

# **Nail Your College Essay**

**Stick Your Opening Line  
Hone Your Narrative Voice  
Capture Your Personal Story**

**By**

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## **Introduction**

### **Colleges Have a Mission**

When a college admissions committee selects a student for admission to a class, it is guided by this question: Will this student succeed and contribute to our college community and our society? Factors bearing on this question might include intellectual curiosity and promise, motivation, over-all energy, leadership skills, integrity, judgment, self-image, non-traditional learning ability, realistic self-assessment, independence, originality, preparation, special skills and talents, resilience, etc. No student will have all of these qualities, but most students will have some.

Of course, some of these factors will be obvious to the admissions committee from your academic record or from test results, while others will be apparent through recommendations written by teachers or high school counselors. Further traits will emerge during interviews—if there are any, or through additional submissions, such as an art or writing portfolio, an athletic tape, or a talent audition, if appropriate. However, for almost all students, the unique qualities they possess will shine through in their personal essay. Since the essay is the only place where you—the student—control the way these qualities are made known to an admissions committee, the essay is a real opportunity to stand out from every other applicant.

### **My Mission**

My main goal is to help you recognize the personal qualities and characteristics you have, to help you value and support them, and to assist you in bringing them forward so they will be evident in your essay.

Further I want to help you recognize and use your authentic voice. This voice is the one you use when you talk to good friends discussing the things you care about most. It is also the voice you may use when you talk to yourself. I suspect, though, that this voice is not the one that most of you use in school essays. Because of this, you may even consider your authentic voice to be too informal for writing an essay, especially one which could determine which college you will attend. This voice is not too informal. It is genuine. It is what you want, and it is my hope that I will convince you to nurture this voice and use it to tell a story, a story that only you can tell because it is, after all, a story about you. Your story, in your own words, and in your most genuine voice, will be the basis of an effective personal admissions essay.

Ultimately I want you to recognize that an effective essay will distinguish you from other students and could forge a connection with a college admissions counselor. And this will make you memorable.

### **The Author's Background**

Jan Rooker has been an educational consultant for almost 15 years. Prior to this she taught high school English in Ridgewood, NJ. Each year she visits numerous colleges across the country. She graduated from Cornell University (BA), Stanford University (MA), and Columbia University (MA). Her website is: [www.janrooker.com](http://www.janrooker.com). Her Email is: [jan@janrooker.com](mailto:jan@janrooker.com).

## Chapter 1

### **WHAT COLLEGES ARE LOOKING FOR—WHEN THEY ASK YOU TO WRITE A PERSONAL ESSAY**

When colleges ask you to write your application essay they want to know you better. At a minimum, they want to know about the person behind the numbers on your transcript and on your SAT score report. But they want to know more. They want to know what has happened to you, and, maybe, what has happened in your family. They want to know how you see yourself and what you think and talk about, the kind of stories you tell. What moves you? What do you dream about? How do you react to a, and what is your tolerance for risk? How are you different from other people who are your same age? How are you different from others who want to be on the same campus? How do you see yourself in the future as you go forward?

#### **In Their Own Words, What Do Colleges Say?**

Some colleges explain in detail to students what they are looking for in an essay. Some are explicit in describing what it is about an essay that causes an admission's counselors to find the essay distinctive or moving. Tufts University gives students great insights about what they think makes a successful essay or a successful handling of an essay topic. At the Tufts University website ([www.admissions.tufts.edu](http://www.admissions.tufts.edu)), the Office of Admissions has put a good number of successful essays--essays which worked for them-- under the heading "Discovering Voice: Essays That Matter" In describing these essays, the Office of Admissions says:

These pieces captured the distinct voices of these young men and women, and forged a powerful and affective human connection with their readers. They truly helped to set these students apart in our applicant pool. They compelled, magnetized, and fascinated us. They demonstrated creativity and illuminated curiosity.

Here's an excerpt from one of the essays (The student who wrote it whose name was Olga was an admitted student for the class of 2010.):

“I wear whatever I want to wear, not the in-one-second-and-out-the-next-I-paid-enough-money- for-this-to-feed-a-small-underdeveloped-nation clothing that everyone around me seems to wear, and I've actually had someone approach me just to say, “Look, I'm wearing an Olga hat,” when I barely knew her name.

“I don't throw things away, and I can still remember the phone number of my second grade best friend that I haven't actually spoken to in seven years. I wear kids' sweatshirts and many of my poems are about the loss of innocence, though they don't usually start out that way.”

You can imagine what the admissions staff was thinking when they read this beginning to the essay. "Wow! Who is this kid? I want to know more!" Your essay can spark the same excitement -- if it is authentic.

Some colleges actually go further in that they help you to understand what your high school English teacher always tried to get you to understand, the difference between telling and showing. On the University of Virginia undergraduate admissions website, Senior Assistant Dean of Admission Parke Muth says:

A good essay is not good because of the topic but because of the voice. A good writer can make any topic interesting, and a weak writer can make even the most dramatic topic a bore. Students need only to recall the difference between two simple concepts - showing and telling. A good essay always shows; a weak essay always tells.

Check the website ([www.virginia.edu/undergradadmission/writingtheessay](http://www.virginia.edu/undergradadmission/writingtheessay)) to see the rest of Parke Muth's advice about essays.

### **What Colleges Don't Want from Your Personal Essay**

Colleges have your transcripts and test scores. They don't want--or need--an essay that lists your academic accomplishments in narrative form. Nor do they want a thesis-based 5 paragraph essay in which you prove--using an introduction, three body paragraphs, and a conclusion--that "Competing in tennis matches is an important activity in my life. It has taught me perseverance, discipline and how to overcome a setback." When one student I worked with, Katie, realized this, she said, "It's too bad, but I guess they are not looking for the standard essay we've been taught our whole lives to write so well." She couldn't have been more right!

Colleges also do not want a well researched expository paper on why a historic figure is worth being revered or why a current crisis is so important at the national level. I can understand why you might think that they do, as several of the essay questions on the Common Application ([www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)) may lead you to this conclusion. But an expository essay, even on these topics, is not the kind of essay that colleges hope to read. Colleges are also not looking for an essay that speaks to an unasked admission's question that you are sure you have guessed the answer to and which you can explain in just the way the college wants to hear the answer. In fact the worst thing you can do is to try to write an essay answering a question with an answer that you suppose the admissions office will think is "right."

A story which illustrates the results of this practice of trying to guess what an admissions office wants to hear is told on the University of Virginia's website. When the university asked applicants to write an essay about an invention or creation from the past that was important to them, over 1,000 applicants in one year wrote about the "Declaration of Independence." Applicants assumed that because the University of Virginia was founded by Thomas Jefferson who authored the "Declaration," this would be a good answer. The college points out, however, that because so many of the submitted essays were so similar, the admissions officers were kept from distinguishing between the applicants. So the last thing you want to do is submit an essay in which you answer the question as you think the college wants it answered. You may be thinking that if essays such as these are coherent, and grammatically correct, then they must be good essays. And well they may be, but they will not distinguish you; and, thus, they cannot make you memorable.

The desire of admissions to help students make essays as distinctive as possible was recently emphasized again when I was at a question and answer sessions with Stanford University's Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, DeAngela Burns-Wallace. Someone asked her what Stanford was looking for in a "supplemental" admission's question that asks, "Virtually all of Stanford's undergraduates live on campus. What would you want your freshman year roommate to know about you? Tell us something about you that will help your roommate—and us—know you better." The question we consultants asked was, "What kind of things have worked in the past for this question?" Ms. Burns excused herself from answering this because, she said, if she did answer it, Stanford would get 300 essays on that exact topic next year. How would this help them distinguish between applicants?

### **So then, what should guide your essay?**

Be your self—as well as you can. Set out to know yourself and then share the self you know with the admission counselor who is reading your file.

In Chapter 2, I believe that you will come to understand what having your own authentic voice means. In Chapter 3, I believe you will come to see how to recognize your story and know that it will distinguish you. In Chapter 4, you will read some effective personal application essays.

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### **Essay Sample**

The following excerpt is the beginning of an essay with an authentic voice. What follows is the beginning of the essay as it was revised by the student and her well-meaning English tutor. Read and compare them.

#### Version 1: Bart

"Well, at least somebody jumped the jump," was the first thing I heard when I looked up from the ground on the far side of the jump and saw my friend, Marge.

We were at the Vermont Summer Festival and I was participating in my first real horse show-- riding Bart, that is. I had been jumping a 3'3" *oxer*. The jump was situated uphill, and you need a lot of pace to jump uphill. I had asked Bart to jump without enough pace and he had stopped short--unfortunately, I didn't. I had catapulted over the jump.

My friend Marge who was watching from the sidelines laughingly said, "Well, at least, someone jumped the jump." She was being funny, and in a way saying, it's okay that you fell off. Anyway because my feet had hit the ground I was out of that class. But

because I would be able to participate in another class, I got right up and right back on. That's how it is with me."

Version 2: Riding is My Favorite Activity

"I began riding when my mom gave me riding lessons for my sixth birthday. The riding ring is where you can find me on most Saturdays and Sundays, and every day after school. Becoming a horse back rider has helped me to learn many life lessons: perseverance, discipline and how to overcome set-backs."

(What followed were paragraphs two, three and four, each respectively, about perseverance, discipline and overcoming setbacks. The conclusion repeated the ideas of the first paragraph.)

Which of these do you find most interesting, most lively, most revealing of the student who wrote them? Both essays reveal that the student is an accomplished equestrian but the first excerpt "shows" it and the second essay "tells" it. The first one also shows through its voice that the writer is expert, determined, spunky, humorous, not easily embarrassed and strong enough to challenge the will of her equally strong-minded horse, Bart. The second, well, it shows she's learned to write a "standard" formulaic essay. Put yourself in the role of an admissions officer. Will you be wowed by the real person...will you be wowed by the one who sounds like a 5-paragraph student robot? Whom would you most want to admit?