



# 25 ESSAY MISTAKES THAT GUARANTEE FAILURE

FOR EVERY OPEN SLOT AT AN Ivy League college, there are 10 to 12 eager applicants vying for it—and you’re one of them. On paper, most applicants appear very similar. All are well qualified academically with high grades and test scores and solid involvement in extracurricular activities.

Imagine the admissions officer who must choose which of these well-deserving applications to accept. How will he or she make the decision? Often, it’s the essay. The essay is the one chance for you to share a piece of yourself that is not encapsulated in the dry numbers and scores of the application. It is your opportunity to demonstrate why you’d be a perfect fit at the college, how you’d contribute to the student body, and why the college should accept you over those other 11 applicants.

The essay is also the one part of your application that you have complete control over. You can write it the night before it’s due and turn in a



piece that is half-baked, or you can spend a little time on the essay and turn in one that can set you apart from the competition.

The truth is that you don't have to be a good writer to create a successful admissions essay. Nor do you need to have survived a life-changing event or won a Noble Prize. Writing a successful admissions essay for an Ivy League college is actually much simpler.

The secret is that any topic can be a winner but it all depends on your approach. If you spend the time to analyze your subject and can convey that quality of thought that is unique to you through words, you'll have a powerful essay. It doesn't have to be beautifully written or crafted as the next great American novel. At its core the essay is not a "writing test." It's a "thinking test." So you do need to spend the time to make sure that your thoughts are conveyed correctly on paper. It may not be pretty writing but it has to be clear.

So how do you do this? While we can give you tips and pointers (which is what you'll read in the analysis section following every essay) the best method is to learn by example. You need to see what a successful end product looks like. While there is no single way to produce a winning essay, as you will read, there are some traits that successful essays share. You'll learn what these are by reading the examples in this book as well as the interviews with admissions officers. Then you can write a successful essay that is based on your own unique experiences, world view, way of thinking, and personal style.

Why are admissions essays so important to getting into Ivy League colleges? At their most basic level, essays help admissions officers to understand who you are. While grades, test scores, and academic performance can give the admissions officers an estimate on how prepared you are to handle the academic rigors of college, the essay offers the only way they can judge how your background, talents, experience, and personal strengths come together to make you the best candidate for their school. For you, the applicant, the admissions essays offer the best opportunity to share who you are beyond the dry stats of your academic record. It's kind of amazing actually. You start with a blank sheet of paper and through careful selection, analysis, and writing, you create a picture of yourself that impresses the admissions officers and makes them want to have you attend their school.



Ultimately, this book is designed to help you create a successful essay that gets you accepted. It will guide you toward writing that essay by sharing with you the successes of others who have written to gain admission to Ivy League colleges as well as other highly selective schools such as MIT, Stanford, Caltech, Duke, and the University of Chicago.

If you're like most students, you would like to know the magic formula for writing an admissions essay. Although we would love to be able to tell you, unfortunately, no such formula exists. Writing is so individual and the options so limitless that it's impossible to develop a combination that will work for *every* essay. However, this doesn't mean that we're going to send you off with laptop in hand, without some guidance. Throughout this book you are going to see the "right way" to do things.

We thought it would be useful to start off with a few common mistakes that other students have made. You'll want to avoid these. In fact, some of these mistakes are so bad that they will almost guarantee that your essay will fail. Avoid these at all costs!

- 1. Trying to be someone else.** This may sound very obvious, and well, it is. But you'd be surprised at how many students don't heed this simple piece of advice. A lot of students think that they need to be who the admissions officers want them to be; but, in reality, the admissions officers want you to be you. They aren't looking for the perfect student who is committed to every subject area, volunteers wholeheartedly for every cause, plays multiple sports with aptitude, and has no faults. Instead, they want to learn about the true you. Present yourself in an honest way, and you will find it much easier to write an essay about your genuine thoughts and feelings.
- 2. Choosing a topic that sounds good but that you don't care about.** Many students think that colleges seek students who have performed a lot of community service, and it is true that colleges value contributions to your community. However, this doesn't mean that you must write about community service, especially when it's not something that has played a major role for you. The same holds true for any other topic. It's critical that you select a



topic that's meaningful to you because you will be able to write about the topic in a complete and personal way.

- 3. Not thinking before writing.** You should spend as much time thinking about what you will write as actually putting words on paper. This will help you weed out the topics that just don't go anywhere, determine which topic has the greatest pull for you, and figure out exactly what you want to say. It can help to talk yourself through your essay aloud or discuss your thoughts with a parent, teacher, or friend. The other person may see an angle or a flaw that you do not.
- 4. Not answering the question.** While this seems simple enough, many students simply do not heed this. The advice is especially pertinent for those who recycle essays. We highly recommend recycling because it saves you time to write one essay that you use for many colleges, but the caveat is that you need to edit the essay so that it answers the question being asked. It turns admissions officers off when students submit an essay, even a well-written one, that doesn't answer the question. They think that the students either aren't serious enough about the college to submit an essay that has been specifically written or at least edited for that college, or that they just don't follow directions. Either way, that's not the impression you want to leave.
- 5. Not sharing something about yourself.** As you know, the main purpose of the admissions essay is to impart something about yourself that's not found in the application. Still, many students forget this, especially when writing about a topic such as a person they'd like to meet or a favorite book or piece of literature. In these cases, they may write so much about why they admire the person or the plot of the book that they forget to show the connection to themselves. Always ask yourself if you are letting the admissions officers know something about yourself through your essay.
- 6. Forgetting who your readers are.** Naturally you speak differently to your friends than your teachers; when it comes to the essay, some applicants essentially address the admissions officers with a too-friendly high five instead of a handshake. In other



words, it's important to be yourself in the essay, but you should remember that the admissions officers are adults not peers. The essay should be comfortable but not too informal. Remember that adults generally have a more conservative view of what's funny and what's appropriate. The best way to make sure you're hitting the right tone is to ask an adult to read your essay and give you feedback.

- 7. Tackling too much of your life.** Because the essay offers a few hundred words to write about an aspect of your life, some students think that they need to cram in as many aspects of their life as possible. This is not the approach we recommend. An essay of 500 to 800 words doesn't afford you the space to write about your 10 greatest accomplishments since birth or about everything that you did during your three-week summer program in Europe. Rather, the space can probably fit one or two accomplishments or one or two experiences from the summer program. Instead of trying to share your whole life, share what we call a slice of your life. By doing so, you will give your essay focus and you will have the space to cover the topic in greater depth.
- 8. Having a boring introduction.** Students have started their essays by repeating the question asked and even stating their names. This does little to grab the attention of the admissions officers. Sure, they'll read the whole essay, but it always helps to have a good start. Think about how you can describe a situation that you were in, convey something that you strongly believe in or share an anecdote that might not be expected. An introduction won't make or break your essay, but it can start you off in the right direction.
- 9. Latching on to an issue that you don't really care about.** One of the prompts for the Common Application is, "Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you." The key to answering this question is to carefully think about these words: "its importance to you." This is what students most often overlook. They select an issue and write about the issue itself, but they don't really explain why it is important to them or how they see themselves making an impact. If you write about an issue, be sure to pick one that is truly



meaningful to you and that you know something about. You'll probably score extra kudos if you can describe how you have done something related to the issue.

- 10. Resorting to gimmicks.** Applicants have been known to enclose a shoe with their essays along with a note that reads, "Now I have one foot in the door." They have also printed their essays in different fonts and colors, sent gifts or food and even included mood music that's meant to set the mood while the admissions officer reads the essay. A few students have even sent cash! While gimmicks like this may grab some attention, they don't do much to further the applicants, especially those few who've sent money, a definite no-no. It's true that you want your essay to stand out but not in a way in which the admissions officer thinks that you are inappropriate or just plain silly. If you have an idea for something creative, run it by a teacher or counselor to see what he or she thinks first.
- 11. Trying to make too many points.** It's better to have a single, well thought-out message in your essay than many incomplete ones. Focusing allows you to go into depth into a specific topic and make a strong case for your position. Write persuasively. You can use examples to illustrate your point.
- 12. Not being specific.** If you think about some of the best stories you've been told, the ones that you remember the most are probably filled with details. The storyteller may have conveyed what he or she thought, felt, heard, or saw. From the information imparted, you may have felt like you were there or you may have developed a mental image of the situation. This is precisely the experience that you would like the admissions officers to have when reading your essay. The key to being memorable is providing as many details as possible. What thoughts were going through your mind? What did you see or hear? What were you feeling during the time? Details help bring the admissions officers into your mind to feel your story.
- 13. Crossing the line.** Some students take to heart the advice to share something about themselves, but they end up sharing too much. They think that they must be so revealing that they use



their essay to admit to something that they would never have confessed otherwise. There have been students who have written about getting drunk, feeling suicidal, or pulling pranks on their teachers. It's possible that in the right context, these topics might work. For example, if the pranks were lighthearted and their teachers had a good sense of humor about them, that's acceptable. But for the most part, these kinds of topics are highly risky. The best way to determine if you've crossed the line is to share your idea with a couple of adults and get their reactions.

- 14. Repeating what's in the application form.** The essay is not the application form, and it is not a resume. In other words, the essay is the best opportunity that you'll have to either delve into something you wrote in the application form or to expound on something new that doesn't really fit on the application form. It doesn't help you to regurgitate what's already on the application form.
- 15. Not having a connection with the application form.** While you don't want to repeat information from the application form verbatim in your essay, it's usually a good idea to have some continuity between the form and your essay. If you write an essay about how your greatest passion in life is playing the piano and how you spend 10 hours a week practicing, this hobby should be mentioned in the application form along with any performances you've given or awards you've won. It doesn't make sense to write about how you love an activity in the essay and then to have no mention of it in the application form. Remember that the admissions officers are looking at your application in its entirety, and they should have a complete and cohesive image of you through all the pieces, which include the application form, essay, transcript, recommendations, and interview.
- 16. Not going deep enough.** One of the best pieces of advice that we give students is to keep asking, "Why?" As an example, let's say that you are writing an essay on organizing a canned food drive. Ask yourself why you wanted to do this. Your answer is that you wanted to help the homeless. Ask yourself why this was important to you. Your answer is that you imagined your family in this situation. You would greatly appreciate if others showed



compassion and helped you. Why else? Because you wanted to gain hands-on experience as a leader. The point of this exercise is to realize that it's not enough to just state the facts or tell what happened, that you organized a canned food drive. What makes an essay truly compelling is explaining the "why." You want the readers of your essay to understand your motivation. Keep asking yourself why until you have analyzed the situation as fully as possible. The answers you come up with are what will make your essay stronger.

- 17. Not getting any feedback.** Practically every article that you read in a magazine, book, or newspaper or on the Internet has been edited. The reason is that writing should not be an isolated experience. You may know exactly what you want to convey in your own mind, but when you put it on paper, it may not come out as clearly as it was in your mind. It helps to get feedback. Ask parents, teachers, or even friends to read and comment on your essay. They can help you identify what can be edited out, what needs to be explained better, or how you can improve your work.
- 18. Getting too much feedback.** Asking one or two people for feedback on your essay is probably enough. If you ask more than that, you may lose the focus of your writing. Having too many editors dilutes your work because everyone has a different opinion. If you try to incorporate all of the opinions, your essay will no longer sound like you.
- 19. Trying to be extraordinarily different.** There are some people who are extraordinarily different, but the truth is that most of us aren't. What's more important than conveying yourself as the most unique person at your school is that you demonstrate self-analysis, growth, or insight.
- 20. Ruling out common topics.** There are topics that admissions officers see over and over again such as your identity, your relationship with your family, extracurricular activities, and the Big Game. While these topics are very common, it doesn't mean that you shouldn't write about them. Your topic is not as important as what you say about it. For example, many students choose to



write about their moms or dads. A parent can be one of the most influential persons in a student's life, and it makes sense that this would be the topic of many students' essays. So don't rule out mom or dad, but do rule out writing about mom or dad in the way that every other person will write. Explain how your dad made banana pancakes every morning and what that taught you about family, or how your mom almost got into a fight with another mom who made a racist comment. Make a common topic uncommon by personalizing it.

- 21. Forcing humor.** You've probably seen at least one sitcom on TV or one monologue by Conan O'Brien or David Letterman with a joke that fell flat. Maybe you groaned at the TV or gave it an un-amused expression. Keep in mind that the jokes on TV are written by professional writers who earn large salaries to be funny. Now, remember that the great majority of us are not headed down this career path. What this means is that you shouldn't force humor into your essay. If you're a funny writer, then by all means, inject some humor. Just be sure to ask an adult or two to read the essay to see if they agree with you that it is funny. If you're not humorous, then it's okay. You don't need to force it.
- 22. Writing the essay the night before it's due.** Almost every student has done it—waited until the last minute to write a paper or do a project. Sometimes it comes out all right, but sometimes not so much. It is not wise to procrastinate when it comes to writing a college admissions essay. It takes time. Even if you are able to write an essay the night before it's due, it's still better not to. The best essays marinate. Their authors write, take some time away from it and then return to it later with a fresh mind.
- 23. Failing the thumb test.** As you are writing your essay, place your thumb over your name. Could you put another name at the top because it could be an essay written by many other students? Or is the essay personal to you so that basically yours is the only name that could be at the top? If you fail the thumb test, it's time to rethink the topic or your approach to it. You want your essay to be unique to you.
- 24. Forgetting to proofread.** Some students put the wrong college name in their essays, a mistake that could easily be avoided by



proofreading. Many more students have spelling, grammatical, or punctuation errors. While these types of errors usually aren't completely detrimental, they can be distracting at best and be signs to the admissions officers that you're careless and not serious about their college at worst. Avoid this by not only using your computer's spell check but by asking someone else to help proofread your essay. Twice is better.

- 25. Not writing to the specific college.** In addition to learning about you, admissions officers also hope to learn how you would fit in at their college. Be as specific as possible about a college, especially if you are writing an essay about why you'd like to attend that particular college. Explain one or two things about the school that make it the best one for you. Make sure that what you are writing is not so general that it could be said of any other college. In other words, it's good to describe how you visited the campus and had a conversation about Marx with a sociology student. It's not as good to state that you want to go to Harvard because it offers a high quality education.
- 26. Not spending time on the rest of your application.** Remember that the essay is one piece of the application. It can certainly help your chances of being accepted, but you need to have everything else in place as well. Sure, it takes time to work on the application form, recommendation letters, and interviews, but you are taking actions now that will affect the next four years of your life and beyond. It's worth the effort.

### How to Use This Book

Now that you have a clear idea of the mistakes to avoid in your essay, it's time to get some advice on what you *should do*. Let's go directly to the source—Ivy League admissions officers. In the next chapter, three former Ivy League admissions officers share in their own words what they seek in applicants and give you tips on how to make the strongest impression on them.

Then, see what makes a solid essay through the essays themselves. Of course, the point is not to copy these essays. It's to gain inspiration. It's to see what's worked in the past and to get your creativity flowing



so that you can formulate in your mind how you can best approach your topic.

We've analyzed each of the essays too. You'll see that even essays written by students accepted at the premier colleges in the country are not perfect and have room for improvement. You'll also see the strengths of the essays so that you can make sure to incorporate similar characteristics.

By learning through example, you can create the most compelling and persuasive essay possible. You'll know what not to do, you'll understand what the admissions officers want and, perhaps most importantly, you'll be inspired to write your own successful Ivy League admissions essay.