

# COLLEGE PERSONAL STATEMENT ADVICE

The personal statement is a narrative, not a classic five-paragraph essay. It is your chance to show you are unique and desirable. Most colleges try to achieve a well-rounded class; they are not looking for well-rounded individuals. Do not be afraid to sound unusual and interesting.

So, what attributes are they looking for? Most applicants are intelligent, and their grades and test scores already reflect their ability. With intelligence as a given, the single most valued attribute is **WILLINGNESS TO WORK HARD**.

Next on the list are creativity and the ability to bring experience and learning together to develop new ideas. Also valued are tenacity, altruism, and the ability to apply knowledge to the real world. Most schools are looking for do-ers, people who make things happen. Choose a topic that will allow you to demonstrate one or more of these attributes.

While telling your story, be sincere. It is easy to spot fabrications.

## 1. **REMEMBER YOUR AUDIENCE:** **ADMISSIONS OFFICERS ARE INTELLIGENT BUT ALSO TIRED, BORED, AND CRANKY.**

An admissions officer must read thousands of essays in a short period of time. To fill a class of 5,000, UC Berkeley reads roughly 24,000 essays in two months. As their deadline draws near, admissions officers may work all night. After reading the 10,000<sup>th</sup> story about a dying grandmother, they become case-hardened and derisive. They tell jokes about them. Some have running contests for the sappiest sob story. These are not bad people, just people pushed to the edge of sanity with an impossible workload. **You must try to be original, entertaining, and worth reading at 2:00AM.**

## 2. **THE FIRST TWO LINES OF THE ESSAY ARE THE MOST IMPORTANT**

Admissions officers are in a hurry. Unlike your teachers who attempt to read your every word, admissions officers **do not** care about you. If the first two lines of the essay fail to engage, the reader may throw it over his shoulder and move on to the next one. Any essay that begins, "I was born in Iowa in 1986," is doomed, doomed, doomed.

Start with a **hook**, a provocative statement designed to grab attention. The best hooks provide the reader with a visual image. Here are three great beginnings:

*As I watched the orange Mazarati purr across the screen in the Tom Cruz movie, I knew I had to become an engineer. It was the first time I realized that engineering could be art.*  
(Student admitted to UC Berkeley)

*Can ducks and chickens mate? This and other crazy questions loomed large in my five-year-old mind. Shortly after the feathers settled from my noisy experiment, my parents gave me my first science set. I don't know if the poultry or I was more thankful. I have been fascinated with biology ever since.*  
(Student admitted to UCLA)

*They have mud on their clothes. The five year olds had been helping their parents in the vegetable fields since dawn and now mill around the market place looking for customers. Their world is bounded by mud and markets. I would be there now if my parents had not encouraged me to learn English. With an American education, I can return to Thailand to help those children have a better future.* (Student admitted to UC Berkeley)

## 3. **USE SHORT, EVOCATIVE TOPIC SENTENCES FOR EACH PARAGRAPH.**

If the admissions officer likes the introduction, he will scan the essay's topic sentences to determine the direction of the essay. Good topic sentences make scanning easy for tired eyes. If the topic sentences offer a clear and logical progression of ideas, he **may** read the entire essay, improving your chances of acceptance.

## 4. **HIGHLIGHT SOMETHING UNIQUE ABOUT YOU.**

Tell a story that demonstrates a desirable attribute or shows how you are different from the other 25,000 applicants. Consider this introduction:

*"I collect arrowheads not Airheads", I explain to my classmates. Sometimes my hobby is a source of confusion. Many are familiar with the Airhead candy available in supermarkets for the small fee of 25 cents. Arrowheads, on the other hand, are a bit more difficult to find, especially if one avoids gift shops. There is generally hiking involved.*

*Mud, of course, comes into play. A 9,000-foot peak or two may intervene. These are just small inconveniences on the hunt.* (Student admitted to Williams College)

Odd beginning? This student demonstrates dedication and willingness to undergo hardship to achieve her goals. Also, she sounds more than a little quirky, interesting, and, most importantly, **memorable** in a sea of essays.

## 5. **SHOW** - DON'T JUST TELL

In the above example, the student does not **say** she is dedicated, she **demonstrates** that she is dedicated. Try to put your reader into the action, feeling or setting of your essay. Bring him into the moment. Close your eyes and picture an experience, then describe what you see. Make your reader see what you see and feel what you feel.

Poor example: *I believe that I can make the world a better place. Last summer I volunteered with my church group to distribute eyeglasses to villagers in Costa Rica. It was very moving and rewarding.*

Better example: *As part of my church group, I spent three weeks in Costa Rica distributing eyeglasses to the most grateful people I have ever met. I will never forget the wonder of one woman when she looked in the mirror; it was the first time she had ever seen her own face. In that moment, my whole trip was worth it. After this experience, how can I take simple luxuries for granted again?* (Student admitted to UC San Diego)

## 6. **ACTION VERBS** ARE YOUR FRIENDS; **ADJECTIVES** ARE YOUR ENEMIES

Action words bring energy and momentum to writing, and they involve the reader. Adjectives slow reading and waste word count. After you draft your essay, go back and cross out every adjective you can find. Next, re-write using as many action verbs as possible.

Poor example: *I did not like following the same, rutted trails that wind through the shady pine trees on my long hikes through the Sierra Nevada Mountains.*

Better example: *At times, hiking takes me off the path, and I scramble over rocks, sidle between trees, and dash through rivers to find my way.*

## 7. GO **A MILE DEEP**, NOT A MILE WIDE

Narrow your topic, and explore it completely. Do not try to tell everything about yourself in 500 words. This is not the place to rehash your entire resume. Choose one experience or theme to enhance the package of your grades and test scores.

## 8. A LIST OF DON'Ts

- Don't brag about what a wonderful or brilliant person you are
- Don't have a tone of "Oh poor me" because of a personal tragedy.
- Don't sound elitist or as if you think you are above the process
- Don't waste word count in complementing the college; they already know how great they are.
- Don't go out of your way to use big words; be natural
- Don't write about others; write about yourself
- Don't write a classic 5 paragraph essay; write an organized narrative.
- Unless specifically directed, don't pull out some dusty quote and write about it. Something personal is always better.

## 9. A LIST OF DOs

- Be **humble**; you may be brilliant, but you are also have much to learn
- Be sincere
- Show energy and passion
- Be interesting
- Be expressive
- Be quirky or unique
- Be vulnerable and admit weakness; show personal change and understanding of life's lessons
- Show how you see the world and your place in it
- Show how you will fit into the university community