

The Write Stuff

STEPHEN FARMER, DIRECTOR OF undergraduate admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, still remembers the year the college asked applicants to write an essay about an invention that had made a difference in their lives. Most students predictably settled on major inventions like cell phones and computers. But the essay that grabbed Farmer was a tribute by one student to his desk chair. "He described its sturdy support, its satisfying swivel, and he tied in principles of physics," says Farmer. "It was very clever in a non-showoffy way." Farmer did what he does only when he gets a really great essay: he made a copy for his personal files. And yes, he voted to admit the student.

Few essays prompt that level of admiration. But those 300- and 500-word statements can clearly affect your chances of acceptance, particularly at top-tier schools, where it almost goes without saying that students' grades and scores are terrific and their accomplishments are daunting. How can you craft an essay that rises to the top? We surveyed a range of admissions officers and found consensus on several points:

● **Do be yourself.** Actually, that's the worst advice you can give some people, Mark Twain supposedly once said. But the No. 1 reason for requiring essays is to give admissions officers a personalized sense of the applicant—an image that mere numbers cannot convey. Are you thoughtful, inquisitive, funny, serious? Would you be a good person to have in class or the dorm?

● **Don't be gimmicky.** Writing your essay in the form of poetry or drama may ensure that it's remembered—but not necessarily in a good way. Unless you're an accomplished poet, stick with prose. If you can't tell a joke, this isn't the place to start. "The form doesn't set an essay apart, only the thoughts inside it," says Ted O'Neill, dean of admissions at the University of Chicago.

● **Do think small.** In 500 words, you're not going to write the ultimate treatise on God or global

warming. Still, you might fashion a compelling essay on entering the pie contest at a state fair. A story will typically be more engaging than a recitation of facts, especially if you include vivid details. Major events, like surviving a hurricane, play well—but so do less momentous stories that show personal growth or the questioning of truths.

● **Don't wait till the last minute.** "If you do a cursory job, we will take that as a cursory interest in our institution," says Jerry Lucido, vice provost of UNC-Chapel Hill. When you're done, put your essay aside for a week and then go back to it with greater objectivity.

● **Don't let someone else write your essay.** You're selling yourself short—and you're likely to get caught. "We have a pretty good feel for how 17- and 18-year-olds write," says Willis (Lee) Stetson, dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. "If the essay

How to ace the essay: be yourself, plan ahead and know which Armstrong walked on the moon.

By ANNE UNDERWOOD

sounds like it was written by a 42-year-old attorney, it probably was." And don't even think about downloading from the Internet. Bruce Poch, dean of admissions at Pomona College, once received the same essay from three applicants on three different continents.

● **Do revise.** A parent, teacher or friend can give you feedback, calling, say, for stronger topic sentences. But as with the writing stage of the process, beware of too much outside influence: colleges discourage use of Internet-based editing services. Poch says essays come back overly polished, or "Botoxed." "We like to see character lines," he says, "not a sanitized version of who you are."

● **Do proofread—twice.** No one expects a 17-year-old to write like F. Scott Fitzgerald. But basic structure, grammar and spelling are important. And don't just rely on spell check. As the Internet editing service with-honors.com warns, there are "sum" mistakes that "spell Czech will knot cache."

● **Finally, don't drive yourself crazy.** Admissions officers will overlook all kinds of bloopers if the essay is interesting enough. Poch recalls the student who answered "What moment in history would you like to have witnessed?" with an essay on the 1969 moon landing—which was fine, except the student attributed that giant leap for mankind to Louis Armstrong (the jazz trumpeter) rather than Neil Armstrong (the astronaut). "The image of Satchmo on the moon made me laugh hysterically," says Poch. But he discerned from the rest of the application that the mistake didn't reflect ignorance, just a slip by a student who loved both astronomy and jazz. "We admitted him anyway—and I teased him for the next four years," says Poch. By the way, the student now holds a Ph.D. in astrophysics.

