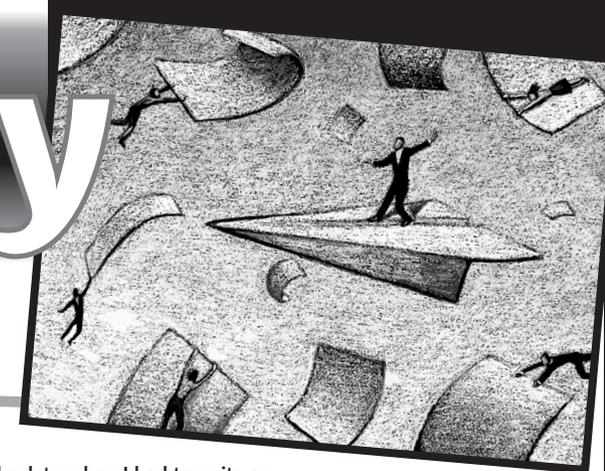


Real World Literacy



6 | If you've ever asked, "When will I ever use this in the real world?" join us, Mondays and Wednesdays, for Real World Literacy, a new Skills for Everyday Living series. Series runs through April 4.

Write Your Way Into College

Everyone can take hard classes and get good grades. Everyone can score high on tests. Everyone can have a million school activities. But almost no one can write a good college admissions essay — unless they talk to an expert first.

Admissions essays are an important part of the college application process, says George Mills Jr., vice president for enrollment for the University of Puget Sound. "The essay is very helpful from two perspectives," he explains. "The choice of topic tells us something about the student that can't be found anywhere else in the application materials. In choosing a topic, a student is telling us that this is important to him or her. Second, the way the essay is developed tells us something about the depth and complexity of thought a candidate is comfortable handling."

How Do I Get Started?

Start by thinking about what's most important to you. "A candidate may write about anything that will enable him or her to convey something more than what is evident in the application," Mills says. Topics you're passionate about, and that you know a lot about, are the best.

This is a key idea. Don't make the common mistake of repeating your life story or fleshing out your resume. Admissions officials can find that information somewhere else in your application.

What If They Find A Typo?

Make no mistake: grammar, punctuation and spelling count. You won't get rejected if admissions officials find a single typo in your essay. But a conspicuous pattern

of errors can often lead a reader to wonder if you're minding the details in other areas of your application.

"If there is consistent evidence that an applicant doesn't pay attention to detail," Mills says, "then there is a high likelihood that the applicant will be denied admission."

What Do Admissions People Want to Read?

Admissions officers look for many things when reading your essay, but mostly they want to find clues about the real you. In particular, they want to know what sets you apart from other applicants who might be otherwise equally qualified.

The breadth and depth of your essay is important. "A student who writes about experiencing a storm, for example, with clear attention to the physical particulars of the setting and an awareness of his or her reaction to it, conveys an ability to integrate and summarize details," Mills notes.

A Quick Note to Parents

"Do not ask to be involved in writing the essay," Mills advises. "Enter the process only if you are invited. If you are asked to proofread the essay, realize that it is a piece of very personal writing. Be gentle in your comments."

It might be wise to enlist the help of a third party your son or daughter respects. "Ask your child to review the essay with him or her," he suggests. "The third party will take you out of the role of critic, a very difficult position to be in at a time when your child is feeling vulnerable."

I can still remember back to when I had to write an admissions essay over 20 years ago. I drafted and revised, drafted and revised, drafted and revised. And then I threw the whole thing away and started over. Looking back, I know exactly what my problem was: I didn't have a clue about what a good admissions essay looked like. Fortunately, you don't have to stumble around in the dark like I did. There are many excellent books full of successful essays and terrific advice. My favorite has always been "Essays That Worked for College Applications: 50 Essays that Helped Students Get into the Nation's Top Colleges" by Boykin Curry, Emily Angel Baer and Brian Kasbar. Don't write your essay without it. It might be the best \$14 you spend on your college education.

Mr. Peha Says

In the Newspaper ...

Activity #1: You're not likely to find models of successful college admissions essays in the newspaper, but you will find college-level vocabulary, sentence structure and argument styles. Well-written newspapers and magazines are viewed as a kind of real-world benchmark for the quality of writing and thinking colleges expect of incoming freshmen. The more you read the paper, and study the writing you find there, the better prepared you'll be for college-level reading, writing and critical thinking tasks—especially if you emulate the styles of talented writers who specialize in feature stories and analysis.

Activity #2: On a fundamental level, a college admissions essay is just a piece of persuasive writing; you're trying to persuade people to let you attend their school. The best persuasive writing in the newspaper can often be found in the Opinion and Editorial section. But don't study Op-Eds; look at the Letters to the Editor which can often be found on the opposing page. These more personal statements often strike the same effective balance between life experience stories and critical thinking that college admissions officers are looking for.

Steve Peha and Margot Carmichael Lester run Teaching That Makes Sense, an education consulting company that makes teaching easier for teachers and learning more meaningful for kids. They're also the authors of two books on writing for tweens and teens: "Be A Writer: Your Guide to the Writing Life" and "Be A Better Writer: Power Tools for Young Writers" which you can learn about at www.betterwriter.com. For more information and free teaching materials, visit their web site at www.ttms.org or write to them at info@ttms.org.