

How to Write the Perfect College Essay

By Junhua Pan, Senior at Lexington High School (MA)

At the start of this summer, I was confident that I would have my college application essay finished before September. Seven false starts and two months later, however, I was seriously wondering why this whole essay thing was so freakishly difficult. Writing had never been a problem for me before, so why was I stuck now? It was just a personal essay. Elementary, dear Watson. Elementary.

Yet there I was, staring down the rapid approach of a new school year with absolutely nothing in the way of a college essay. Everything I had written had ended up in the trash, from that 500-word pseudo-essay to the one-liner that I scribbled down while visiting schools in New York. At the rate I was going, my essay count was likely to plummet into the negatives before September ended.

Every day, I could hear the word echoing ominously in the back of my thoughts—"Essay...essay...essay..."—and it made me want to tear my hair out.

I tried all the usual ways of smashing a writer's block. I listened to music. I took a walk. I played video games. I talked to my friends. I scribbled incoherent nothings on scrap pieces of paper, searching for some spark of inspiration that would turn into the perfect college essay. I sat down and just cogitated for extended periods of time, sifting through my personal philosophies, hoping to turn up some bright gem of truth that, when put into writing, would make admission officers say, "Ah! What brilliance! We simply must have this student at our school!"

But I never struck gold. Frustrated, I finally tossed aside my pathetic essay attempts and started on my school assignments instead. An hour later, I had typed out a 1,000-word introductory

message for my math teacher and was wishing that I could use that essay on my college applications. Unfortunately, I had been dancing on the edge of sarcastic wit throughout that assignment, and that really wasn't the tone I planned for admission officers to see.

I had a nebulous idea of what my college essay should look like upon completion. There would be a nifty opening, with just the right amount of humor, transitioning smoothly into a refreshing introduction. The topic of the essay, of course, would be completely original—or, failing that, the way I presented the idea would make up for the lack of originality. The words would reveal my very best qualities without being boastful or conceited. The writing would flow effortlessly. There might even be a tasteful metaphor or two.

The most problematic aspect of this whole plan, I thought, was finding the right topic. I started writing about summer camp or trips overseas, but discarded that idea when I thought of all the applicants who would choose to discuss the exact same subjects. I considered piano as a potential essay topic, but almost everyone I knew also played the piano, and that made me hesitate. While I could try to put a new spin on any of these topics, there was only so much one could do with "I love traveling" or "Piano is my special talent."

No, I needed something earth-shattering and beautiful, some topic that I could write about without my conscience constantly whispering, "But you know so-and-so is better than you at this. In fact, there are tons of people out there who are just so much better than you in general." Self-promotion was rather difficult when I couldn't stop remembering every last one of my own shortcomings. And if I couldn't even make myself believe that I was all that great, what chance was I going to have at convincing others?

Every day, it was the same: I would pull up a blank word-processing document and glare at it for hours, sometimes typing a few words, but always deleting everything because none of it ever sounded right. And still that little voice in the back of my head went on whispering, "Essay...essay...essay..."

Finally, today, I gave up the whole thing as a bad job, opened a new document, and began to argue with myself on the computer screen (it seemed less mentally unstable than talking to myself in my head, at least). It went something like this:

- I'm sick of trying to write this essay. Why is it even necessary?

Because it's part of the college application process, and I want to go to college.

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JUNHUA PAN is currently a senior at Lexington High School (MA). Despite the challenges of balancing a busy schedule with the demands of the college application process, she is determined to maintain an optimistic outlook and to minimize stress. She eagerly looks forward to continuing her education as a college freshman in the fall.

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My parents, support my academic decisions but they don't think I can amount to anything grand due to my Asian-American heritage. They don't see that in America, everyone has a chance to excel, no matter who you are. You just need the opportunity to do so. My career goal is to be an astronaut, a goal that is literally past the horizon but I strive to do my best so that one day I may realize that goal. A good college would allow me to achieve that goal; that is why academic excellence and diligence are so important to me.

I am at a point where the decisions I make will directly impact my future. The college I go to will be a paramount factor in my future success. It is vital I do well in applications and receive scholarships to pay for a good education so that I may fulfill my goals and break through the doubt held by my immigrant family. My potential is limitless as long as I try.

How to Write, continued from page 25

- But what if I don't?
But I do. I want to learn.
- True. But this is so frustrating.
Then write about that frustration.
- What kind of an essay would that be?
An honest essay.
- Yeah, honestly awful.
But it would be me.
- But it wouldn't be the "me" that colleges want to see.
No one is asking for perfection.
- But it seems like they are.
But I can't deliver perfection.
- So then why not just be honest? I'm human. I have my fears, my failings and my frustrations.
Write about it.
- My dissatisfaction with the world. My dreams for the way it could be.
If I have good qualities, they'll show through anyway.

- Though I wish I didn't have to play up my virtues to make colleges want me.

But what if I didn't have to?

- Some college might want me just the way I am.

I could practically feel the metaphorical lightbulb going off above my head. Epiphanies didn't get much better than this. My original plan for writing the perfect college essay was in pieces, but who cared? I had a better idea—the best idea I'd had since I embarked on this whole application process.

I wasn't going to drive myself crazy by trying to write an impeccable essay. I wasn't going to pretend that I was some sort of genius. I wasn't going to go out of my way to promote myself like a brand name product. I wasn't even going to imply, "I'm wonderful! Don't you want me at your school?"

I was just going to tell them about myself. That was all.

So I began to write, and finally—finally—the words began to flow. This, I realized, was why my math assignment had been so easy; I had just been writing about myself. Now I watched as my fingers raced over the keyboard, the sentences and paragraphs pouring out to fill the blank pages with incredible ease.

Before I knew it, I had a personal essay.

It wasn't completely original. The writing wasn't perfect. There were no metaphors, but that was all right, because the words contained my thoughts, my voice and my personality—all of which are far from perfect, but are genuinely me.

And that's exactly what I want to present in my college essay: myself. No embellishments, no positive spins, no stretching of the truth. After all, I don't want to be accepted or rejected on any false assumptions; I want to be evaluated and valued for exactly who I am—no more, and no less.

Test Drive, continued from page 26

One thing that has put me off from some schools has been, believe it or not, the salesmen. If I'm looking to buy a television set, the salesman shows me the features, compliments me—demonstrating that he really wants me to buy this item. He's interested in the customer—even if only because he's being paid commission. But the admission staff at some schools I've toured haven't acted this way. I don't feel like they care if I go to the school; there's a million more like me, so why do they need me? I suppose the million emails I get every day saying "Come to this school you've never heard of!" may be their way of "wanting" me. But this doesn't feel personal. Not only does it read like something they could change the name on and send out to any student, but a typed email has nothing of the inflection or body language that suggests that they mean what they say. So this, then, is a new qualification to my search: Do I feel like I'm wanted on campus? Do I fit a need that they have? Perhaps this is the closest thing I can find to a test drive. If a test drive shows compatibility with car and driver, I can bridge this shortcoming by finding my compatibility with a school.

It's been difficult finding a college that is "a good fit" (as my counselors would say) for me. Note that I say "a" college for me, not "the" college for me. This is how I've resolved my issues in my college search. Instead of finding the college that fits every criteria of mine, I'm looking for a group of colleges that I know will provide a good experience, even if it's for different reasons. I may have to sacrifice a few cupholders, but I may gain a few extra horsepower. The TV resolution may not be great, but the video inputs I gain are worth it. Then, when it comes to deciding on just one college, I'll decide on additional factors, such as financial aid. With this strategy, I should be happy with whatever college I choose. My criteria will not have pigeon-holed me. Maybe I don't need a test drive.

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