

Essay Writing Workshop

Nazareth Academy High School

March 5, 2019

Goals for today

- Differentiate between the types of essays you may write
- Understand the purpose of the essay
- Identify what makes a compelling essay
- Apply writing practices to make your essay stand out

Before we begin...

- Admissions is an art, not a science
- Every school varies in how it will read and weigh your essay(s)
- There's no perfect college essay

Types of essays

Personal Essay/Statement

- Any topic of your choice
- Portrays identity and personal growth
- “You” should always be the subject

Supplemental Essay(s)

- School-specific prompts
- Responses can vary in length
- Typically includes a “why us” question

Your personal essay should...

- Showcase your writing skills and ability to organize and present material in a clear and concise fashion
- Give the admissions committee insight into your personality and interests, especially if the university does not offer interviews
- Convey a sense of your goals, beliefs, values and achievements in a way that brings your application to life

Who's reading my application?

- An admissions committee consists of several *real people*:
 - Territory manager or “first reader”
 - A “second reader”
 - Senior admission officers
- Writing is a subjective process
- Clear thinking, good writing, originality, and personal reflection appeal to all

How important is my essay?

As a general rule:

- A great essay won't compensate for academic inconsistencies
- Or if you're significantly below a school's admission profile
- But a poorly written essay can raise flags for concern

Show the admissions committee you've taken time to reflect, revise, and present a story that uniquely speaks to your experiences

The least interesting essays...

- Sound like a thousand others
- Are about ideas or generalities
- Seem like they're written by someone using a thesaurus
- Take a long time to get to the point

The most compelling essays...

- Sound like the words of a real person living a real life
- Are often unexpected or surprising
- Sound like a story that could only be told by one person: a person we'd like to meet

Writing Tips

Take your time

- Rome wasn't built in a day; neither will your essay
- The best essays comes from students who've taken a considerable amount of time to reflect, write, and revise their essay
- Don't skip this important part of the writing process!

Identify your values

- Your essay should tell a story that exemplifies some of your core values
- Whether you crave intellectual challenge, value friendship, or have a thirst for adventure, your essay needs to show your readers these values ***in action***
- Need help? College Essay Guy has a great “Values and Objects” exercise online

Choose your topic wisely

- A paper on the Civil War may be well written, but it tells us nothing about you
- The topic you choose should reflect on a moment in your life that portrays your identity and growth
- If you don't feel comfortable sharing the essay with a parent or counselor, then it's probably not appropriate for your admission essay

Topics that have worked...

- A young girl from the Bronx staring up into the night sky, pondering where her future will take her
- A Boston boy seeing the tired feet of his mother who works from dawn to dusk to provide for the family
- Why that collection of ornate spoons holds so much meaning to a young girl after the loss of a grandmother

Topics to avoid...

- Summarizing your resume
- Highly polarized or sensitive topics
- Why you're *so lucky*
- Illegal or illicit behavior
- The “meta-essay” or “anti-essay”
- Lies, exaggerations, plagiarism

Be authentic

- Write from your heart, not your head
- Don't feel like you need the answers to cure cancer or attain world peace
- We're not looking for specific topics, challenges, or endings

Keep your reader engaged

- Focus on writing vivid details that include all five senses
- Don't be afraid of using dialogue, flashbacks, and vary your sentence structure for maximum impact
- Remember, your essay could be the first in the queue or the twenty-first, so keep your writing sharp and compelling

How to start an essay...

Every Saturday morning, I'd awaken to the smell of crushed garlic and piquant pepper. I would stumble into the kitchen to find my grandma squatting over a large silver bowl, mixing fat lips of fresh cabbages with garlic, salt, and red pepper. That was how the delectable Korean dish, kimchi, was born every weekend at my home.

My grandma's specialty always dominated the dinner table as kimchi filled every plate. And like my grandma who had always been living with us, it seemed as though the luscious smell of garlic would never leave our home. But even the prided recipe was defenseless against the ravages of Alzheimer's that inflicted my grandma's mind.

How to start an essay...

For as long as I can remember, one of my favorite pastimes has been manipulating those tricky permutations of 26 letters to fill in that signature, bright green gridded board of Wheel of Fortune.

Every evening at precisely 6:30 p.m., my family and I unfailingly gather in our living room in anticipation of Pat Sajak's cheerful announcement: "It's time to spin the wheel!" And the game is afoot, our banter punctuated by the potential of either big rewards or even bigger bankruptcies: "She has to know that word—my goodness, why is she buying a vowel?!"

How to start an essay...

Smearred blood, shredded feathers. Clearly, the bird was dead. But wait, the slight fluctuation of its chest, the slow blinking of its shiny black eyes. No, it was alive.

I had been typing an English essay when I heard my cat's loud meows and the flutter of wings. I had turned slightly at the noise and had found the barely breathing bird in front of me.

The shock came first. Mind racing, heart beating faster, blood draining from my face. I instinctively reached out my hand to hold it, like a long-lost keepsake from my youth. But then I remembered that birds had life, flesh, blood.

Proofread. Proofread. Proofread.

- First impressions matter: a misspelled word won't kill you, but errors add up and don't leave a positive impression
- Avoid name-dropping a specific school on the Common App

Get help (but not too much)

- Find 1-2 people (max!) who you trust to provide constructive feedback
- Don't get lost in the noise of how others think your essay should sound
- We're looking to admit you, not Mom or your history teacher

The Great College Essay Test

1. Core Values
2. Vulnerability
3. “So what” Moments
4. Craft

Questions?

Brad Simon, Assistant Director of Admission

- bsimon1@sju.edu
- 610-660-2960