

What are some common mistakes applicants make?

Many essays fall short because they only describe something important but leave it to the reader's imagination to discover why it is important. Don't do this. Tell the reader why this matters to you and what it should tell them about who you are. You should also be careful when using a thesaurus. Admission committees are looking to see that if you are a strong writer, but using too many adjectives can be problematic and distracting. Remember other laws of writing--avoid excessive use of exclamation points, be careful with commas, don't overuse capital letters, etc. And finally, make sure that a parent, teacher, or counselor has read your essay. No matter how many times you read your own writing, or how many times you spell-check your work, you will miss small errors because you are so familiar (we hope) with your essay at that point.

How many evaluators might read my essay?

At a school like Puget Sound, anywhere from one to ten. At Puget Sound, the admission counselor responsible for the area where you live reads your application first, and can decide whether to admit that candidate if their paperwork looks unusually strong. Typically, two to three admission counselors read the average file. If there are disagreements about the admission decision, or unusual circumstances, the application goes to the "admission committee," a group of ten-or-so admission professionals who review the file as a group and make decisions at that point.

Who is my audience? Am I writing for older or younger counselors? With what interests?

When you write your college essay, you write for a number of ages, audiences, and interests. Often students write unnaturally formal essays, believing admission committees are stuffy and serious. While admission counselors definitely take their jobs seriously, they are also interested in an accurate appraisal of a student--helped, in large part, by a funny essay, an offbeat essay, an honest essay, and so on. At a school like Puget Sound, the staff is professional, with a great sense of humor, and includes recent college graduates (not much older than yourselves!), alumni of the institution, and folks who attended or worked for other colleges previously.

Do schools care if I write about something completely different?

At Puget Sound, specifically, the admission staff neither views you as less original if you use a topic from our list, nor as unable to follow directions if you write something creative. As long as the essay is well written and says something about you, our staff will not "freak out" if you choose a topic on your own. In fact, most students do.

Certainly, if a college lists very specific essay topics, and does not allow the option of writing on an independent topic, follow that school's instructions.

Should I automatically write about something serious if something serious happened to me?

Not necessarily. An occasional complaint among some students is that they don't have a "brush with death" about which to write in their college essays. Such an encounter is not critical for a powerful writing sample. Often something seemingly small can be unusually moving--like the student who wrote an essay for Puget Sound about collecting Pez dispensers with his dad. It was more about their relationship than about Pez, and more moving than many essays I've read. If you feel, however, that a serious or traumatic event helped define you as a person, changed your opinion about life, or affected your academic record, it is definitely worthwhile to include as much information about that event as you're comfortable sharing in your application.

What about a humorous essay? How "goofy" is too goofy?

I'm a fan of "funny"--and you'd be surprised how many admission professionals are, also. This is true, however, only if you're comfortable with that voice in your essay. As a college-bound high school student with a good sense of humor, I was not entirely comfortable using humor in my essay. As a result, I wrote about a more serious topic. Your comfort level as a writer is a huge factor in a successful essay, and you might fall flat if you attempt to make a committee laugh when you're not at ease with your sense of humor on paper. The more natural you sound, the better. If you, comfortably, can discuss Scooby Doo, or your summer working in a photo booth, or your "car which resembles a blue U.F.O." (all recent, and very funny, Puget Sound essays), go for it!

What "original" topics do colleges see with surprising frequency?

Students write regularly about their mission and/or volunteer trips out of the country, on outdoor experiences they have, on sports injuries, and on domestic and international travels. While students are more than welcome to write on these topics, students should know that the writing sample should focus on a very specific experience associated with one of the above events, or should be particularly unusual. Knowing that admission offices see an outrageous number of essays on these topics, students should take pains to make essays about one of the above stand out.

Is there a "right answer" if a college asks, "Who belongs on a modern day Mt. Rushmore?"

Likely, no. A specific question does not necessarily have a specific answer. If one of your applications has an unusual question, brainstorm a list of possible answers, make

a clear argument, and support your argument well. Again, this is another opportunity to show colleges who you are and what you care about.

When a college asks "Why would you like to attend our school?" - how should I proceed?

First, since this question appears regularly on different applications, avoid writing one response in which you insert the names of different colleges. A response which uses the formula, "I want to attend (insert name of college), because (insert name of college) is pretty and the students seem nice" will seem exactly that--formulaic and transparent. When I read responses to our "Why would you like to attend Puget Sound?" portion, I am most impressed by students who have done their homework. Nothing is more enticing to someone who talks about a college all day than hearing those messages "stuck" with students: "Puget Sound appeals to me because I want to attend a college where 75% of the students come from states outside of Washington. I've lived in Marysville my entire life, and I look forward to the perspectives of students from Kansas, and from Virginia, and from Alaska. Additionally, I see myself on a residential campus, in a cool neighborhood, with impressive medical school admission rates." If you met someone--tour guide, admission counselor, current student, your uncle who is a graduate--who helped you decide to apply, drop their name casually in this "Why?" passage. It doesn't hurt.

What if a school asks me to describe a significant experience?

Think "interesting," not "significant" experiences. Sara Myers McGinty, author of *Writing Your College Application Essay*, notes that "the pressure to be 'significant' simply pushes writers toward vague, abstract topics like death and divorce." While there is nothing wrong with either of those topics, the notion of "significant" puts pressure on a student to develop something weighty, when colleges are just as interested in comparatively "light" topics which still say something powerful about the applicant. You might write about one experience which changed your opinion or your viewpoint of something, made you regret your decision, or made you respect someone less.

How should I handle short answer questions?

With as much care as you put into the formal essay, although one college professional said in a 1995 New York Times article, "The students polish their long essays, but lots of times they're off guard--and much more revealing--in responding to the short-answer questions." To admission counselors, the short answers can be refreshing, and often the most fun to read--they capture, in a quick blurb, how a student feels about a very specific question, or how the student feels about the college in a nutshell. Know, however, that you're usually not limited to the space provided (unless the school says

otherwise--read the instructions carefully) and can submit your short answers on separate pieces of paper.

Can I send extra writing samples? What should I send? Will someone actually read these?

Often, students feel as if creative writing, a graded paper, poetry, journal entries, or articles written for the school paper enhance the application and provide more details about their ability to write. Unless the application says otherwise, most colleges welcome additional samples and will read whatever you send. Know, however, that you need not scrounge up fifty pages of creative writing which does not already exist. If you have additional samples you like, if they're easily sent and not a pain to reproduce, and if the college has not advised you otherwise, send them along!

Is the essay the best place to explain any circumstances which affected me academically?

The essay can be a good place to explain in more detail why things look the way they do on your transcript, or why stumbles occurred in high school. You can, however, also write a separate letter explaining those circumstances if you'd like to write your essay on another topic. If you feel comfortable doing so, you should find a way to explain "bumps" in your academic record someplace in your application.

Do I need to stick to the essay length suggested by the college?

At Puget Sound, the admission staff has no problem if you write more than the rough guideline of 300-500 words, and admission counselors will read longer essays in their entirety. That said, there is no need to send an essay which numbers twenty-five pages. Plain and simple, it's more work for you. Read instructions carefully; If school specifically states "no more than" a certain number of words, follow their guidelines. Following directions is another, albeit oft-overlooked, part of the application process.

Should I just re-work something I've already used for a class assignment?

Sometimes, a piece of writing which originally served as "My Essay on *The Great Gatsby*" will sound like "My Re-Hashed AP English Essay on *The Great Gatsby* Which is Now My College Essay on How Much I Love *The Great Gatsby*." That said, save all writing, knowing that supposedly "finished" writing remains a work in progress, and students often find snippets of old writing which inspire college essays or essays for scholarship competitions. If you wrote your college essay as a class assignment, and you're happy with the product, send it to as many schools as will accept it.

Can't I just print a pre-written essay off the Internet and save myself the hassle?

Er, nope. For one, we college folks are pretty savvy. My colleagues and I read thousands of applications, every year, year after year. Most admission professionals are familiar with the content (or at least the tone) of essays discovered on-line. When a student's essay sounds little like the rest of the application (or, when it sounds like your mom wrote it, for that matter), colleges investigate, or request extra writing samples. More than anything, you don't want to put your application in jeopardy. And, you'll be expected to write in college--you'd better get used to it now.

What should I do with my essay after I send it to the college?

Without question, save your college application essay, and save as much of your high school writing as possible until you are well into college. Again, you might find you can submit your essay (or a revised version) for scholarship consideration, and your essay might prove a decent jumping off point for more writing at the university-level--where you'll be soon enough.