

Writing The College Essay

As the December and January college admission deadlines approach, many high school seniors are working hard to finalize their application essays and summarize their life achievements in 250 words or less. To some students the college essay comes naturally, but other students struggle with this final piece of the admissions puzzle.

For years I have helped students clarify their voices to craft integrated, thoughtful essays more likely to catch the attention and spark the imagination of a bleary-eyed, application-weary admissions officer.

The key to writing a successful college essay is **to involve the reader as quickly as possible** and use **specific details** and creative expression to keep the reader engaged to the end. To engage a reader, a student must abandon the simplistic 5-paragraph structure, and drop any formulaic devices that may have helped her in class, on the AP, or the SAT. The college essay is fundamentally different. This essay is about risk-taking. This essay is about personal voice and expression of values.

To be successful, **a student must write the essay that only he or she could write.**

The essay must be the authentic expression of the student. An essay coach can evoke details and stronger content, but the student must be the author at every level of the process.

When working with students on the essay- we generally begin by brainstorming life experiences- looking for the **stories that deeply energize and inspire the student**. I am not looking for the conventional stories, or the safe stories; I am after the particular event that moved, for whatever reason, that particular student. I am always looking for hints of passion- a change in expression or inflection- to indicate that the student actually cares about a given topic. **A topic which inspires passion in a student will always yield a superior essay.**

Once we find the topic, the next thing is to create the anecdote. I must always push students to get personal, get creative and take risks with the essay. We must find the **specific details that enliven the anecdote**. “Give me details.” “What did you see, what did you feel?” “Don’t tell me- show me.” “Recreate the event and bring me in to your experience.” “**No cliché’s.**” “**If anyone could have written that, then you cannot write that!**” “Be more specific.” “Can you think of a stronger way to say that?” These are the questions that punctuate a college essay session.

As part of our service, we have trained coaches who can help students get “unstuck,” find their voice and craft thoughtful, engaging essays that will stand out during the admissions process. If any of your children are struggling with the essay and are looking for support, we are here to help. Please contact us to sign up for a few hours of essay coaching.

Thanks.
Jed Appelrouth