

Make your case in college essay

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Think like a lawyer when preparing your application. Susan Goodkin of California Learning Strategies Center says that it's important for students to construct a case just as attorneys do when they're preparing for court. Be prepared, and understand how the information you provide will be viewed and compared with other students.

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Look at the totality of your application, which includes high school transcript, standardized test scores, letter(s) of recommendation, activity list and frequently an essay or two or three. The transcript tells a college what you've done. The test scores, according to some, offer a peek at your future potential. The essay tells the college about who you are.

The college essay is often cited as big stakes in the college admissions process. When a student presents the objective criteria that gets him or her in the door, (i.e., the rigor of coursework, the grades and test scores in a college's range), it is often the essay that gets a student a seat at the table.

Your job is to make sure the person reading your application remembers you, in a good way. Colleges are interested in students who will enrich their campus, and the essay is a great place to demonstrate what you can bring to the party. It's important to highlight what is distinctive about you, not only what you've done throughout your high school career, but what makes you unique: What are your foibles? When have you surprised yourself and other people? What relationships are most important to you?

The best way to share these kinds of details is to tell a story or an anecdote. It's fine to use dialogue or humor. Be selective about the characteristics you choose to share; it's not a laundry list of Boy Scout adjectives. As you learned in elementary school, the college essay is a time to "show, not tell." Susan Goodkin (www.learningstrategiescenter.com) gives a great example: Let's say you were trying to communicate your love of music. Don't say, "music is my passion." Instead, tell them about the first time you heard a symphony.

So what are you going to write about? Here are some good brainstorming thoughts to get the juices flowing:

Something that has changed the way I think is...

I made a difference in someone's life when I...

One of the funniest stories about me is when I...

Here are a few more essay tips:

Remember to isolate a small moment in time - a conversation, receiving a cherished keepsake, a meal, etc.

Be reflective - think about how you've been affected and possibly how you've influenced others.

Be yourself - use your own voice and write the essay yourself.

Eliminate clichés - saving the world, perseverance on the football field, etc.

Make your introduction enticing - make them want to read more. Drop the reader into the middle of the action.

Don't have a lengthy preamble - just tell them what you're going to tell them, once.

Cut, cut, cut - ask yourself whether every sentence fulfills a purpose. Just ask an admissions officer; during application reading time, being concise is considered a godlike quality.

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