



Get to the point!

Writing Your College Application Personal Statement Essay

What is the point of the college application personal statement essay?

Much of the college application is quantitative — for example, GPA and standardized tests scores. The Personal Statement Essay is the college's effort to humanize the process and to add a qualitative element to the admissions decisions. The application readers want to know something about the applicant as a person.

Therefore, the first thing your teen needs to decide is what he wants the College Admissions Office to know about him that isn't already spelled out in his application. Remind him to take some time to consider this. He may have to spend a bit of time on identity development. He should consider the following: Who am I? What's important to me? Do my activities, classes, and accomplishments point to a special interest, passion, trait, or commitment that I want to further develop?

Try this exercise:

When the admissions representative is finished reading your teen's essay, what is the one thing she wants the reader to learn about her? "Wow, this student sure is _____!" Be sure she can confidently answer this question prior to beginning her rough draft.

Get started.

Now, how will she get her message across without just blurting it out? Remind her to put herself in the reader's chair for a moment. Most admissions officers read hundreds of essays over a period of two to three months. This may get a bit tedious, so it's okay if she considers something unique or unusual. Remind her to feel free to entertain, educate, or persuade as she develops her message. She might consider telling a story that only she can tell, perhaps a story that screams perseverance or one that hints at innovation and creativity. Descriptive words, powerful verbs, and lots of details paint a picture that makes the reader feel like she is right there with the writer. Remember that her goal is to get the reader to know her—not her favorite French teacher, her father who sacrificed to bring her to this country, or her favorite author. The readers may, however, want to know how one of these people has inspired her or made her who she is today. The focus should be on her!

You're not in Kansas anymore.

Your teen should realize that his college essay is not an English assignment that will be graded by his teacher. He may have mastered the "summary statement" to kick off his term paper, but he should save that for his SAT Writing test. The best college application essay draws the reader into the essay and allows the story to unfold. He might consider beginning his essay with a statement or question that causes the reader to think, "Hmm, I wonder what this student is going to talk about?" and ending with, "Oh, I get it!" He might want to start his essay in the middle of his story for a more intriguing, eye-catching beginning: "Clutching my guide rope and flailing for a toe-hold, I thought longingly of the hot chocolate that awaited me at base camp."

He'll want to be specific. Sometimes our small daily rituals tell more about us than the big awards we win. Some students choose to humbly tell a story about a failure and what they learned from it. As long as it holds a powerful message, the story will accomplish his goal.

Cross your "T"s and dot your "I"s.

As your student dives into the creative writing process, it's important to remind him to be mindful of a few rules associated with writing these essays. First, he must read the prompts and make certain his response answers the whole prompt (some prompts will have several questions that should be addressed). He should also understand if the prompt is looking for a more creative style response — sometimes called a "dinner-time conversation," versus a more direct response, referred to as "interview style." If a college prefers the "interview style" response, students should be careful to answer more directly with plenty of detail. Finally, grammar and punctuation errors can be distracting. Your student should review for grammar, spelling, and overall flow of the essay. He should use transition words, statements or sentences to make sure the ideas are connected in a logical flow. Avoid any errors — mistakes only draw negative attention to the application.

It's about telling your story.

There is a movement toward innovative options for students to share their stories with admission officers. Many schools now offer the option to supplement the traditional personal statement essay with an uploaded image, video, or document file— these files could reflect music, artwork, graded high school paper, robotics schema, and more. The Common Application uses the SlideRoom to allow students to upload content when applicable. And many of the colleges that are members of the new Coalition for Access and Affordability and Success (CAAS) application allow students to better distinguish themselves through uploaded files. Encourage your student to consider being creative in showcasing her unique interests and accomplishments.

You gotta be real.

Be sure your teen uses her voice, explaining any slang or technical jargon. Remember she shouldn't make things up or fall prey to exaggeration. She should be real — this is her chance for the admissions office to get to know her. Read her essay aloud and be sure it sounds like her voice. She may ask a few people to review her application, and then read her essay. The essay should complete her application and convey something about her as a person. This is your teen's chance to make her point!