

COLLEGE ESSAY

ASSUMPTIONS and their IMPLICATIONS

- They've seen your transcripts, test scores and extracurricular stuff. **SO DON'T REPEAT ANYTHING FROM THERE.**
- GPA, test scores and activities trigger a **RATIONAL** evaluation of you. Thus, your essay is your best chance to trigger an **EMOTIONAL** response.
- The reader spends less than **ONE** minute skimming the essay; they are inundated by them. **GRAB THEM QUICKLY/DON'T OVERSTAY YOUR WELCOME.**
- Many topics are common—illnesses, tragedies, etc. If you go that route, you **MUST** be **SINCERE/AUTHENTIC** and the event (cause) must produce an **UNCOMMON** effect (change in you).
- You are not a good enough writer to fake sincerity—**THEY WILL SEE IT!**
- Readers hate to be lectured—**DON'T LECTURE.**
- Readers love a good story—**TELL ONE.**
- Given your word limits, you can only communicate **ONE THING WELL.**

GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- **LESS IS MORE:** architectural truism that states that cleaner, simpler, shorter, more efficient narratives pack a larger emotional punch—they are unadorned by clutter, and thus allow for greater focus on the things that matter.
- **SHOW, DON'T TELL:** a newspaper term espousing the principle of “word illustration”—finding descriptive language that paints a **VIVID VISUAL PICTURE** which dramatizes your main idea or theme.
- **ENTER LATE, LEAVE EARLY:** a screenwriting term which urges all scenes to begin **AS LATE AS POSSIBLE** before the scene's crucial moment—and **ENDS AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE** afterward. Only the essential moment remains.

THE PARADIGM

- What **SINGLE** essential characteristic about yourself does your answer need to convey? Express it in a philosophy statement: *Success is a process. Suffering is essential. Love is the ultimate gift.*
- What brief, emotionally impactful (funny, tragic, sad, poignant, tragic-comic...) anecdote symbolizes this characteristic, indicates its origin, or explains a profound change in you (depending on the question)?

PROCESS

Don't start by thinking of anecdotes!!

Begin by determining *WHAT SINGLE THING YOU NEED TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT YOURSELF*. Again: express it as a philosophy, in a statement—struggle builds character; setbacks are temporary.

THEN consider possible anecdotes.

Is there a unique element (situation, outcome, point of view, culture)?

Will it provoke emotion?

Does it lend itself to vivid description—physical, emotional, or both?

IS IT A SINGLE MOMENT—a scene in a movie? No epics!

After choosing, identify 3-4 KEY DETAILS—Sensory and Emotional: how cold the water was; how it felt when you gasped; the smell of a cleaning product in the hospital; your fear, sadness, emptiness, numbness, rage, jealousy, elation, joy, desire...

(MAKE SURE THESE ARE SPREAD THROUGHOUT STORY—*FIRST LINE* AND *LAST LINE* FOR SURE!!!)

List the key details, and use one of the following devices to animate it:

Metaphor: “My sister was a prairie flower, a rare splash of audacious color in a vast brown world.”

Simile: “The shock of her comment came with a three second delay—like her words had released the grip on a hand grenade, prolonging the wait for the inevitable concussive blast.”

Vivid, specific VERB: Nobody “walks.” They amble, stagger, skulk, race, rocket, scamper, etc.

Nuanced Adjective or Adverb: “*audacious color*” (rather than “bright”); “*decadent hunger*” (rather than ravenous); “*she laughed haltingly*.”

OR COMBO PLATTERS: “*she laughed haltingly, like a lawn mower sputtering to start itself*.”

STRUCTURE

1. Opening Anecdote that illustrates the key idea/theme/answers particular question. (50% - 75% of words)
2. An explicit explanation of the story, clearly indicating what it illustrates about you—lesson learned, insight gained, change in you, etc.

Sub Structure:

Part I: The Story

- a) Opening image—vivid; disorienting
- b) Set the scene
- c) Describe the event
- d) Indicate EMOTION with “feeling” statements: “I felt empty.” “I felt paralyzed.” Etc.
- e) Closing image

Part II: The Impact

- a) Philosophy statement: “That night I learned that love was worth any cost...”
- b) Return to KEY moment of story: “When my leg shattered, I knew...”
- c) Clearly indicate change/impact/effect: “Now, instead of running from adversity, I will turn and embrace it, enthusiastically.”