

# Top 10 College Essay Mistakes

## SECRETS OF WRITING A WINNING PERSONAL STATEMENT

DID YOU KNOW that top schools collectively reject hundreds of applicants with PERFECT test scores and GPAs? That's why *The New York Times* in 2011\* wrote: "These colleges give more weight to the essay than the GPA ... In other words, ONE writing assignment is more critical to a high school senior's chances of getting into many top colleges than his or her average grades from FOUR YEARS of high school ... Factors like recommendations from teachers and guidance counselors and extracurricular activities trail far behind ... That's because elite colleges are flooded with qualified applicants ... **The essay** suddenly becomes meaningful because it **becomes a tie breaker**" (emphasis added). In reality, however, those of us who work in the trenches can tell you that these college application essays can be more than just a tie breaker; they can actually serve as a kind of "equalizer," trumping other considerations, making applicants with less-than-perfect test scores and GPAs more competitive than they otherwise would be, against "superior" applicants. Yes, that's how influential they can be. \*July 9, p. ED6

Entire books have been written about how to write a good college application essay (or "personal statement," as the main essay is sometimes referred to). It's a process that calls for a serious investment of time and concentrated effort. But in my 30-plus years of professionally assisting applicants with these essays, ten mistakes stand out as being at the top of the list. Awareness of these major errors will at the very least be helpful in crafting an effective essay. Within them, they articulate many of the key "secrets" to writing a winning personal statement.

MISTAKE #1: **Settling for a boring or cliché topic.** Everyone has an interesting story to tell, usually more than one. If a student is not telling an interesting story, it's usually because not enough effort has gone into the process of brainstorming. One key skill an expert coach develops is how to extract and identify the best essay topics, by "interviewing" the applicant.

MISTAKE #2: **Failing to develop a strong outline before starting the actual writing.** An essay without an outline is like a house without an architect's plans. It probably won't work well for its intended purpose and will have to be torn down, to be rebuilt. This process will ultimately take more time than would have been the case had there been a good design to begin with.

MISTAKE #3: **Believing the essay has to begin with a trite vignette** (usually starting with the word as): "As the door creaked slowly open," "As the sound of laughter filled the hallways," "As the last person to speak before me left the stage ... I felt my heart pounding when I approached the podium." Many years ago, this approach was considered innovative. Nowadays, it is cliché.

Is it possible to directly introduce the actual topic, with an irresistible opening? Consider these three examples:

- I never imagined I would be dependent on a wheelchair.
- The world I come from, in terms of my educational community, is largely one of misplaced priorities.
- After losing 10 elections in a row, I was faced with figuring out how it was that this could possibly have happened.

**MISTAKE #4: Using stilted, academic prose completely unnatural for a high school student.** Many an application essay sounds as if the writer has swallowed a thesaurus, trying to impress the reader with big words and pedantic phrases. This inevitably backfires, as it makes it impossible for the writer to come across as genuine or authentic.

**MISTAKE #5: Lecturing the reader.** How do you think a middle-aged admissions committee member feels about being taught the great truths of life by a teenager? Anything that may come across as lecturing—not offering insight with regard to the applicant’s direct personal experiences—is best left out of the essay.

**MISTAKE #6: Confusing “self-esteem” and confidence with arrogance.** Confidence is good. Arrogance is not. Many students blur the distinction and thereby fail to come across as likeable. This works to their distinct disadvantage, as people understandably tend to favor those they perceive as likeable. “The thin line between confidence and arrogance is called humility.”

**MISTAKE #7: Avoiding any admission of flaws and weaknesses.** Schools are not interested in filling their seats with “perfect” students or with “robots,” that get all As and score 100% on exams. Schools are attracted to students who are creative, innovative and highly motivated, to achieve something. Yes, solid track records are important but so is thoughtfulness and maturity.

**MISTAKE #8: Focusing on someone else’s story or failing to be introspective.** Unless specifically asked to do otherwise, the focus of the essay should be one’s *own* story—not that of your grandmother, for example, no matter how much you admire her. And the more constructively introspective and insightful you can be about yourself and what makes you tick, the better.

**MISTAKE #9: Failing to clearly address the prompt (answer the question).** “Just write about whatever you want and match it to whichever prompt seems like the best fit.” This advice is actually given on a regular basis by counselors at a highly regarded private high school in Silicon Valley. But it is no better an idea than talking off topic in response to an interview question.

**MISTAKE #10: Waiting until the last minute to write the essays (i.e., procrastinating).** Many ambitious students and their parents devote literally thousands of hours, over many years, toward cultivating a child’s achievements. And then they wait until the last minute to work on the application essays, thinking that somehow, the results will still be good. This is not advisable.

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