



# Essays: Do's & Don'ts

BY KAREN BRESLAU

**Y**OU'RE STARING AT A BLANK screen, filled with dread at having to describe "a significant event in your life," "a person who influenced you" or "an important historical figure." And you're just 17! Now imagine the plight of the person who's got to read your answer (and a thousand more): a weary-eyed admissions officer whittling a mountain of applications into several little molehills: yeses, nos and maybes. When competing applicants have comparable grades, test scores and extracurricular activities, says Katherine Cohen of Ivywise, a Manhattan-based admissions counseling service, "an essay that makes the reader laugh or smile or cry or just connect with you makes all the difference." Even an academic superstar can be tossed aside because of an essay that's flip or bland—or fails to answer the question. But there's the other side: A marginal applicant can compensate for lower test scores with a compelling story. Here are some do's and don'ts:

**Show, don't tell:** "Imagine living in a world with red trees, brown apples and purple skies—colors only you can see." This opening line, from an aspiring artist admitted to Penn, reveals something about the applicant available nowhere else on his application. Imagine if, instead, he had written "I am colorblind." The use of vivid, personal detail, says Cohen, "makes clear immediately the writer's intelligence and originality."

**Write about something other than success:** Failure, adversity, even humiliation are powerful teachers. As long as you're not maudlin about it, such stories can show an admissions officer what an applicant is made of—and has had to overcome. One student won acceptance to Amherst with a story about her incarcerated father. "Ever since I can remember, I've been visiting my father in

They may be no fun to write, but those 300 to 500 words of creativity on your application could be the difference

prison, or as my mother so fondly called it, 'school.'" The committee was impressed, says admissions director Katie Fretwell, "because she wrote about an experience very unusual in our applicant pool."

**Answer the question:** Can you follow directions? If the essay asks about a favorite character in a novel, don't write about all the books you've read. The University of Pennsylvania famously asks students to submit page 217 of their autobiographies. Cohen advises students to start mid-sentence, just as an actual book would.

**Use humor wisely:** A student delighted NYU with an essay on "an important event" by describing a day of the week. "Thursday is cocky... Thursday is a devious tease." This student used his wit to demonstrate creativity and boldness.

**Plan ahead:** This is no time to pull an all-nighter. Even though the essays are brief (usually 300 to 500 words), they require weeks, even months, of organization and self-knowledge to prepare.

**Don't repeat information:** Reciting facts listed elsewhere on your application is the most common student mistake, says Geoff Cook, founder of [Essayedge.com](http://Essayedge.com), an online editing service. "The essay should reveal the personality behind the grades, scores and achievements." Someone with a 1600 on his SAT should write about his community service, not his intellect.

**Don't "thesaurusize":** Words like "plethora" and "myriad" are a turnoff, says Cook. And beware clichés: "I always learn from my mistakes"; "I know my dreams will come true"; "I can make a difference."

**Avoid controversy:** Don't write about your first sexual experience, your views on abortion or using drugs. Current events

generally work only if you have been personally affected—for instance, if you lost a parent on 9-11 or joined the service.

**Don't download an essay from the Internet:** While it's OK to consult the Web for samples and inspiration, you can be sure that admissions offices know exactly what's out there—and will bounce anyone who plagiarizes. If you use a Web-based editing service, choose one where the editor gets to know you and will help your voice come through. The essay is your best chance to talk directly to the people deciding your fate. Let them hear you loud and clear.

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