

How To Write The Common App Essay

How to Help Your Students Write The Common App Essay

By Kim Lifton

How many times do students come into your office and tell you they don't have good topics for their Common App essays? If your office looks anything like ours, that question might surface countless times during the fall of senior year.

That's because most students think the first step to writing a great college essay is selecting a topic. Guess what? That approach usually leads them down the wrong path.

We're going to share our single best piece of essay writing advice so you can help your students stand out and improve their chances of admission to their dream schools.

Before they start writing the Common App essay (or any other personal statement), they need to ask themselves this question:

"What do I want colleges to know about me that is not apparent from the rest of my application package?"

The question may not seem like such a big deal. But each student's answer is crucial. Without an answer, students have trouble writing college essays that help admissions officers decide if they are a good fit for that school.

College admissions officers want your students to reflect on their lives in the Common App essay. Keep in mind they are only 16 or 17; most of them have not had much practice delving deeply

into their lives. Instead, they are focused on the future – thinking about education, career, travel, and dreams.

As counselors, you can guide them. Many of our students tell us they cannot answer that question when we first ask it. We assure them that they can, and we teach them how to reflect.

How to Help Students Answer the Big Question

You don't need to be a writing teacher or a college admissions officer to help your students master this task. You merely need to understand high school students, and know how to get them to talk. I've never met a high school counselor who wasn't up for that job!

You can offer to help them yourself, or suggest they seek out advice from a parent, a friend, a trusted teacher or another adult. Start by asking your students to share their best attributes. If you know what they are, it is okay to share one or two traits to get them started.

Is your student industrious? Funny? A leader? Shy? Outgoing? Curious? A risk taker?

Focus on characteristics, not accomplishments or failures. Remind them that colleges will already know about their grades, test scores, awards, clubs and jobs. What they don't know is what kind of person the student is.

Once you are done chatting about traits they want to share, ask the question again:

"What do I want colleges to know about me that is not apparent from the rest of my application package?"

With input from you, each student should be able to come up with an answer to that question. Then – and only then – it's time to think about topics for their essays – stories that illustrate those characteristics.

Students Need to Reflect in Common App Essays

As Johns Hopkins University's Associate Director of Admissions, Calvin Wise told me: "I never run into a colleague's office and say 'look at this 4.0 GPA.' I will run into an office with a good essay to share; that excites me."

To Wise, impressive grades and test scores are the norm. But his adrenaline gets pumping when he reads a great essay. Great essays illustrate what an experience meant to the student. They show how the experience shaped that young person. They

help admissions officers understand who a student is, beyond grades and test scores.

College Essay: The Most Challenging Part of the Application

At Wow, we understand the college essay is the most challenging part of the application. We also know you can help your students approach the essay in a way that will help them stand out. Every one of your students has a story to share. Colleges want to hear it.

Kim Lifton is President of Wow Writing Workshop, which developed the college admission industry's only proven process for teaching students how to think about and write the essay so admissions officers will pay attention to a student's application. Wow offers free resources to high school counselors and to families. They also provide paid services for every type of student, from a do-it-yourself essay-writing program with a "virtual coach", to essay reviews and private coaching. For more information e-mail info@wow-writingworkshop.com.



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