**What should I write? How to tackle those pesky college essays**

**BY JANE STANCILL, the News and observer, 21 december 2013**

The college essay strikes fear in the souls of students, who stare at the blank space on the application and wonder: What should I write? As January application deadlines loom, high school seniors are writing, rewriting, procrastinating and fretting over perhaps the most daunting part of the quest to win admission to the college of their dreams.

The essay is one opportunity for a student’s personality to shine through, adding sparkle and spice to the statistics – the SAT, the ACT, the GPA.

Experts say the essay is rarely a “make-or-break” part of the application, but it can make a difference for a student, depending on where he or she falls in the applicant pool. A good one can nudge a student ahead, but it probably won’t make up for anemic scores or grades. A truly bad essay can torpedo an applicant’s chances, however.

Washington-based college admissions consultant Steven Roy Goodman advises his clients to take time and care with the task.

“The essay is very important,” said Goodman, author of “College Admissions Together: It Takes a Family.” “It gives students a chance to talk about who they are and where they want to go. This is their chance to speak in their own words. This is not their teacher talking. It’s not their transcript talking.”

Not all college applications require essays, but many do, including the Common Application used by more than 500 universities. The essays are usually limited to 250 to 500 words.

Students are given several prompts such as: “Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?” or “Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?”

Some campuses that use the Common Application add their own questions. UNC-Chapel Hill, for example, has five prompts, including: “What do you hope to find over the rainbow?” and “If you could travel anywhere in time or space, either real or imagined, where would you go and why?”

**Who are you?**

A college application essay has to do three things, said Duke University Undergraduate Admissions Dean Christoph Guttentag.

“It has to reflect good writing, it has to reflect good thinking and it has to reflect the individual writing it,” Guttentag said. “It’s hard to do.”

While many essays are good, few are outstanding, said Guttentag, who estimates that he’s read 50,000 in his career at Duke.

The key, say Guttentag and other admissions officials, is authenticity. The essay shouldn’t sound like a cover letter for a job applicant and shouldn’t be a philosophical treatise on world peace. It shouldn’t be the creation of an adult who has packaged a student for presentation.

It should simply be the observations of a teenager who has 17 years of life experience.

“What’s exciting,” Guttentag said, “is when we read an essay where we really have a sense of who this person is.”

So, if a student is funny and clever, his essay should reflect that. Similarly, if a student is hardworking and diligent, then her essay shouldn’t be quirky and out of the box.

Students often feel that they have to confess something or write about the worst thing that ever happened to them. It has become counselors’ standard advice to avoid the “three D’s” – death, disease and divorce. Experts say it is difficult to write well about those topics, which almost never reveal much about the student.

It’s a natural impulse for students to want to make a grand statement during this rite of passage, said Steve Farmer, vice provost for enrollment and undergraduate admissions at UNC-Chapel Hill.

He suggests they take the pressure off themselves.

“From our point of view, the essay is a lot less than what students make it out to be,” Farmer said. “We don’t think that any student can be defined wholly in an essay. We don’t read essays to judge students as people. We want a sample of their writing. We want to hear their voice. We want to understand how they tell a story, we’d like to see something about how their mind works.”

Instead of writing consciously about themselves, Farmer said, students are better off describing something concrete and specific, an event that isn’t earth-shattering. “Go from the small to the big,” Farmer advises. “Go from the local to the cosmic instead of trying to start with the cosmic.”

He offers this tip: Students should read their essay aloud to a friend, to make sure the voice sounds like theirs.

**No relationships, please**

On a recent afternoon in the parking lot of Durham School of the Arts, the talk turned to essays, applications and acceptance letters.

Corey Coleman, 18, a senior, has already submitted applications to 14 schools, including her favorites: Tufts University and Boston University.

The process, she said, was definitely stressful. She ended up writing one essay on an unconventional topic – describing the time she went to a “laughter yoga” training exercise and how it made her feel.

“I thought it would be an interesting essay, and unique,” Coleman said.

On her Wake Forest University application, Coleman wrote one essay and answered seven prompts for short responses, including writing about herself in a 140-character tweet.

Camille Oliverio, 17, also a senior, applied to 13 schools. She took the “small-to-cosmic” approach by writing about a hike to the top of Occoneechee Mountain in Hillsborough. It was unusual because she almost always does activities with others.

“I went there by myself,” she said. “It was a small step toward being independent.”

There on that mountain, Oliverio related the climb to her journey as an artist, finding her own personal aesthetic. “I realized what I really want in life,” she said of pursuing her art.

Guttentag, the Duke admissions dean, said his views on the essay have changed over the years. He used to like a creative approach, but that’s not really a fair standard for most students, who aren’t necessarily creative but are capable of good writing.

No topic is off limits, he said, but essays about boyfriends and girlfriends almost always bomb. In three decades, he’s read only two such essays that were good.

And, he said, he’s no long enamored of “the writerly” essay with evocative adjectives and overly polished prose.

“It actually tends to hide the person behind the writing,” Guttentag said. “When what strikes you is the writing and not the person, then the essay hasn’t done as good a job as it might.”

Bottom line, he said: “A great essay doesn’t have to be clever, and it doesn’t have to be writerly, and it doesn’t have to be exceptional. A great essay is authentic and personal.”

Goodman, the admissions consultant, always asks his students before they write: What is your favorite thing to do?

The best essays show and tell and reveal personality. “Have fun with this as best you can,” he advises, “and I know it sounds a little crazy.”

There’s a reason, Goodman said: “If it’s not fun to write, it’s not fun to read.”

Darien Faison, 18, a Durham School of the Arts senior, chose to write about his passion since he was a little kid: acting.

He wanted to make it as polished as possible, without veering into the fake and overdone, he said. “I feel like they can tell when it’s definitely from your heart.”

It must have worked. On Wednesday when he got home from school, his parents were waiting for him. An envelope had arrived from UNC Wilmington.

“I couldn’t believe it,” he said.

Then, after all that essay writing, Faison returned to a communication tool he was more familiar with: He posted the good news on Instagram and Facebook.

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How to write a good essay:

1. Start early. Don’t wait until the last minute.

2. Be yourself. Think about what interests you, what you love to talk about, what makes you sit up and take notice if it’s mentioned in class or on TV. Then write about it.

3. Be honest. Don’t fall for canned essays for sale on the Internet. That’s plagiarism.

4. Take a risk. Find a way to stand out. Don’t write what your friends are writing.

5. Maintain your focus. Stick to a theme or a single idea. An essay isn’t a laundry list of accomplishments.

6. Write and rewrite. Start by writing a first draft without overthinking it. Then revise, sharpen, polish.

7. Get a second opinion. Find friends, teachers and parents to read the essay and give feedback. But don’t let your parents over-edit.

8. Proofread. Read carefully after edits. Spell-check. Make sure you’re submitting the right essay to the right school.

9. Be accurate. You may be applying electronically, but treat the essay more seriously than emails. Don’t use email or texting shortcuts.

10. Don’t expect too much from an essay. Essays can be the deciding factor but only rarely. But keep in mind that a bad essay can hurt your chances.

Source: National Association of College Admission Counseling