

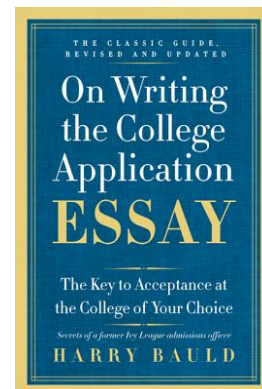
On Writing The College Application Essay

The Key to Acceptance at the College of Your Choice

Harry Bauld

Book Notes / Summary

Harry Bauld is a former admissions officer at Brown and assistant admissions director at Columbia. "On Writing The College Application Essay" is the leading authority on college essays.



Introduction

"What are they looking for on application essays?" is the wrong question to ask

Two reasons that the essay needs a lot of your concentration and energy:

1. It's the hardest part of the application process
2. **"The essay can be your ticket out of the faceless hordes and into First Choice University"** - the essay, unlike other parts of your application, is in your complete control and an opportunity to show admissions officers who you are.

Two things to do before writing college essays

1. Read other essays
2. Practice - "to write well, you have to write"

"A warning: There's no magic formula for writing the college essay. "Writing," said E. B. White, "is an act of faith, not a trick of grammar." It's not any kind of trick at all, in fact. Your writing is your way of seeing and of thinking."

"How an essay really works: it shows you at your alive and thinking best, a person worth listening to—not just for the ten minutes it takes to read your application, but for the next four years."

Chapter 1: The Gray Area

Overview of College Admissions

The Gray Area - "the murky netherworld peopled by those whose credentials are neither easily accepted nor easily denied" 99% of us are in "the gray area"

If you're not from one of the built-in Lobby Groups in the process: recruited athletes, development prospects (people who can spare a few million in pocket change to build a new gymnasium), members of a federally designated minority group, or children of alumni. All these applicants have special advocates for them in close contact with the admissions committee. **Everybody else is Just Folks.**

“At best, life in the Gray Area means the admissions committee suspects you're someone who can do the work and even do it well at their school; at worst it means you are indistinguishable from the lump of other students with similar backgrounds and credentials who clog their application pool.”

Yale Director of Admissions: “admits that if he flushed the entire admitted class and accepted instead a couple thousand rejects from that year, there would be no appreciable drop in ‘quality’”

So just getting into the Gray Area at your first-choice school can be something of an accomplishment. **The trick, of course, is getting out of the gray shadows of sameness and into the sunlight of acceptance. To do that, you have to become three-dimensional to the committee. The best way: write a good essay.** But first you have to understand the essay in context.

The College Application

“The best route to a successful application (and beyond, forever!) is to follow your interests in order to discover what you love, and then to pursue it”

(1) Transcript

- Most important part of your application: the transcript. “Admissions officers, in sickness and in health, cherish this document above all others.”
- “Anything you take to ‘look good’ almost infallibly does the opposite”
- Course selection is also important, not just your grades

(2) Testing

- ACT & SAT are becoming increasingly “equal” powers
- 815 colleges don’t require either test
- Some colleges accept SAT II or IB scores in place of SAT/ACT
- **“Admissions officers use the SAT as a reflection of your academic accomplishment versus your background: what have you done with what opportunities you’ve had.”**
- On the SAT - 2 students scores must differ by at least 144 points (out of 1600) before “they are willing to say the students’ measured abilities really differ”
- SAT II - growing in importance, reflect what you actually learn and know
- On SAT / ACT Prep Classes: “every hour spent on them is one you could have been pursuing your interests, changing the world, discovering the passion of your life - or even just reading a book, fishing, watching a movie, etc”

“At Brown, we routinely turned down students with superb grades and high test scores. **“What does he offer us, we would ask, “besides numbers?”** The kicker for the college admissions committee is still their personal response to you, the flesh on the statistical bones. **Where do they find the real you?”**

(3) Interviews

- Not in interviews. Selective colleges use interviews for public relations, not evaluations.
- “The object of an interview, from the college's point of view, is to give you a terrific experience of their school ... don’t make a stain. You’ll be fine”

(4) Teacher Recommendations

- “what you need is a letter that will make you come alive—the same vividness you're searching for in your own essay writing.”

(5) Social Media

- “if you think admissions officers do not check the Facebook pages of applicants, then you're probably not astute enough to be going to college”

(6) Resumes

- “a resume, especially a professional-looking one, really reeks of extreme ‘packaging’ a huge turn-off at the selective schools”

On The Essay ... it's unlike any other writing you've ever done and for an audience that you can't (and may never) see.

Academic assignments versus college essay: “at best (school) assignments are exercises, literary pushups supposedly in preparation for college, but meaningless in themselves. At worst, writing them is not writing at all—you're more like a cat in a lab, coughing up hairballs.”

“But your college essay is not an exercise - it's a Real Game”

How to approach your essay ...

1. Who is my audience?
2. What kind of piece is it?
3. What do I have to say to these readers? (Not, what do they want to hear?)

Chapter 2: Know Your Audience

Who are Admissions Officers?

“Bleary” & “Haggard” - tired and over-worked admissions officers. Reading applications is a thankless task

Types of Admissions Officers:

1. Temps - young, enthusiastic, recent graduates, intelligent but not usually bookish, hired largely for their sales appeal, work in admissions as an interesting time killer.
 2. Early Lifers
 3. Lifers - top-level, big guns who set policy and run the show, few prepare to lifers - it just happens, they are personally dynamic, multi-tasking market-savvy “enrollment managers”
- Temps read significantly more applications than lifers
 - The more seniority you have, the fewer application files you read
 - File reading is the “drudge work”

First & Second Reading

- Most files are read twice by temps - usually score you numerically as a student and person on a scale of 1 to 6
- First readings handled differently by colleges. Some are first read by a “random reader” (faculty member, grad student, hired application reader) then by the local rep. Some are first read by the the local rep then reviewed by a random reader.
- Not all files make it to the admissions director - screened by regional committees
- Some math: a college has 30,000 applications. If the committee meets every day between November 1 and April 1 (including holidays) - the college is making 200 decisions per day or 25 per hour (less than 2 minutes per file). **In actuality - the committee meets 100 days, making 300 decisions per day or 40 per hour.**
- **“At all colleges, it is the reading of the area person that counts the most”**

Riffraff Readers

- Faculty members
- Hired Guns

Committee Meetings

- By the time your application gets to the “full” admissions committee (the director, presenter and 1 or 2 other officers) - the decision is already made. The decision of the presenter (local rep) is rarely overturned.

Chapter 3: Danger - Sleepy Prose Ahead

What Not To Do When Writing College Essays

Your first job - not to put the admissions officer to sleep with your essay

Things not to write about:

(1) The Trip

- Sweeping banalities / broad generalizations and ignoring the little details
- Broadened horizons, gave me a new perspective on my native country, increased my empathy for others, learned about my cultural heritage

(2) My Favorite Things

- Classic fluffball
- Things I am for: puppy dogs, freedom, big soft pillows, and Mrs. Field’s cookies. Things I am against: nuclear war, pimples, racial discrimination, spinach.

(3) Miss America

- Plagiaristic, generic, regurgitation, flimsy
- The question “Please comment on an issue of national or international concern” should not lead to “I think world peace is the most important issue facing us today.”

(4) Jock

- Also applies to musicians, actors, lab interns, yearbook editors.
- Trying too hard to impress
- Formula to avoid :

- Through (activity) I have learned (Noble Value A), (High Platitude B), and (Great Lesson C).
- Through wrestling, I have learned to set goals, to go all out, and to work with people.

(5) My Room

- I don't know what to tell you about myself, so I guess I'll describe my room

(6) Three D's

- I honestly believe that I have the **d**iscipline and **d**etermination and **d**iversity of interests to succeed at whatever I do.

(7) Tales of My Success

- Combination of Three D's & Jock
- But, finally, when I crossed the finish line and received the congratulations of my teammates, I realized all the hard work had been worth it

(8) Pet Death

- As I watched Button's life ebb away, I came to value the important things in this world

(9) The Perspirant

- Do not write about the process of applying to colleges. Such applicants are called "sweaty"

(10) Selling & Telling Autobiography

- Don't attempt to tell your life story in 650 words

You can't force admissions people to like you. They have "built-in shock proof s*** detectors." No one hates the hard sell more than an admissions officer.

Chapter 4: Chilling Out

What You Can & Should Do When Writing College Essays

Contradiction - everything that you can't write about, you can write about. There are no good or bad topics, just good or bad essays.

John Updike said, "There is a great deal to be said about almost anything. Everything can be as interesting as every other thing."

Sometimes good writing is just the result of reinvigorating what has become a mundane cliché.

You can make a college essay out of anything, the materials are everywhere. You just have to pay attention and teach yourself to care.

Getting Ready To Write - How To Approach the Essays

(1) Don't focus on what are "they" looking for? Instead focus on - **what do you have to say?** That's what they want to hear.

(2) **Find people to read your essay** - you are writing for readers and need to train yourself to say something worth reading. You need to find people that care about you to give honest, constructive feedback on your writing

(3) **Write something only you can write.** Your essay should have a sound as distinctive as your speaking voice. The problem with most essays is that they could have been written by anyone.

(4) **Know what you write about.** Think of yourself as a reporter working on a story, the subject of which is you. Your memory is your file drawer and in that file are your research materials. You're looking for significant details and they can be found in the humblest and most ordinary things that you do every day.

(5) A college essay is an informal, or familiar piece - Don't think of the college essay as school-related writing. It's not a history or english paper, loosen up. Write in a natural tone and style - a kind of inspired conversation. **It's as personal as a phone call.**

(6) Entertain - does not mean to tell jokes. **Sustain a voice worth listening to throughout the essay.**

Note on humor: Use this rule - if you think of something funny about your topic, write it down. If you don't, don't. In other words - **don't force humor into your essay.**

Chapter 5: Warming Up

Brainstorming Tips & Strategies

Turn off the self-criticism. Avoid the temptation to edit before you write.

Don't start with an outline - brainstorm ideas first.

Start by writing about anything, everything - without worrying about coherence. Get ideas on paper.

What do you have to say? Plenty. Start to recognize what you already know and experience every day

Warming Up Strategies

Your college essay may be buried somewhere in one of these suggestions, waiting to be unearthed. Time to get shoveling.

- **The Obsession List** - anything you remember or that pops into your head for no good reason, that disturbs, elates, provokes, annoys, upsets, inspires or pulls at you
- **The Notebook** - a journal of ideas and observations, pieces of conversation, events, memories, dreams, etc. Use journaling as a substitute for outlining, "writing is traveling through uncharted territory - your mind. You are the first traveler, and your essays are the world's first maps."
- **Stranger than Fiction** - "teach yourself to see" the intersections where the remarkable and ordinary cross paths. The person who goes out with their eyes open for something unusual is likely to find it.

- **Rambling** - In 10 minutes, write 250 words about everything you're thinking. Rambling 2 - write for 10 minutes on one topic
- **Free Association** - pick an ordinary object and really look at it and think about it. Then in 1 minute, make a list of words and phrases that the object brings to mind.

Writer's Block - First write, no matter how badly, re-write and edit later

"I have rewritten - often several times - every word I have ever published"

"My pencils outlast their erasers"

-Vladimir Nabokov

Chapter 6: Coming Alive

Techniques to Improve Your Essay

All the world is not a stage, it's an audience.

Use stories and pieces of stories (anecdotes) to bring your work to life. An incident, a bit of conversation, a few vivid characters can make the difference between a lifeless piece and one that sings.

A fragment of dialogue in a college essay is like catnip for admissions officers

Using anecdotes:

- introduction or take-off point
- a final note, story that crystallizes your essay
- a detail in the body
- a big story that runs throughout the essay and shapes the whole

In a short piece like a college essay, anecdotes are a quick and vivid way to entertain and inform.

Tip on Conclusions: Think like a camera - with which shot do you end the movie that is your essay?

Entertainment Quotient

- **Sense Detail** - Show, don't tell. Sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. Show what you know. Ex - rather than describe how disciplined you have become as a result of your music lessons, talk about the texture, feel, smell of the violin - the details that put a reader through your practice routine with you.
- **Metaphor** - Seeing one thing in terms of another. Avoid cliched metaphors, never use a comparison that you've heard before
- **Verbs & Nouns** - Nouns are the bones, verbs are the muscles. Don't over-use adjectives

Metaphor Madness - Learning to write is learning to recover the freshness and imagination of kid talk and harnessing it to grown up consistency. You can help redevelop the metaphorical habit by doing what kids do - - play games.

Stretch your mind - see connections and play with ideas

Everything can be like everything else

Your memories are the foundation of what only you can write. Memories are your story. Think of early childhood memories and ask ask: how does this memory reflect who I am now?

Chapter 7: Sweetheart, Get Me Rewrite

You know it's revision time when you've written a few pages and your draft begins to dull, like a knife in constant use.

At the re-write stage ask yourself:

- Where am I?
 - Start with what's good
 - Can you pull a main idea out of your current draft?
 - Map out what worked - ideas, phrases, metaphors
- What shape am I in?
 - Shape = form, organization
 - The shape of an essay emerges through your writing, often after the first draft

The Beginning (How and When)

- Imperative to "hook" your readers in at the beginning
- **If your writing has only one chance to sparkle, it should sparkle at the beginning**
- Good leads are often written late in early drafts of essays
- The lead of your essay gives it shape - an "angle" that stirs the reader's curiosity
- A great lead / introductory sentence is the distilled essence of the essay
- **Types of leads:**
 - Anecdote - Most common beginning for a college essay.. A story or snippet of dialogue is an extremely effective lead, as long it connects to your topic.
 - The Why - when the reader asks why in response to your opening sentence. Ex: "I try to live reasonably in the modern world, but it keeps getting harder and harder."
 - Paradox - An apparent contradiction that is somehow true. Ex: Nothing is more serious than humor. The only sound worth hearing is silence.
 - Shocker - "I do some of my best thinking in the bathroom." The shocker is not simply a wild or fanciful statement. A good one steers the reader into the main idea of the essay.
 - Curmudgeon - "Moby-Dick may be a great book, but it's not a good book." Curmudgeon = A grumpy, ornery old man.
 - Split - "There are those who have faith in man-made things and those who do not." Dividing people or things into a few simple types. Good device for a light essay. But always stay close to your own experience. The whole point of beginning this way is that you fall into one of the categories, usually the apparently inferior one.
 - Raymond Chandler - Comparison between something concrete and something abstract - "Love is like a light bulb, you can turn it off and on."

- Confession - "I do some of my best thinking in the bathroom." The confession lead is not really confessional - the aim is not to reveal intimate details from a sense of guilt. The confession lead should be honest and entertaining
- Stating the Obvious - "San Francisco is a long way from New York" - the obvious that is hidden right under noses, so obvious that we never think about it.

Endings

- Don't use "in conclusion" or "finally" or "in summation"
- The best endings remember where they came from, without repeating what you've already said
- Beginning and endings speak to each other
- Anecdotes or quotes related to your main idea can work very well as conclusions

Writing Voice / Style

1. Formal - tuxedo talk. Scholars, lawyers and people seeking to maintain a professional distance from their audience use it
 2. Informal - a sweater, comfortable shoes. The voice is direct and unadorned
 3. Colloquial - t-shirt & sneakers, the breeziness of everyday conversation.
 4. Slang - flip flops, street talk
1. Please elaborate upon the circumstances surrounding the collision. (formal)
 2. Describe the accident. (informal)
 3. How'd you crash the car? (colloquial)
 4. What went wrong with your ride? (slang)

Most of your college essay should be an informal tone. Avoid formal and slang

Chapter 8: Tinkering

Tone

- How to win friends and influence admissions officers
- Tone = your mood.
- Don't boast, don't whine, don't plead.
- **Controlling your tone means being sensitive to the effect of your words on a reader.**
- Examples
 - I can't stand physics (aggressive)
 - Physics is a stupid science (insulting)
 - Physics is a mystery to me (honest humility)
- What kind of tone should you use in your college essay? Whatever suits you. The mood grows out of the subject and the writer's authentic feeling about it. Use a natural voice. You can only be who you are and have the moods you have. Concentrate on using your moods to produce something entertaining and revealing.

Diction

- Word choice
- Too many college essays are choked with myriads, plethoras and other test-tube words
- Don't do this:
 - My scholastic experience encompasses a multitude of endeavors

- Inflated language does not make you smarter, it makes you sound pretentious
- Good writing knows the names of things and good words are accurate and lively.
- **Empty phrases** - puffs of smoke in a wrong-headed effort to appear intelligent and worthy of admissions. The hallmark of people who have nothing to say and usually know it. These words just take up space and insulate us from meaning.
- Don't waffle with your words. If you have something to say, say it. Examples: "I was tired" not "I was kind of tired." / "Megan is opinionated" not "Megan is rather opinionated."

Transitions

- Taking the reader from here to there and back without jolting them out of their seats
- Transitions connect or contrast time or thought
- Sketch the big movements of your essay and ensure that there is a transition present at every shift

Trim the Fat

- When you have only 650 words to nourish your reader, everyone must count
- Most college essays are bloated with sentences that could be tightened or completely eliminated
- Less is more, simplify your sentences

Chapter 9: Evolution of an Essay

College essays take a long, windy road to admissions office with many drafts, edits, revisions, along the way. The progression from one writing stage to the next is not a smooth and clear process.

This chapter provides an example of the essay process from start to finish

Chapter 10: A Not-Brief-Enough Rant About Supplements

The creature called The Supplement has swelled the competitive admissions environment like a sci-fi reptile in an overheated lagoon. Now you'll often write more than students who applied in the BCA (Before Common App Era).

Essay topics come in two basic types:

(1) Generals

- Broad and open ended
- Common App Prompts (Main Essay)
- Ex: "Discuss an experience or influence"

(2) Specials

- Narrow
- Common App Supplements
- Ex: "If you are applying to Trinity College of Arts and Sciences, please discuss why you consider Duke a good match for you. Is there something in particular at Duke that attracts you? Please limit your response to one or two paragraphs."

Supplements - come in 2 sizes

- 300 to 500 words (standard)
- short-takes

Regardless of the essay type, you always want to write something vivid, detailed, specific, close to what you know.

The Common App General Essay - can't be used or modified for any of the supplements

Every school asks: "Why do you want to go to (name of school here)?"

- Demonstrated Interest
- Very common for engineering schools: "why engineering?"
- Avoid the generic form paragraph with plugged-in factoids
- Trap of these questions is using generic cliches
- Details are the key to answering these questions
- If you can't write something specific and personal about a college - if you're applying only because the college has a name, you need to do some research and examine why you are applying.

Optional Essays - Are 'optional' essays truly optional? Not if you want to get accepted. Writing the optional essays is a great way to demonstrate interest.

How do you handle writing all of these supplements?

- "no human being can write all these essays while also passing senior year"
- best method - consolidate, using one (or a few) pieces of your writing to use for all (or many) of the supplements
- Strategy - **Connect The Dots** - Line up all of the required supplement choices for the schools you're applying to. Then find a quotation that is personally meaningful (avoid a cliched quote, ie Robert Frost "the road less traveled"), the best source of a quote is someone important in your life.
- "This connect the dots method is actually helpful, because it sets up limitations that can focus your ideas and make the game worth playing, like the net in tennis."

Chapter 11: Exhibits - The Quick and The Dull

Reading the essays of other students can help sharpen your judgment.

When reading samples, ask yourself: (1) what do you learn about the writer? (2) do you like the writer?

Admissions people often disagree in their evaluations of essays. Different readers, even in the same admissions office, look for different things. How can you please them? You can't. Say what you have to say.

The exact same essay, placed in the files of two different students with comparable academic credentials, might lead to different results.

Take-away from this chapter - **realize how senseless it is to ask "what are they looking for?"** They - as a group, as a college - don't always know themselves.

See the chapter with sample essays and commentary from admissions officers

Chapter 12: Anthology

Samples of professional writing that are very similar to college essays

The opinion pages and features sections of newspapers, magazines, blogs, literary journals often have informal, personal and short narratives.

Study the pros - pick up their moves and tricks.

Very effective for the “Tell us anything you think we should know” or “write on any topic you like” topics.

Chapter 13: Exhibits II

Additional essay samples & comments from the author

Each one takes a risk - the risk of admitting something, not just to get admitted, but to discover. Although an essay of 650 words cannot discover everything, you get to know the writers well in a short space. That is the product of honest and conscientious revision.