That means phrases like "My trip to France was off the hook" are out.
- **Watch the humor.** Go with a funny essay only if you've already proven you have comic writing ability—and even then, think twice. Keep in mind that you don't know the personality of the admission officer reading your essay, so it's possible that your senses



facet of yourself not yet covered in the application. Give the person a résumé or copy of your application to familiarize him or her with what you've accomplished, and allow the teacher at least a month to write. As a final touch, send a thank-you note once he or she has completed the letter.

Can you include recommendations from a coach, boss, or other non-teacher? Go ahead—as long as you've already secured the required number of academic recommendations. "But don't give us seven or eight," cautions Jim Bock, director of admission at Swarthmore College in Pennsylvania. "There really is such a thing as overkill!"

## 5 FINAL TIPS

Keep these college application hints in mind:

**1. Neatness counts.** "We've seen applications with grease stains, soda stains," says Michelle Petro-Siraj, an admission director at The Catholic University of America in Washington, DC. Also, don't fill out the application in pencil—use a pen. Better yet, many schools allow you to download the application and fill it out on screen. You can then print out a copy to mail or submit a

copy via e-mail.

**2. Make copies of everything.** That way, if a college misplaces any materials, you can replace whatever is needed.

**3. Send the application in on time.** "It can affect not only whether you're admitted, but what financial aid you receive," says Petro-Siraj.

**4. Don't give in to stress.** "Try not to spend too much time worrying," says Bock. Getting into college is an important hurdle, but don't treat it as a life-or-death matter.

**5. Don't slack off grade-wise.** Colleges have access to your senior year grades, and if they drop drastically, you can expect a school to take a second look at your record—and possibly even rescind an offer.

*Tracey Randinelli is a regular contributor to CAREERS & COLLEGES.*



## 5 ESSAY DON'TS

**1. DON'T CONFUSE YOUR SCHOOLS.** Saying "I've always wanted to go to Cornell" in the essay you're sending to Grinnell is a big no-no. Make sure you use your computer's Find/Replace command to remove all traces of previous schools before you send the application.

**2. DON'T INTERCHANGE IT'S AND ITS.** If you can replace the "its" with the words "it is," the word is a contraction and calls for an apostrophe. If not, it's a possessive—leave it alone. (And while you're at it, bone up on the differences between there and their, and to and too.)

**3. DON'T OVERUTILIZE PRETENTIOUS LANGUAGE TO DELINEATE THE SUBJECT MATTER.** In other words, don't use too many big words.

**4. DON'T USE TENSES AND PRONOUNS THAT DON'T AGREE.** "Each has their way" is not correct. "Each has his or her way" is.

**5. DON'T START SUCCESSIVE SENTENCES WITH THE SAME WORD.** That is careless. That is sloppy. That is why you shouldn't do it.

of humor may not click.

- **Keep to the specified length.** If no maximum is given, stick to about 500 words. The friendly admission officer reading 50 essays a day will thank you.
- **Remember: You don't have to be Tolstoy.** Admission officers hope to learn more about you by reading your essay. They are not expecting you to produce the greatest work of literature ever.

### EDIT AND CHECK

**STEP 3** One of the best ways to pinpoint problems in your essay is to have someone else read it. But don't let your editor do the writing! "An editor might say, 'I think you should come up with more details,'" says Kreisberg, "and then it's your job to come up with those details and write them."

Don't rely solely on your computer to proofread your essay. Spell checks are notorious for not picking up repeated words or words that are spelled differently, but sound alike. (Here what were saying?) And don't expect an admission rep to overlook grammatical goofs. Seattle University's McKeon remembers showing an error-filled essay to a colleague. "He said it would have been criminal to admit the student."

If you put in the time and energy, your hard work will be appreciated by the people who matter—the admission staff. "Each year, I will read one or two essays that move me to the point where I write the person an individual letter," says McKeon. Your essay may get you something just as important—a letter welcoming you to your dream school.



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