50 Successful IVY LEAGUE Application Essays

Includes advice from college admissions officers and the 25 essay mistakes that guarantee failure

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25 Essay Mistakes That Guarantees Failure

For every open slot at an Ivy League college, there are 10 to 12 eager applicants vying for it—and you’re one of them. On paper, most applicants appear very similar. All are well qualified academically with high grades and test scores and solid involvement in extracurricular activities.

Imagine the admissions officer who must choose which of these well-deserving applications to accept. How will he or she make the decision? Often, it’s the essay. The essay is the one chance for you to share a piece of yourself that is not encapsulated in the dry numbers and scores of the application. It is your opportunity to demonstrate why you’d be a perfect fit at the college, how you’d contribute to the student body, and why the college should accept you over those other 11 applicants.

The essay is also the one part of your application that you have complete control over. You can write it the night before it’s due and turn in a
piece that is half-baked, or you can spend a little time on the essay and turn in one that can set you apart from the competition.

The truth is that you don't have to be a good writer to create a successful admissions essay. Nor do you need to have survived a life changing event or won a Noble Prize. Writing a successful admissions essay for an Ivy League college is actually much simpler.

The secret is that any topic can be a winner but it all depends on your approach. If you spend the time to analyze your subject and can convey that quality of thought that is unique to you through words, you'll have a powerful essay. It doesn't have to be beautifully written or crafted as the next great American novel. At its core the essay is not a “writing test.” It's a “thinking test.” So you do need to spend the time to make sure that your thoughts are conveyed correctly on paper. It may not be pretty writing but it has to be clear.

So how do you do this? While we can give you tips and pointers (which is what you'll read in the analysis section following every essay) the best method is to learn by example. You need to see what a successful end product looks like. While there is no single way to produce a winning essay, as you will read, there are some traits that successful essays share. You'll learn what these are by reading the examples in this book as well as the interviews with admissions officers. Then you can write a successful essay that is based on your own unique experiences, world view, way of thinking, and personal style.

Why are admissions essays so important to getting into Ivy League colleges? At their most basic level, essays help admissions officers to understand who you are. While grades, test scores, and academic performance can give the admissions officers an estimate on how prepared you are to handle the academic rigors of college, the essay offers the only way they can judge how your background, talents, experience, and personal strengths come together to make you the best candidate for their school. For you, the applicant, the admissions essays offer the best opportunity to share who you are beyond the dry stats of your academic record. It’s kind of amazing actually. You start with a blank sheet of paper and through careful selection, analysis, and writing, you create a picture of yourself that impresses the admissions officers and makes them want to have you attend their school.
Ultimately, this book is designed to help you create a successful essay that gets you accepted. It will guide you toward writing that essay by sharing with you the successes of others who have written to gain admission to Ivy League colleges as well as other highly selective schools such as MIT, Stanford, Caltech, Duke, and the University of Chicago.

If you’re like most students, you would like to know the magic formula for writing an admissions essay. Although we would love to be able to tell you, unfortunately, no such formula exists. Writing is so individual and the options so limitless that it’s impossible to develop a combination that will work for every essay. However, this doesn’t mean that we’re going to send you off with laptop in hand, without some guidance. Throughout this book you are going to see the “right way” to do things.

We thought it would be useful to start off with a few common mistakes that other students have made. You’ll want to avoid these. In fact, some of these mistakes are so bad that they will almost guarantee that your essay will fail. Avoid these at all costs!

1. **Trying to be someone else.** This may sound very obvious, and well, it is. But you’d be surprised at how many students don’t heed this simple piece of advice. A lot of students think that they need to be who the admissions officers want them to be; but, in reality, the admissions officers want you to be you. They aren’t looking for the perfect student who is committed to every subject area, volunteers wholeheartedly for every cause, plays multiple sports with aptitude, and has no faults. Instead, they want to learn about the true you. Present yourself in an honest way, and you will find it much easier to write an essay about your genuine thoughts and feelings.

2. **Choosing a topic that sounds good but that you don’t care about.** Many students think that colleges seek students who have performed a lot of community service, and it is true that colleges value contributions to your community. However, this doesn’t mean that you must write about community service, especially when it’s not something that has played a major role for you. The same holds true for any other topic. It’s critical that you select a
topic that's meaningful to you because you will be able to write about the topic in a complete and personal way.

3. **Not thinking before writing.** You should spend as much time thinking about what you will write as actually putting words on paper. This will help you weed out the topics that just don't go anywhere, determine which topic has the greatest pull for you, and figure out exactly what you want to say. It can help to talk yourself through your essay aloud or discuss your thoughts with a parent, teacher, or friend. The other person may see an angle or a flaw that you do not.

4. **Not answering the question.** While this seems simple enough, many students simply do not heed this. The advice is especially pertinent for those who recycle essays. We highly recommend recycling because it saves you time to write one essay that you use for many colleges, but the caveat is that you need to edit the essay so that it answers the question being asked. It turns admissions officers off when students submit an essay, even a well-written one, that doesn't answer the question. They think that the students either aren't serious enough about the college to submit an essay that has been specifically written or at least edited for that college, or that they just don't follow directions. Either way, that's not the impression you want to leave.

5. **Not sharing something about yourself.** As you know, the main purpose of the admissions essay is to impart something about yourself that's not found in the application. Still, many students forget this, especially when writing about a topic such as a person they'd like to meet or a favorite book or piece of literature. In these cases, they may write so much about why they admire the person or the plot of the book that they forget to show the connection to themselves. Always ask yourself if you are letting the admissions officers know something about yourself through your essay.

6. **Forgetting who your readers are.** Naturally you speak differently to your friends than your teachers; when it comes to the essay, some applicants essentially address the admissions officers with a too-friendly high five instead of a handshake. In other
words, it’s important to be yourself in the essay, but you should remember that the admissions officers are adults not peers. The essay should be comfortable but not too informal. Remember that adults generally have a more conservative view of what’s funny and what’s appropriate. The best way to make sure you’re hitting the right tone is to ask an adult to read your essay and give you feedback.

7. **Tackling too much of your life.** Because the essay offers a few hundred words to write about an aspect of your life, some students think that they need to cram in as many aspects of their life as possible. This is not the approach we recommend. An essay of 500 to 800 words doesn’t afford you the space to write about your 10 greatest accomplishments since birth or about everything that you did during your three-week summer program in Europe. Rather, the space can probably fit one or two accomplishments or one or two experiences from the summer program. Instead of trying to share your whole life, share what we call a slice of your life. By doing so, you will give your essay focus and you will have the space to cover the topic in greater depth.

8. **Having a boring introduction.** Students have started their essays by repeating the question asked and even stating their names. This does little to grab the attention of the admissions officers. Sure, they’ll read the whole essay, but it always helps to have a good start. Think about how you can describe a situation that you were in, convey something that you strongly believe in or share an anecdote that might not be expected. An introduction won’t make or break your essay, but it can start you off in the right direction.

9. **Latching on to an issue that you don’t really care about.** One of the prompts for the Common Application is, “Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.” The key to answering this question is to carefully think about these words: “its importance to you.” This is what students most often overlook. They select an issue and write about the issue itself, but they don’t really explain why it is important to them or how they see themselves making an impact. If you write about an issue, be sure to pick one that is truly