

# The Importance of the College Essay

Schools that require essays and personal statements require them for a reason. They need to know who you are. Stanford could fill its freshman class solely with valedictorians-people whose grades are spotless, who captained varsity teams, who volunteered 4000 hours, or who did research at NASA during the summer. Yet Stanford, and other selective schools, reject many of these "perfect people" every year in favor of those whose grades and scores might not seem competitive in comparison. Why do they do this? Because they try to look at the whole person. One of the ways admissions officers get to know potential students' perceptions and personalities is through the college application essay.

Ask yourself: Does my SAT (and ACT) score tell everything about me? Probably not.

In the rigid application system of fill-in-the-blank and check-those-applicable, the essay or personal statement is the one place where you can express your internal self. Your external self-your grades, scores, activities, service, employment-is thoroughly documented in the rest of the application.

Although the admission committee might not accept or reject you on the basis of a single application element, the right essay can tip the balance in your favor. If your grades are dubious, a creative, coherent piece of writing might be the evidence an admissions team needs to take the risk and admit you. They want to hear your voice.

An admissions team is interested in both the content of your essay, and your ability to use language. Don't fall into the trap of using your most exciting experience as an essay topic and forgetting that the writing is equally important. Does the itinerary of your trip to Europe let them know what a creative, sensitive, thoughtful, interesting person you are? Nope. It probably tells them that your parents could afford the plane ticket, or that you had a good travel agent.

You are an expert.

Relax. Regardless of the guise ("Describe your most significant educational experience," "If you could be a historical figure for one day, who would you choose and why," etc.), the essay should be about you. This is good news! You are an expert on you.

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