

COLLEGE APP MISTAKES

The Top Three Things College Admissions Officers HATE to See in College Application Essays



College admissions officers are generally personable, generous, empathetic, even at times forgiving. But there are three things they absolutely positively will not forgive in college application essays and they are:

1. ARROGANCE

College admissions officers evaluate your application materials in the hope of finding the best and the brightest. But they also review your application to evaluate whether or not they want to live with you.

That's right. If that strikes you as odd, think of it this way: If you were considering inviting someone to share your home with you, wouldn't you want to know as much as possible about the character of your prospective housemate before extending the invitation?

We all would. And college admissions officers are no different.

It's that simple. If you represent yourself as arrogant, entitled, mean, selfish, or egotistical, no one's going to want to share space with you.

Confidence, on the other hand, is an attractive quality, and one you should represent in your essays.

HOW DO I KNOW IF I'M BEING CONFIDENT OR ARROGANT?

Find out if you are writing confidently or arrogantly:

CONFIDENT

A confident person is a self-assured person. *The Oxford English Dictionary* defines confidence as "a feeling of self-assurance arising from an appreciation of one's own abilities or qualities." Confident people don't have to demean others to show off their worth. Think of Michelle Obama. Michelle Obama is a confident person; she is not an arrogant person.

ARROGANT

Arrogant people typically represent their worth in relation to others, others they put down and demean. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines arrogance as "showing off an attitude of superiority." We all know arrogant people and we all do our best to shun their company. We certainly don't invite them to live with us.





Still not sure? Test yourself.

These were the first three sentences of a recent applicant's Common Application essay submitted to Vassar College:

- "Most people think I'm smarter than them. Including my teachers. That's because I am."

- Arrogant or confident?

Now consider this:

- "When I was appointed leader of the theatre club I was honored."

- Arrogant or confident?

Four Ways to Avoid Arrogance

1. When you describe your skills and qualifications, don't phrase them in relation to others. That will show lack of empathy. If you make your peers' work sound less important than yours, you will sound inflated and egotistical.

- Example: Because I was the smartest, I was chosen to lead the team.

- Revised version: Based on my skills and qualifications, I was chosen by my peers to lead the team.

- Example: All my life, I've been surrounded by unmotivated students.

- Revised version: I sought opportunities to be with people who shared my interests and concerns.

2. Don't boast about test scores and grades. That info shouldn't be in your essay anyway.

3. Do not in any way suggest that the colleges you are applying to should be lucky to have you. Rather, write how you know that the colleges are perfect for you because of what they offer.

4. Review your social media presence and scrub if necessary. The image you present in your application should be in accord with the image presented on social media. If you look self-important, conceited, bumptious, immodest, stuck-up, condescending, vain, or patronizing, you probably are, or so college admissions officers will think.





FINAL WORDS

When writing your essay remember that your purpose is to show the admissions officers that you are—above all else—likeable, somebody they might enjoy sharing space with. As Rachel Toor, a former admissions officer at Duke once wrote, “[an applicant’s] job is to make the college fall in love with you.”

Or at least make them like you a whole lot.

2. ESSAYS ABOUT SOMEONE ELSE

At a recent Boston College info session, an admissions officer cautioned potential applicants about what he called “my hero” essays. As he observed, “Parents and grandparents are often the subject of these essays. But *they* are not applying; *you* are.”

Your application essay is the primary vehicle through which admissions officers get a sense of who you are as a person, not just a set of pretty numbers. As such, you not only make a mistake but you also waste an opportunity when you devote your essay to someone else.

In addition, “my hero” essays tend to be sentimental and there’s nothing like saccharine, overblown hype to set an admissions officer’s teeth on edge.

However, if despite this caution, you choose to write about someone you love, make sure that the focus of the essay is on you and the choices you’ve made, not your hero.

3. ESSAYS THAT REPEAT INFORMATION ALREADY PROVIDED IN YOUR APP

College admissions officers read up to five, sometimes even six applications an hour. While they are generally likeable people, you don’t want to test their patience. And you will test their patience if you write as if you didn’t care about what you were doing or how your words are going to be read. They also won’t like it if your essay is littered with grammatical, punctuation, and spelling errors.

Admissions officers expect you to take your application seriously. They expect you to write thoughtfully. They expect a certain writerly decorum. If you write carelessly, you seem like you don’t really want to go to college.

The college application essay provides you with an opportunity to show off why you are not just qualified for admission, but ideally suited for admission. If you take yourself seriously, the reader will too.

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