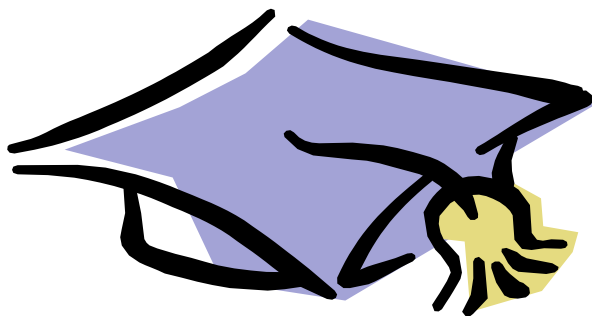


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Writing an Outstanding Admissions Essay



Contrary to popular belief, writing an outstanding admissions essay has little to do with the particular topic you choose. I've read essays about *My Summer Vacation* that have bombed- I've read essays about *My Summer Vacation* that have left me with tears of joy. To steal a cliché, it's not what you say; it's how you say it.

So, you've chosen to write your essay about the individual who has influenced you most- pop singing icon Michael Jackson. Should you start by describing MJ's childhood and progress through album after album, like a college level rockumentary?

Step 1. Capturing the reader's initial attention should be first and foremost on your mind.

Engaging a blurry-eyed admissions officer's interest is a difficult task however, but it need not require Shakespearian talents. It does however require something **different**, something **unique**. Having previously read thirty-four other essays about Michael Jackson, and discovering how the song *Billy Jean* was an instrumental force in every other candidate's personal development, your essay has a daunting hill to climb. Here's how your typical introduction might read...

Michael Jackson came into this world from meager beginnings, only to persevere and rise up out of poverty to become the greatest Pop icon of the twentieth century.

This introduction isn't terrible, but it is terribly boring. This introduction has put the reader on snooze-control and your essay has failed to capture the reader's attention.

Now, here's an alternative introduction:

Dubadub Dah, Dubadub Dah, Dubadub Dah- I couldn't make out the words, but it didn't matter, syllables were strung together like Venetian blinds.

Now, after reading that first sentence can you guess the topic of the essay? Don't have a clue? Well, that is the entire point. An admissions essay doesn't have to spell things out for the reader. **You don't need a topic sentence or an executive summary like we are taught to do in school for research or term papers.** An admissions essay is a different type of animal. Feed the reader something interesting and unique, and you have satisfied the first condition in mastering the admissions essay.

So you've captured the reader's attention, how do you keep it?

Step 2. A reader's concentration is held by consistent and logical flow.

Consistent flow doesn't just mean from paragraph to paragraph, it means from idea to idea, from sentence to sentence. Every idea, every word, should not be sitting on its own little island, it should be part of an

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interconnected stream of words that take the reader on a smooth ride from point A to point B. Often overlooked, **transitions are the easiest and most effective way to give your essay that even feel.** Here's an illustrative example of poor flow:

The songwriter showed his contempt for the audience with a shake of his white glove. Michael began to sing the first few notes his final song- Dangerous. His star quality was cemented.

Notice that these are three separate ideas. They are not tied to one another, and as a result, the paragraph does not flow, and the reader loses interest.

Here's an example of consistent and logical flow:

The songwriter showed his contempt for the audience with a shake of his white glove. Despite his irritation, Michael began to sing the first few notes of his final song- Dangerous. It was this ferocious conclusion that cemented his status as King of Pop.

Although the three sentences are still distinct ideas, transitional devices hold them together. Now, readability is increased, improving the likelihood that an admissions officer would continue further to your finale.

Once your reader finally approaches the end of their literary journey, but one task remains- you must craft a "Lasting Impression" Conclusion. For what good is your essay if nobody remembers it?

Step 3. We must therefore leave the reader with a lingering thought or lasting impression that is difficult if not impossible to shake.

How do we leave these emotional fingerprints on our reader's mind?

In order to leave your indelible mark, **you must make a connection with the reader.** A connection isn't necessarily forged by the fact that you *saved the world from famine, or that you won the nobel prize for literature.* **Something that is significant to you, can and should come across as significant to the reader.** Here's an example:

Other games and competitions followed, but the outcome was the same. Patients were moving muscles, and not just in their arms and legs, but the rarely utilized fibers required for smiling and laughing. Bob Barker's passive followers were briefly transformed into active human beings. Expanding rib cages were no longer the only signs that these people were alive. Animated expressions, roaring laughter and spirited personalities were proof that life was more than just a series of breaths.

This original essay was entitled...you guessed it *My Summer Vacation*, but in the end, it is clear that what this candidate learned was more than just how to live off minimum wage.

So, you've got the basics admissions essay strategies down and are ready to write. Here are the four most common hazards to avoid.

Step 4. Avoid these common traps.

Plato's Pitfall

Greek philosophers from ancient times discussed themes such as the ideal republic and civil piety. In the year 2002 A.D., however one must never fall into the trap of over philosophizing in your essay. I cannot count how many essays I have read that started off:

Ever since the dawn of complex society, individuals have struggled to incorporate religious themes within cultural bounds.

...Nothing glaringly wrong with that opening, but remember, you are not writing a research or term paper. **An admissions committee wants to know something about you.** Philosophizing about religion should be saved for college level classes, not the admissions essay.

Attack of the Thesaurus

Did a giant meteor kill off the last thesaurus during the Mesozoic era? Absolutely not, thesauruses are alive and well on all our word-processing machines. They give us the ability to replace our own thoughts with

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similarly meaning alternatives. Although the thesaurus means well, **they often confuse readers and interrupt that consistent flow we all strive for**. Here is the result of a thesaurus gone awry.

The conjectural anecdote resulted in a most calamitous insurrection directed at my nostrils.

Not sure what the writer is trying to say? Try this one:

The hypothetical remark got me a punch in the nose.

This second sentence shows how saying what you mean, without the aid of a thesaurus, can be much more effective than overusing word-processing features.

Well-Rounded

Many a student sees the admissions essay as an opportunity to put his or her best foot forward. The problem occurs when our aspiring college student tries to condense his or her attributes, awards, and extracurricular activities into one single literary masterpiece. **The admissions essay, however, is not a resume**. The admissions essay is an opportunity to show the admissions committee **one or two** interesting tidbits about you as a person. Attempting to jam eighteen years of accomplishments into a few sheets of paper is a harrowing task that should be held off until graduation day.

Clichés

An admissions essay writer must learn to skate a fine line between being profound and being formulaic. Unique candidates do not:

Win one for the team

Find money the root of all evil

Give me your tired, your poor

God bless us, everyone

These are all clichés that over time have been used again and again. Admission officers will be quick to go numb after reading an essay filled with these overused phrases. Coming up with different ideas or a unique perspective is the challenge of any writer. This is what separates an average admissions essay from an exceptional one.

Summary of Outstanding Admissions Essay Points

Do

- Capture the reader's initial attention by being different or unique
- Keep the reader's attention with a consistent and logical flow
- Leave the reader with a lasting impression by forging a connection

Don't

- Over philosophize
- Overuse the thesaurus
- Use the admissions essay as resume
- Overuse clichés

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Sample Outstanding Admissions Essay

This is an actual essay written by a college applicant to NYU.

3A. IN ORDER FOR THE ADMISSIONS STAFF OF OUR COLLEGE TO GET TO KNOW YOU, THE APPLICANT, BETTER, WE ASK THAT YOU ANSWER THE FOLLOWING QUESTION:
ARE THERE ANY SIGNIFICANT EXPERIENCES YOU HAVE HAD, OR ACCOMPLISHMENTS YOU HAVE REALIZED, THAT HAVE HELPED TO DEFINE YOU AS A PERSON?

I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I translate ethnic slurs for Cuban refugees, I write award-winning operas, I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

I woo women with my sensuous and godlike trombone playing, I can pilot bicycles up severe inclines with unflagging speed, and I cook Thirty-Minute Brownies in twenty minutes. I am an expert in stucco, a veteran in love, and an outlaw in Peru.

Using only a hoe and a large glass of water, I once single-handedly defended a small village in the Amazon Basin from a horde of ferocious army ants. I play bluegrass cello, I was scouted by the Mets, I am the subject of numerous documentaries. When I'm bored, I build large suspension bridges in my yard. I enjoy urban hang gliding. On Wednesdays, after school, I repair electrical appliances free of charge.

I am an abstract artist, a concrete analyst, and a ruthless bookie. Critics worldwide swoon over my original line of corduroy eveningwear. I don't perspire. I am a private citizen, yet I receive fan mail. I have been caller number nine and have won the weekend passes. Last summer I toured New Jersey with a traveling centrifugal-force demonstration. I bat 400.

My deft floral arrangements have earned me fame in international botany circles. Children trust me.

I can hurl tennis rackets at small moving objects with deadly accuracy. I once read Paradise Lost, Moby Dick, and David Copperfield in one day and still had time to refurbish an entire dining room that evening. I know the exact location of every food item in the supermarket. I have performed several covert operations with the CIA. I sleep once a week; when I do sleep, I sleep in a chair. While on vacation in Canada, I successfully negotiated with a group of terrorists who had seized a small bakery. The laws of physics do not apply to me.

I balance, I weave, I dodge, I frolic, and my bills are all paid. On weekends, to let off steam, I participate in full-contact origami. Years ago I discovered the meaning of life but forgot to write it down. I have made extraordinary four course meals using only a mouli and a toaster oven.

I breed prizewinning clams. I have won bullfights in San Juan, cliff-diving competitions in Sri Lanka, and spelling bees at the Kremlin.

I have played Hamlet, I have performed open-heart surgery, and I have spoken with Elvis.

But I have not yet gone to college.

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