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College Essay: Finger Trap?



Be yourself. Who else can you be? Well, lots of people, and that's the problem. The problem is, many students (and the people who advise them during the college application process) succumb to certain understandable pressures and conceive the college essay in terms of the imagined expectations of its imminent reviewers, an impersonal panel of stodgy admissions veterans, who have seen everything under the sun, and therefore need to be dazzled in the most clever and noteworthy way to favor anyone. Nothing could be further from the truth. In fact, that kind of thinking is like a classic

Finger Trap: the more you try, the more it binds you. The real solution is to relax and be natural.

The most impressive thing that college candidates can do when presenting themselves in essay form is to share from genuine experience and demonstrate genuine reflection about it, preferably the kind that indicates *believable learning* and *believable growth*. There are several reasons why this approach works best, and *believe me*, it does. Every Fall I work with dozens of high school seniors on their college essays and I'm there in the Spring when the results come. Time and again the data indicate that authenticity gets the better returns, while gimmicks and cleverness generally tank, a sad thing to witness, and doubly sad for the students who live that outcome.

The first reason for it is that you stand out in the wrong way when you present something clever. Yes, the reviewers notice you more, but what they remember most is that someone else must've conceived your essay for you. Imagine an adult reading an essay about a student's love of golf, and the essay has paragraph titles bearing the names and numbers of golf clubs, so that the introduction equates to a long-range shot from the tee with the title "Driver", the second paragraph is the advance to the green with the title "9-iron", and eventually the concluding section (titled "Putter") is the ball going into the hole. I do applaud the wit that goes into such arrangements, but their lasting impression is never what students hope for. Students hope to receive acclaim, to be regarded as superlative essayists. Instead, they stand out as examples of someone who is not entirely ready for college because they lack deeper involvement in their life experience and are trying to cover up for what's missing with a glossy veneer, fooling no one.

The second point is the degree to which being genuine shines and inspires in our cold, cruel world. Okay, the world is not always cold and cruel, but there is certainly a cutthroat aspect to the giant slush piles of college essays out there every year. The surest way to keep yours off such a pile—and to keep it passing between the hands of the people who send acceptances—is to contact their humanity with honest, often simple words. The best thing a student can do is to be himself or herself. From that starting point, there is truth, and truth about oneself invites a reader in, especially if zero time is

misused impressing anyone. Once the reader is in, he or she naturally and eagerly shares in the writer's further discoveries—also known as *introspection*, a profoundly attractive quality in a high school age human, or anyone for that matter. When a member of an admissions board sees that a candidate has chosen to prioritize true introspection in life and in a first-contact essay, the likelihood of favoring that candidate climbs rapidly. So long slush pile; hello second and third readers.

My goal for your children is to increase the likelihood that they will get into the college that is best for them. Which one that is differs from student to student, but how to make it happen stays the same. The essential paradox in the essay is that students have to overcome all inclinations to manufacture specialness so that what is truly special about them comes directly into focus for their readers to appreciate. It is the only way anyone *will appreciate it*. Now consider what can happen when the right person does. A student spends 4 years creating a transcript and doing favorable extracurricular activities. That's 4 years and those items bear roughly 50% of the weight in the overall college application. The remaining portion splits more or less evenly between board scores and—you got it!—the college essay. On one slice of paper that takes only a few sittings to fill up well, a student stakes 25% of the claim to any college. This immense stakes-to-time ratio is therefore a huge win when your essay succeeds. It is also, understandably, why students lapse into ineffectiveness or artifice without the proper guidance.