

Nine Horrible College Essay Topics

An admissions counselor shares the most common blunders.

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<http://education.newsweek.com/2010/09/12/the-nine-college-essay-mistakes-not-to-make.html>

When it comes to college essays, the goal is not to discover the next Shakespeare. College-admissions officers are really trying to find out about applicants: what excites them, what interests them, and what kind of addition they'll be to a college community. However, when told to choose their own topic, some high-school students panic and write about the first thing that comes to mind, while others get overwhelmed and can't write anything. It's not a clear-cut process, and there are numerous opportunities for applicants to make mistakes. As an independent admissions counselor, I've read hundreds, if not thousands, of application essays over the years. Based on my experience, here are some of the most common missteps—and outrageous mistakes—that applicants make in writing their college essays.

1. The Scare Tactic: Applicants often try to highlight personality traits in their essays, but their examples may not make the impression they hoped for. One student tried to illustrate her tenacity by writing about her refusal to believe that a boy she was interested in was not interested in her, too. The essay ended with her standing on his doorstep waiting for him to come home. Another student wrote about doing “whatever it takes” to maintain his high GPA, including showing up at his teacher's house to dispute about a test grade. The applicants honestly meant to show their best sides, but instead these essays can make admissions officers a little nervous.

2. The Love Letter: Applicants can go wrong writing about requited love, too. One young man wrote a very long essay praising everything about his girlfriend, in detail. I had to remind him that colleges want to hear about him, not his first love. All was not lost, though: I suggested he save the essay for when they got into a fight and he needed to apologize.

3. The Mountaintop Epiphany: It was a grueling physical and emotional challenge, but eventually the applicant made it to the top of whatever mountain she was climbing and had a life-changing epiphany about what is truly important. Either that, or the process of getting to the top of the mountain was a metaphor for her approach to life. While these milestone climbs are obviously important to the individual, there is little new to be said about them. Unless an applicant is an exceptionally deep thinker and skilled writer, it's best to skip this well-worn topic.

4. The Insightful Impoverished: Community service can be a profound experience for many students. However, a popular conclusion to this type of essay goes like this: “As the plane took off, I smiled at the country I was leaving. Even though I was the one who came to help, they were the ones who gave me a gift, by showing that it's possible to be happy even when you have nothing.” Unfortunately, this does not reflect as well on the writer, who may be perceived as naive and a bit entitled.

5. The Redundant Recitation: Many students I've worked with think that the most important thing for a college to know about them is that they are hard workers. If a student has good grades, however, the admissions office assumes he works hard. As the University of Texas at Austin advises, "Submitting the same information twice will not make your personal achievements seem any more noteworthy." And if a student doesn't have good grades, she's telling the admissions office that she doesn't succeed despite working hard.

6. The Meta-Essay: Each year, tens of thousands of students across the country struggle to come up with a topic for their college essay. And each year many of them think it might work to write about their current struggle to write their essay. Unfortunately for them, the "I couldn't decide what to write so I'm writing about writing the essay" essay has already been done. A lot. The college-admissions officers want to know about what makes an applicant tick, and how he would enrich the community at the college or university he's applying to. This topic really doesn't help answer either of those questions well.

7. The Navel Gazer: What is life? How do we become the people we are? What is the point of human existence? If you're asking rhetorical questions, are you actually saying anything? Philosophical discussions are great, but they can wait until freshman year. A college essay should talk about the applicant's life and personality, not recount unanswered questions.

8. The A-Plus Paper: While the classic five-paragraph essay structure may get a student an A-plus in English class, it earns an F in the college-admissions process. The college essay should be a personal narrative, yet many students approach it as an academic paper, writing in detail about a novel, science topic, or political issue. I often tell students that their draft is beautifully written, but that I didn't learn anything about them.

9. The Anti-Essay Manifesto: One young man wrote an essay that railed against the entire college-admissions process. He complained about how high-school grades didn't reflect his genius, standardized tests couldn't capture his potential, and admissions officers were too narrow-minded to understand how lucky the college would be to have him. Though the college-application process can be frustrating, criticizing the entire system—and the people who run it—isn't a good way to make a first impression. I often tell students that after they get through this process they can criticize it all they like, and work to change it from within, but that an essay on this topic isn't going to be their best tack in receiving an admit letter.

Most college-essay mistakes can be headed off with a little common sense, so I always advise applicants to talk through their essay ideas with a trusted person before they start writing. Brainstorm, brainstorm, brainstorm! With a little effort—and a list of topics to steer clear of—you can make sure you avoid the worst college-essay mistakes.

Deena Maerowitz is a [college-admissions consultant](#) and a former admissions director at Columbia University Business School.