



## How to Prepare Your Students to Write Meaningful College Essays

by Kim Lifton

In the high-stakes world of college admissions, you will meet countless people who can tell you what colleges want in an essay. Most will not (or cannot) show your students how to write those essays.

You'll find outlines and templates for what the finished product should look like, or books with sample essays, and videos with limited instructions. Some will tell you to follow a template based on what type of experience or story the student wants to share. Gimmicks and shortcuts won't help because they don't work. We teach an approach, not a cookie-cutter template.

But you should know there's more than one way to write an application essay. It really doesn't matter if a student records a story into their phone or scribbles ideas with a pen on a legal pad. These are just tools to help the writer respond to the prompt. Before responding to any prompt, the student needs to find something meaningful to share. That's where you come into the picture.

### **Simplify your part in the college essay process**

Your job does not need to be so hard. Preparing your students to write college essays is one of the best ways to help them during an otherwise confusing and stressful time in their lives. Contrary to popular belief, writing is not the challenge here. Exploring who a student is, what matters to them and how they exhibit those traits or characteristics in the world, is the tough part. It's also the most important part.

Why? Students and parents care about topics;

admission officers care about insight.

Want to make your process move more smoothly? Start at the beginning of the process, not with an editor's red pen at the end. You can be most effective in the college essay coaching process if you teach your students how to reflect and explore their most positive qualities upfront. If that happens, the rest of the process will move along much more smoothly.

Before your students start writing, selecting a prompt or picking a topic, they need to know which defining traits and characteristics are important enough to share with colleges. That's the first step toward reflection.

Too many students get hung up on the topic of the college essay, long before they are even ready to start the application process. They start by looking for activities that might lead to stories and devote a lot of time talking about their experiences and their accomplishments. That's why college essays seem so difficult. Students start in the middle without even knowing they skipped the first part of the process.

We suggest that you help students take two steps back if they want to start by picking topics. Just tell your students to put the topic aside while they focus instead on traits and characteristics.

### **Why Does a Student's Story Matter?**

Students can make their applications pop by sharing stories that illustrate what they learned from any experience or what the experience shows

about them. What happened to the student is important, but why it matters is critical.

We know it's hard for students to identify their best features. They'd rather talk about accomplishments. They think about the future: where they will live, what job they might have, and a trip around the world. What's more, most of them have had very little or no practice writing about themselves or being reflective. You can guide them.

We're going to share our best approach to helping teens look inward, so they can find meaning in any experience. The effort can make the difference between a flat essay that bores the admissions office and one that shines. This should make the essay experience much less daunting.

### **You can use these questions to get started:**

- **What three words would your best friend use to describe you to a new student who came to your school?**
- **What do you like to do when you are not at school?**
- **What do your friends say about you? Are you a problem-solver? Do you like a challenge?**
- **I think you are \_\_\_\_\_ (these traits). What do you think?**
- **If you were standing on a stage, and five people you never met were in the audience interviewing you for your dream job, what would you want them to know about you that they couldn't find from reading your resume?**
- **What makes you great?**

Whatever you do, keep the questions open-ended. Whether they are part of a conversation, or you introduce them as part of a college essay workshop, avoid yes and no questions. Stay in the present. Ask probing questions. This activity will prepare

you to ask the question we ask all of our students before they start writing anything: *What do you want colleges to know about you beyond test scores, grades and extracurricular activities?*



### **The student's answer will guide the essay.**

Point out to students that they can respond to this prompt by sharing any type of story — a description of a significant conversation, a time when they realized something personally important — anything that truly and vividly demonstrates who they are. A student need not climb a mountain or travel to another country. Babysitting or making meatballs with grandma, navigating an icy highway or playing basketball with friends works, too.

The why (the learning or insight) is more important than the what (the experience). When working with your students, keep asking the key question we use with our students, and make sure they have a clear answer before settling on an essay topic.

If you get stuck, “why?” is always a good question. We ask our students “why?” all the time.

### **What are Colleges Really Looking for in an Essay?**

Shawn Felton, the Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Cornell University, reviews thousands of applications each admissions cycle. That's a lot of entrance essays. What delights him? A story that rounds out an applicant's package, and an essay that helps him understand who the person is.

“We want to put a face to the pile of paper,” Felton explains. “It is part of a number of identifiers that deliver who you are as a person.”

“The essay is not something to be cracked,” he cautions.

Whenever we ask, admissions professionals like Felton, tell us exactly what they are looking for in a personal statement. One thing is certain: The personal statement provides an opportunity for students to show people who may never meet them just what kind of person they are.

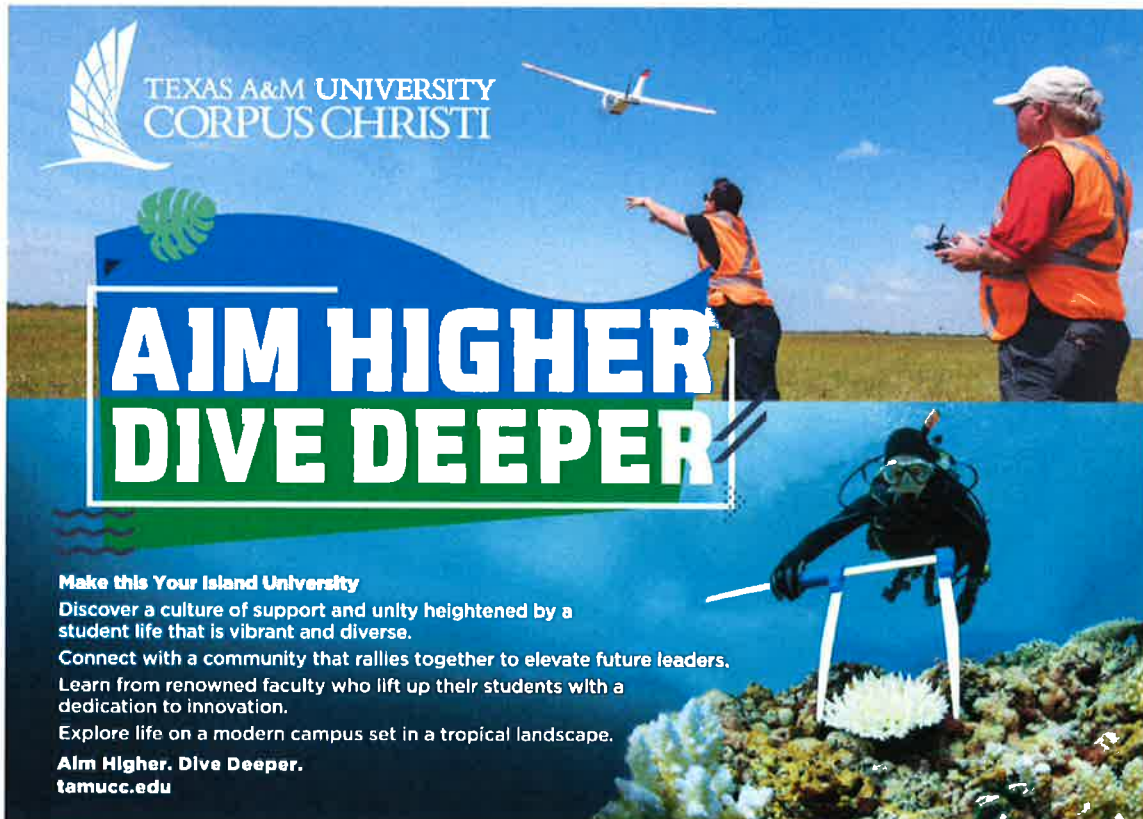
Colleges use the essays in different ways, so it's important that you help students understand that there is no rubric for a good essay, but the ones that stand out all share a few common features. Regardless of the prompt, they:

- **Answer the question.**
- **Showcase a positive trait or characteristic.**
- **Sound like a high school student.**
- **Illustrate something meaningful about the student.**
- **Demonstrate reflection.**

The key word here is *reflection*. The essay should always show insight into who the student is. Does the experience they write about have to be earth shattering? No. Does it have to illustrate an “aha” moment? Not at all. It is a reflection on something that has meaning to the applicant. It doesn't matter what that is. There's no magic answer. No secret sauce. Not even a shortcut. The essay is one (very important) piece of a holistic admission process.

Many of the best stories we've read focus on mundane moments when a student shows insight. Admissions professionals from Vanderbilt, Santa Clara, Denison and Rice universities shared some additional perspective with us.

- Jan Deike, Assistant Director of Admissions, Vanderbilt University: “Life is truly lived in the smaller moments, and that can make a powerful essay. But sometimes students feel that because they haven't found the cure for cancer, they have nothing to share.”
- Lorenzo Gamboa, Senior Associate Director of Undergraduate Admission for Santa Clara University: The best personal statements focus on “one place, one time, one moment.”



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The graphic features a blue sky with a white sailboat logo and a small airplane flying. Below the sky, two people in orange safety vests are on a grassy field; one is pointing towards the sky while the other holds a remote control. The bottom half of the graphic shows a scuba diver underwater, holding a white frame over a coral reef. The text 'AIM HIGHER DIVE DEEPER' is prominently displayed in a white box with a green border.

- Gregory Sneed, Vice President of Enrollment, Denison University: "The topic of the essay doesn't need to be mind-blowing, in fact the most mundane topics are often the most relatable and enjoyable. But if it reveals someone who would be highly valued in our campus community, that could tip the scales."
- Tamara Siler, Senior Associate Director of Admission, Rice University: "Focus on a moment you feel has defined you as a person, and as a student."

As UC Berkeley's Assistant Vice Chancellor and Director of Undergraduate Admissions Amy Jarich explains, she just wants to know what potential UC students care about: "What would you tell me in an elevator? Let me know that you're active and alive in the world you live in."

## The Essay Will Continue to Grow in Importance

As you know, the competition to get into the nation's top colleges gets tougher every year, but that's not because students are smarter or more qualified than they were five or ten years ago.

It's a simple matter of impossible math. Year after year, more kids apply for the same number of available spaces at the most selective schools. It is impossible for them all to get in.

With more perspective, parents and students alike can take a deep breath and calm down a bit. You can help by sharing this insight with them.

Because it is so hard to get into the top name-brand schools (think Stanford, Harvard, UC Berkeley, MIT, Vanderbilt, Columbia, University of Chicago, to name a few), the students who are qualified for the most selective colleges look elsewhere to improve their chances. They use modern technology to apply to more schools than they might have otherwise considered.

Furthermore, because students can apply to so many schools using the Common Application and other platforms, students frequently check boxes for schools they might normally ignore if more effort were required. This practice helps colleges increase their applicant pool. It works well for schools because it makes them look more selective.

If a school can accept only 1,200 students and 6,000 apply, the admit rate — or the percentage of students the school accepts — will be 20%. If 12,000 apply, the college will enroll the same number of first-year students, but the admit rate will plummet to 10%. On paper, it will look like this college has become more selective ("We accept only 10% of applicants.") Needless to say, this practice can be challenging for parents who just want to get their kids off to a good college.

The University of California asks students to choose four out of eight Personal Insight Questions. Many institutions in Texas use the ApplyTexas application, with its own personal statement prompts. Scores of schools have begun accepting the Coalition application, which also offers several personal statement choices. And many state universities ask their own personal statement questions on their independent applications. While we cannot predict what the admissions process will look like in the future, all evidence indicates the essay will remain — and it will continue to grow in importance.

*Kim Lifton is President of Wow Writing Workshop, a strategic communication and writing services company with a team of professional writers and teachers who understand the writing process inside and out. Kim, a former journalist, speaks with senior admissions officers from the nation's most selective colleges all the time. Wow works directly with students, and trains school counselors, English teachers and independent educational consultants who want to improve their essay-coaching skills. Wow also offers professional communication and writing services (social media and blogging seminars) to businesses and nonprofits. Check out their tips and sample essays at [www.wowwritingworkshop.com/just-for-counselors](http://www.wowwritingworkshop.com/just-for-counselors).*