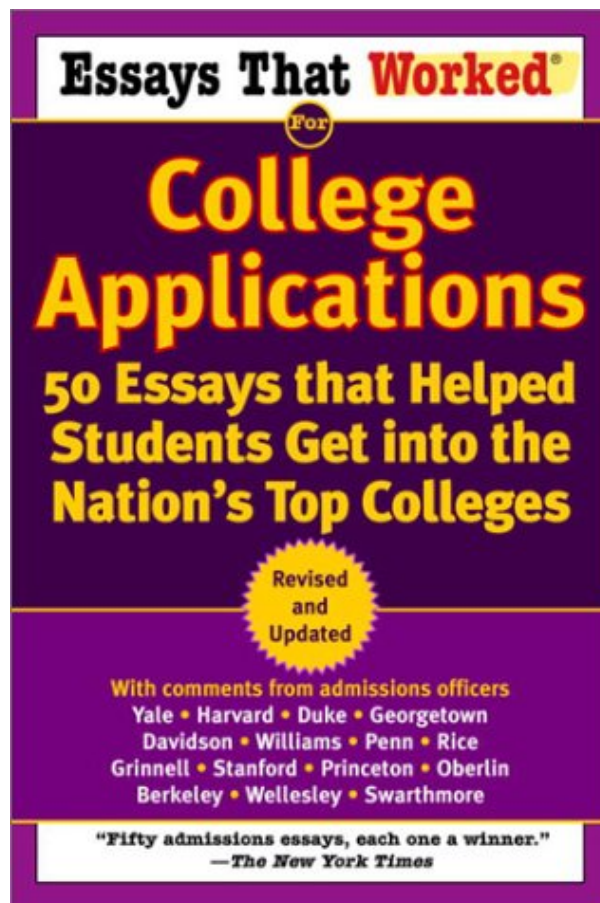


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About the Author

Boykin Curry is a partner at New York-based hedge fund Eagle Capital. He is a co-founder of Public Prep, a network of charter schools in New York City; a board member of Alliance for School Choice; and co-founder of Democrats for Education Reform. He received a degree in economics from Yale University in 1988 and his MBA from Harvard University in 1994.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH AN ADMISSIONS OFFICER

He still had a hundred essays to read before 6:00 p.m., and he was beginning to grow tired. My interview with him would offer a brief break from the Herculean task of narrowing ten thousand applicants to a freshman class of nine hundred.

“I hope your book works,” he joked, “so maybe next year I won’t have to read five hundred essays about the yearlong drama of being student council president. I’m sorry, but successful car washes just don’t make for enthralling reading.”

I smiled. He rubbed his eyes.

“On a Wednesday in the middle of March this job gets tough. Sometimes it seems that there are only four types of essays: the ‘class president essay, the ‘I lost but learned’ sports essay, the ‘I went to Europe and learned how complex the world is’ essay, and the good old ‘being yearbook editor sure is hard work’ essay.

When I read one of those, it takes amazing willpower to get to the third paragraph.”

“So sometimes you don’t read the whole essay?” I asked.

“No comment,” he replied, changing the subject. “I wish students would realize that when they write they should have something to say. They should try to present their values and priorities by writing on a subject that really means something to them, because, other than the essay, all I have is a bunch of test scores and activities: ten thousand sets of numbers and facts. I’d like to be able to see beyond that. I want to see what makes someone tick.”

“But couldn’t that be dangerous?” I asked. “What if someone writes something really bizarre, just to avoid being ‘boring’? Can strange ideas or comments hurt an applicant?”

“Well, if someone expressed homicidal tendencies, it would probably have a negative effect. Still, you’d be surprised how tolerant we are. A few years ago, we had a kid from Palestine apply. In his essay, he endorsed Yassir Arafat and the PLO. As far as he was concerned, Israel had usurped the rightful land of his people and should be treated as a criminal state. The admissions officer who covered the Middle East was an Orthodox Jew. Not only did the student get in, but he graduated with honors in political science.

“In fact, being offbeat or daring is usually a plus, as long as the student stays in control of his writing. The essays which are most effective seize a topic with confidence and imagination. Too many applicants treat their essay like a minefield. They walk around on tiptoe, avoiding anything controversial. Of course, the essay comes out two-dimensional, flat, and boring. It seems like many essays have been read, proofread, and reproofread until all the life has been sucked out. I wish kids would just relax and not try to guess what the admissions committee is looking for. As soon as they start playing that game, they’re going to lose. The essay won’t be from the heart, and it won’t work.

“The great essays—good writers discussing something of personal importance—stick out like diamonds in a coal bin. When we’re sorting through the last few hundred applications, an essay that sticks out in an admissions officer’s mind has got to help the applicant who wrote it.”

“How important is it to be a good writer?” I asked.

“Writing style tells you a lot about the way a person thinks. I like when a student brings a sense of style to a piece, as a good essayist or editorial writer would do. I’ve always advocated reading the essays of E. B. White as a means of preparing for writing the essay. I also suggest that students read the editorial pages of the local newspaper. But we never discount the student who writes a simple, even awkward, essay that is sincere and moving.

“That’s why I urge students to write as they would in a diary or a letter to a friend. When you write a letter, you may ramble, but when you’re finished, your letter sounds like something you would really say.”

“So an honest, personal essay is best?”

“No, there is no ‘best’ type of essay. But when a ‘personal’ essay is done well, it can be very effective. The best I’ve ever read was written about fifteen years ago by a football recruit. His application was perfect: high school all-America quarterback, president of his class, 3.8 GPA, and a mile-long list of extracurriculars. But his essay was about his stuttering. He wrote about his loneliness in junior high, about the girls who laughed at him, and about the wall he built around himself. Since football was something he really loved, he buried

himself in it, spending afternoons in the weight room and nights in front of a mirror, practicing words and signals so he wouldn't embarrass himself by stuttering on the field.

"When you put an essay like that beside one of those self-absorbed recitals of high school achievements—there's just no comparison."

I decided to change the subject a little. "What really irritates you in an essay?"

"Arrogance and pretentiousness are bad, but the only thing that really bugs me is when a student doesn't put his personality into an essay. I always hear parents and students complain that colleges don't look so much at the individual student as they do at scores, grades, and class rank, so I'm disappointed when students don't take advantage of the only place in the application that allows them to express their individuality."

"Okay, then," I asked, "what do you really like to see?"

"I always enjoy essays where the author realizes that he's writing for an audience of real human beings. I also like essays with a touch of excitement and enthusiasm, and I like an applicant who demonstrates the ability to look at himself from the outside. And, of course, wit never hurts."

"So should applicants try to write funny essays?"

"'Funny' isn't a good word, because there's a fine line between something that is humorous and something that is obnoxious or inappropriate. I much prefer an essay that is amusing because of its insight over one in which a kid is trying to write a string of one-liners—that rarely works."

I paused for a moment, thinking how to word my next question tactfully. "How much of a 'sell' do you expect?"

"How much do I expect? Tons. I expect that most kids will try to wow me with their accomplishments, even though I could just look at their activities list if I really want to know. Each year we have enough valedictorians, class presidents, and team captains to fill our freshman class five times. With that many talented kids, it's hard to impress me by listing your glorious achievements.

"How much of a 'sell' would I like? None. We enroll people, not cars, and I want more than a list of 'added features.' I am less interested in hearing what a student has done than hearing why he does what he does. Anything that comes across as a 'sell' is negative. If what comes through is a healthy self-confidence in your own accomplishments, then that's positive.

"Also, of course, a hard 'sell' can really backfire if the essay is not consistent with the rest of the application. A student once wrote an angry essay about social injustice and how the world should feed and clothe the poor. So I checked her list of activities. She had never been involved in any charities or community service programs, so I was pretty skeptical of her true feelings. No one likes hypocrisy, so if an applicant's record doesn't back up the essay, it can add a large negative factor into my decision.

"A common theme that is both uninteresting and unrevealing is participation in organizations which are 'in' at the time, such as SADD and SafeRides. Also, stating that you were listed in Who's Who of American High School Seniors only tells me that you were willing to pay."

I decided to go for all the marbles. "All said, what is the best essay?"

“What works the best? Honesty, brevity, risk taking, self-revelation, imaginativeness, and fine writing: many of the attributes which are edited out when you ask someone’s opinion of your college essay. If a student reads his application before mailing it and can say ‘this sounds like me, then he’s probably written the best essay possible. Students should feel more comfortable trusting their instincts. Nine times out of ten, an essay that feels good to the writer will be good for the reader, too. And that should make the process better for all those involved—as essay writers or essay readers!”

(The quotes from the “admissions officer” above were compiled from the comments of all the admissions officers we interviewed.) USING—and ABUSING—the INTERNET

The admissions officer is sitting at his desk, piles of papers everywhere indicating the degree to which he is overworked (or perhaps his own relaxed approach to organization). He is reading the forty-ninth essay of the day, when suddenly he has a wave of *déjà vu*.

Now, he’s been reading admissions essays at his small, private, liberal arts college for five years, and he’s often read essays that remind him of something else. But this one—hmmmm:

New Albany City, check. Time, 15:30. Great! Reset timer; power normal; oil temperature, within range; compass setting, correct. Alone at 4,000 feet in a small airplane in a strange new territory and I am piloting my way perfectly. I feel like Lindbergh!

Is it possible that he’s read about two student pilots this year? Coincidence? He thinks not. He reads through the essay about this young man’s euphoric first solo flight and becomes more convinced that he has seen it before. He shuffles through the applications that he placed in a stack for a second review.

Bingo! There it is—the same essay in an application from two weeks ago. Punctuation, paragraphing, wording, all exactly the same. He glances through the application. One counselor recommendation mentions the flying lessons; the other one does not. Both applicants come from large urban areas, but not the same urban area, not even the same state. Both are bright students and quite tech savvy. Their transcripts and their extracurriculars indicate a big interest in the Internet. In fact, one teacher recommendation names the computer as the culprit when her student misses deadlines or comes to class unprepared. She intended to praise his expertise, but now the admissions officer is reading between the lines.

Taking a welcome break, he begins to surf the ’Net himself and quickly finds several Web sites that offer help for college application essays. He subscribes to a few of the larger sites and finds one that will provide an essay of your choice on a variety of topics—for a fee, naturally. Thirty minutes later, he finds the exact essay the applicants submitted.

Both students are quickly rejected, of course. Furthermore, he “unofficially” alerts his admissions friends at the other colleges indicated on the students’ SAT reports. It seems unlikely that either student will attend the college of his choice.

While this example is a compilation of several stories, the tale of the duplicate essay is absolutely true. Any dishonesty in connection with the application will prevent admission. If cheating is discovered after you’ve been accepted (and in one incident at Stanford University, after a student had started classes), your acceptance will be rescinded.

While blatant plagiarism is rare, “canned” essays are becoming common. Increasingly, admissions officers are seeing the “packaging” of applicants. What has made this unhappy trend grow is the use, and abuse, of the Internet.

In one random search, we found almost 1,000 Web sites “guaranteeing” a winning application essay. One service offers a “final polish of the essay.” This same site adds: “Unlike other sites, our editors do not merely write a critique of your essay; instead, they actually correct and make changes to your essay while maintaining your unique voice.” This claim is, by definition, impossible; if your voice is unique, how can “they” duplicate it? “They” don’t even know you!

Another service is even more blatant. Their Web site states: “We draft your university, graduate, or professional school essays or college admissions statements from the information you provide to us.” Be aware that, while admissions readers are looking for your own voice, they’re also pretty good at detecting when it’s not there. They want to see how you express yourself. As one admissions director said, “When that expression becomes a product of someone else’s work, there’s a word for that: plagiarism.”

The price for a college application essay ranged from \$20 to \$500 and up, depending on how much aid you receive and how fast you want it. The sites generally tout readers from schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, though there’s no way to prove that they have any affiliation with those schools—and chances are, they don’t. Other sites are run by independent counselors (in one case, a mother who honestly admits she’s just selling advice from her home) who charge fees for services that are provided free at most high schools and on many legitimate Web sites.

While many sites are perfectly honest, the Internet has provided almost unlimited possibilities for fraud. But you’ll find that it’s hard to deceive a good admissions officer. They’ve been trained; they’ve read hundreds of essays before yours; and they know as much or more about the Web as you do.

In fact, several Web sites, such as Plagiarized.com, help readers determine whether an essay is genuine, and there’s software available specifically for detecting copied papers. Is it foolproof? Of course not. But is buying an essay off the Web a risk worth taking? Aside from the immorality of it, look at the practical aspect: If you submit a bad essay, it alone probably won’t get you rejected. If you submit a plagiarized essay and it’s discovered, you’re immediately rejected—at that school, and probably at every school to which you applied.

None of the essays in this book are Pulitzer Prize winners, but they are honest products of the student. When an essay isn’t, an admissions officer can smell it, and the results can be disastrous. And no one, no matter how desirable, is immune to close scrutiny on the essay. An admissions officer at Stanford recently said, “We just turned down an incredible athlete, but the essays killed him.” She went on to say that Stanford is seeing too much “editing” on student essays—sometimes the result of an overzealous school counselor, more often due to the growing influence of Internet sources.

An admissions officer from a private school in Georgia wrote:

I had a case this year of a kid who stole an essay off the Internet and tried to pass it off as his own. It sounded familiar but I couldn’t put my finger on it. I posted something on the NACAC [National Association for College Admissions Counseling] Web site and within ten minutes people had sent me five or six sources. . . . By the way, I wrote a deny letter to him and a duplicate to his parents.

The Internet can provide terrific, legitimate suggestions and tips for all aspects of the college application

process, including the essay. The best place to start is at the college site itself. You can access any college by using the university's name, generally followed by ".edu." Read as much about the university as you can, including the questions they ask on their application. Familiarize yourself with whatever is unique about a specific institution. Ask yourself, "Why do I want to go to Takemeplease University?" If you can answer that question, you can probably write a good essay.

Many Web sites are excellent sources for all kinds of college data. For example, www.collegeboard.com (associated with the College Board, which is more than one hundred years old) has useful information about all aspects of the process, including preparing for the SAT, applying online, writing the essay, getting financial aid, and even choosing the college that's right for you.

The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (www.nacac.com) has great advice and links to other information sources, including essay help. Yahoo offers several free services, some of which you register for, including SAT and ACT tips and preparation, online college applications, college searches, financial aid, etc.

The bottom line: Any information you want is available free on the Internet. But be careful, because the Internet alone can't get you through the application process. Not everything you see on the Internet is valid or germane to your experience. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

According to the NACAC, more students are applying to college online every year. (In one case, a student applied to fifty colleges online and was accepted at forty-seven!) Critics say that some colleges encourage online applications just to increase the number of applications they receive. This way, their well-publicized rejection rates will seem higher. However, the majority of colleges today provide admission applications online. Some even have applications available only online. Remember that all electronic resources begin with what you yourself contribute. There is still no substitute for self-discovery. What concerns you in your college choice: Location? Major? Activities? Environment? Individual attention? Accessible professors? Class size? The more you know about yourself, the more useful online information can be.

One senior admissions officer wrote: "As students become increasingly Internet savvy, I think we will be experiencing a rise in those who are willing to apply online." As online applications increase, there will be more access to online aids—both honest and dishonest—for the college essay. The trick is to recognize the difference between helpful hints and outright cheating. Make the essay authentic. To be authentic, you should not sound like a forty-year-old editor. Your own voice is your best chance of showing an admissions officer that you are special and that you belong at his school.

So, turn off your computer and write—you know, like they did in ancient times, with a pen and paper. Take a risk. Let your essay show your potential for growth, for contemplating new ideas, for change. View yourself as an unfinished product and convince the college that it can finish the job. Then go back to your computer and let your fingers fly. Above all, be honest—to yourself and to your future college.

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“So sometimes you don’t read the whole essay?” I asked.

“No comment,” he replied, changing the subject. “I wish students would realize that when they write they should have something to say. They should try to present their values and priorities by writing on a subject that really means something to them, because, other than the essay, all I have is a bunch of test scores and activities: ten thousand sets of numbers and facts. I’d like to be able to see beyond that. I want to see what makes someone tick.”

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Another service is even more blatant. Their Web site states: "We draft your university, graduate, or professional school essays or college admissions statements from the information you provide to us." Be aware that, while admissions readers are looking for your own voice, they're also pretty good at detecting when it's not there. They want to see how you express yourself. As one admissions director said, "When that expression becomes a product of someone else's work, there's a word for that: plagiarism."

The price for a college application essay ranged from \$20 to \$500 and up, depending on how much aid you receive and how fast you want it. The sites generally tout readers from schools such as Harvard, Yale, and Stanford, though there's no way to prove that they have any affiliation with those schools—and chances are, they don't. Other sites are run by independent counselors (in one case, a mother who honestly admits she's just selling advice from her home) who charge fees for services that are provided free at most high schools and on many legitimate Web sites.

While many sites are perfectly honest, the Internet has provided almost unlimited possibilities for fraud. But you'll find that it's hard to deceive a good admissions officer. They've been trained; they've read hundreds of essays before yours; and they know as much or more about the Web as you do.

In fact, several Web sites, such as Plagiarized.com, help readers determine whether an essay is genuine, and there's software available specifically for detecting copied papers. Is it foolproof? Of course not. But is buying an essay off the Web a risk worth taking? Aside from the immorality of it, look at the practical aspect: If you submit a bad essay, it alone probably won't get you rejected. If you submit a plagiarized essay and it's discovered, you're immediately rejected—at that school, and probably at every school to which you applied.

None of the essays in this book are Pulitzer Prize winners, but they are honest products of the student. When an essay isn't, an admissions officer can smell it, and the results can be disastrous. And no one, no matter how desirable, is immune to close scrutiny on the essay. An admissions officer at Stanford recently said, "We just turned down an incredible athlete, but the essays killed him." She went on to say that Stanford is seeing too much "editing" on student essays—sometimes the result of an overzealous school counselor, more often due to the growing influence of Internet sources.

An admissions officer from a private school in Georgia wrote:

I had a case this year of a kid who stole an essay off the Internet and tried to pass it off as his own. It sounded

familiar but I couldn't put my finger on it. I posted something on the NACAC [National Association for College Admissions Counseling] Web site and within ten minutes people had sent me five or six sources. . . . By the way, I wrote a deny letter to him and a duplicate to his parents.

The Internet can provide terrific, legitimate suggestions and tips for all aspects of the college application process, including the essay. The best place to start is at the college site itself. You can access any college by using the university's name, generally followed by ".edu." Read as much about the university as you can, including the questions they ask on their application. Familiarize yourself with whatever is unique about a specific institution. Ask yourself, "Why do I want to go to Takemeplease University?" If you can answer that question, you can probably write a good essay.

Many Web sites are excellent sources for all kinds of college data. For example, www.collegeboard.com (associated with the College Board, which is more than one hundred years old) has useful information about all aspects of the process, including preparing for the SAT, applying online, writing the essay, getting financial aid, and even choosing the college that's right for you.

The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (www.nacac.com) has great advice and links to other information sources, including essay help. Yahoo offers several free services, some of which you register for, including SAT and ACT tips and preparation, online college applications, college searches, financial aid, etc.

The bottom line: Any information you want is available free on the Internet. But be careful, because the Internet alone can't get you through the application process. Not everything you see on the Internet is valid or germane to your experience. If something sounds too good to be true, it probably is.

According to the NACAC, more students are applying to college online every year. (In one case, a student applied to fifty colleges online and was accepted at forty-seven!) Critics say that some colleges encourage online applications just to increase the number of applications they receive. This way, their well-publicized rejection rates will seem higher. However, the majority of colleges today provide admission applications online. Some even have applications available only online. Remember that all electronic resources begin with what you yourself contribute. There is still no substitute for self-discovery. What concerns you in your college choice: Location? Major? Activities? Environment? Individual attention? Accessible professors? Class size? The more you know about yourself, the more useful online information can be.

One senior admissions officer wrote: "As students become increasingly Internet savvy, I think we will be experiencing a rise in those who are willing to apply online." As online applications increase, there will be more access to online aids—both honest and dishonest—for the college essay. The trick is to recognize the difference between helpful hints and outright cheating. Make the essay authentic. To be authentic, you should not sound like a forty-year-old editor. Your own voice is your best chance of showing an admissions officer that you are special and that you belong at his school.

So, turn off your computer and write—you know, like they did in ancient times, with a pen and paper. Take a risk. Let your essay show your potential for growth, for contemplating new ideas, for change. View yourself as an unfinished product and convince the college that it can finish the job. Then go back to your computer and let your fingers fly. Above all, be honest—to yourself and to your future college.

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By Lisa Alexander

Required reading for high school summer reading. Enjoyed the essays...creative, entertaining, and easy to read.

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Solid book

By C. S. Williams

I bought this for my son, a rising senior in high school. I was surprised that he immediately picked it up and read it, and said it was very helpful to him. However, I was also surprised that it included some essays that were very short, but conveyed a unique thought process. I would be scared to death for my son to send a couple of paragraphs and have that be his one shot at promoting himself.

Admissions counselors would probably like this book, mainly because it would promote more variety for them, as they have to wade through hundreds of writings.

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful.

Great book for the purpose!

By Education Pro

This is a great prep tool for the reluctant but good writer. College essays can be a bit scary. Seeing others that worked helps take off the edge, and spark ideas, so you can get down to the business of writing your own winning college app essay.

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About the Author

Boykin Curry is a partner at New York-based hedge fund Eagle Capital. He is a co-founder of Public Prep, a network of charter schools in New York City; a board member of Alliance for School Choice; and co-founder of Democrats for Education Reform. He received a degree in economics from Yale University in 1988 and his MBA from Harvard University in 1994.

Brian Kasbar is a co-founder of Gemini Educational Systems, which provides video modeling therapy for special education students. He received his BA from Yale in 1988.

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AN INTERVIEW WITH AN ADMISSIONS OFFICER

He still had a hundred essays to read before 6:00 p.m., and he was beginning to grow tired. My interview with him would offer a brief break from the Herculean task of narrowing ten thousand applicants to a freshman class of nine hundred.

"I hope your book works," he joked, "so maybe next year I won't have to read five hundred essays about the yearlong drama of being student council president. I'm sorry, but successful car washes just don't make for enthralling reading."

I smiled. He rubbed his eyes.

"On a Wednesday in the middle of March this job gets tough. Sometimes it seems that there are only four types of essays: the 'class president essay, the 'I lost but learned' sports essay, the 'I went to Europe and learned how complex the world is' essay, and the good old 'being yearbook editor sure is hard work' essay. When I read one of those, it takes amazing willpower to get to the third paragraph."

"So sometimes you don't read the whole essay?" I asked.

“No comment,” he replied, changing the subject. “I wish students would realize that when they write they should have something to say. They should try to present their values and priorities by writing on a subject that really means something to them, because, other than the essay, all I have is a bunch of test scores and activities: ten thousand sets of numbers and facts. I’d like to be able to see beyond that. I want to see what makes someone tick.”

“But couldn’t that be dangerous?” I asked. “What if someone writes something really bizarre, just to avoid being ‘boring’? Can strange ideas or comments hurt an applicant?”

“Well, if someone expressed homicidal tendencies, it would probably have a negative effect. Still, you’d be surprised how tolerant we are. A few years ago, we had a kid from Palestine apply. In his essay, he endorsed Yassir Arafat and the PLO. As far as he was concerned, Israel had usurped the rightful land of his people and should be treated as a criminal state. The admissions officer who covered the Middle East was an Orthodox Jew. Not only did the student get in, but he graduated with honors in political science.

“In fact, being offbeat or daring is usually a plus, as long as the student stays in control of his writing. The essays which are most effective seize a topic with confidence and imagination. Too many applicants treat their essay like a minefield. They walk around on tiptoe, avoiding anything controversial. Of course, the essay comes out two-dimensional, flat, and boring. It seems like many essays have been read, proofread, and reproofread until all the life has been sucked out. I wish kids would just relax and not try to guess what the admissions committee is looking for. As soon as they start playing that game, they’re going to lose. The essay won’t be from the heart, and it won’t work.

“The great essays—good writers discussing something of personal importance—stick out like diamonds in a coal bin. When we’re sorting through the last few hundred applications, an essay that sticks out in an admissions officer’s mind has got to help the applicant who wrote it.”

“How important is it to be a good writer?” I asked.

“Writing style tells you a lot about the way a person thinks. I like when a student brings a sense of style to a piece, as a good essayist or editorial writer would do. I’ve always advocated reading the essays of E. B. White as a means of preparing for writing the essay. I also suggest that students read the editorial pages of the local newspaper. But we never discount the student who writes a simple, even awkward, essay that is sincere and moving.

“That’s why I urge students to write as they would in a diary or a letter to a friend. When you write a letter, you may ramble, but when you’re finished, your letter sounds like something you would really say.”

“So an honest, personal essay is best?”

“No, there is no ‘best’ type of essay. But when a ‘personal’ essay is done well, it can be very effective. The best I’ve ever read was written about fifteen years ago by a football recruit. His application was perfect: high school all-America quarterback, president of his class, 3.8 GPA, and a mile-long list of extracurriculars. But his essay was about his stuttering. He wrote about his loneliness in junior high, about the girls who laughed at him, and about the wall he built around himself. Since football was something he really loved, he buried himself in it, spending afternoons in the weight room and nights in front of a mirror, practicing words and signals so he wouldn’t embarrass himself by stuttering on the field.

“When you put an essay like that beside one of those self-absorbed recitals of high school

achievements—there’s just no comparison.”

I decided to change the subject a little. “What really irritates you in an essay?”

“Arrogance and pretentiousness are bad, but the only thing that really bugs me is when a student doesn’t put his personality into an essay. I always hear parents and students complain that colleges don’t look so much at the individual student as they do at scores, grades, and class rank, so I’m disappointed when students don’t take advantage of the only place in the application that allows them to express their individuality.”

“Okay, then,” I asked, “what do you really like to see?”

“I always enjoy essays where the author realizes that he’s writing for an audience of real human beings. I also like essays with a touch of excitement and enthusiasm, and I like an applicant who demonstrates the ability to look at himself from the outside. And, of course, wit never hurts.”

“So should applicants try to write funny essays?”

“ ‘Funny’ isn’t a good word, because there’s a fine line between something that is humorous and something that is obnoxious or inappropriate. I much prefer an essay that is amusing because of its insight over one in which a kid is trying to write a string of one-liners—that rarely works.”

I paused for a moment, thinking how to word my next question tactfully. “How much of a ‘sell’ do you expect?”

“How much do I expect? Tons. I expect that most kids will try to wow me with their accomplishments, even though I could just look at their activities list if I really want to know. Each year we have enough valedictorians, class presidents, and team captains to fill our freshman class five times. With that many talented kids, it’s hard to impress me by listing your glorious achievements.

“How much of a ‘sell’ would I like? None. We enroll people, not cars, and I want more than a list of ‘added features.’ I am less interested in hearing what a student has done than hearing why he does what he does. Anything that comes across as a ‘sell’ is negative. If what comes through is a healthy self-confidence in your own accomplishments, then that’s positive.

“Also, of course, a hard ‘sell’ can really backfire if the essay is not consistent with the rest of the application. A student once wrote an angry essay about social injustice and how the world should feed and clothe the poor. So I checked her list of activities. She had never been involved in any charities or community service programs, so I was pretty skeptical of her true feelings. No one likes hypocrisy, so if an applicant’s record doesn’t back up the essay, it can add a large negative factor into my decision.

“A common theme that is both uninteresting and unrevealing is participation in organizations which are ‘in’ at the time, such as SADD and SafeRides. Also, stating that you were listed in Who’s Who of American High School Seniors only tells me that you were willing to pay.”

I decided to go for all the marbles. “All said, what is the best essay?”

“What works the best? Honesty, brevity, risk taking, self-revelation, imaginativeness, and fine writing: many of the attributes which are edited out when you ask someone’s opinion of your college essay. If a student reads his application before mailing it and can say ‘this sounds like me, then he’s probably written the best

essay possible. Students should feel more comfortable trusting their instincts. Nine times out of ten, an essay that feels good to the writer will be good for the reader, too. And that should make the process better for all those involved—as essay writers or essay readers!”

(The quotes from the “admissions officer” above were compiled from the comments of all the admissions officers we interviewed.) USING—and ABUSING—the INTERNET

The admissions officer is sitting at his desk, piles of papers everywhere indicating the degree to which he is overworked (or perhaps his own relaxed approach to organization). He is reading the forty-ninth essay of the day, when suddenly he has a wave of *déjà vu*.

Now, he’s been reading admissions essays at his small, private, liberal arts college for five years, and he’s often read essays that remind him of something else. But this one—hmmmm:

New Albany City, check. Time, 15:30. Great! Reset timer; power normal; oil temperature, within range; compass setting, correct. Alone at 4,000 feet in a small airplane in a strange new territory and I am piloting my way perfectly. I feel like Lindbergh!

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The National Association for College Admissions Counseling (www.nacac.com) has great advice and links to other information sources, including essay help. Yahoo offers several free services, some of which you register for, including SAT and ACT tips and preparation, online college applications, college searches, financial aid, etc.

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