

# The College Admissions Essay: Do's and Don'ts



By Nikkee Porcaro

The early decision/early action deadlines may have already passed for many colleges — many have

Nov. 1 or Nov. 15 application deadlines for priority admission — but regular decision deadlines aren't until December, January, or even February for most schools. That means there are still tons of opportunities to submit a memorable, poignant, or hilarious essay that gains you entry to the school of your dreams.

Having worked with students on their college and graduate school essays for the better part of 10 years, allow me to share some do's and don'ts I've learned over the past decade.

## Do:

### Think small picture, not big picture.

Many students want to write about the big championship game, the parent who conquered cancer, or the major tragic life event. These rarely show much about the student themselves. Think small: What small events/traits/values allow the school to see the layers of you? How can you use a seemingly small-scale event to paint a bigger picture of what makes you unique?

**Proofread.** Yes, you've heard it before, but it needs to be said again. I once had a student applying to the Hankamer School of Business at Baylor Univer-

sity spell it "Hammeraker" throughout his essay. (Not even close!) Other students have done the infamous "reuse an essay but forget to change the college name" trick. It's also very awkward when you think you typed the word "public" but accidentally typed "pubic" instead. Spellcheck won't save you from that hot mess. Proofread, I beg you.

**Be funny ... if appropriate.** Admissions officers are reading thousands of essays — sometimes tens of thousands — and can get burned out easily. If you can inject some humor into your essay, it can go a long way. Humor can be tricky since it is highly subjective, but jokes about pop culture or a relatable embarrassing situation can be a breath of fresh air to an overworked admissions officer.

## Don't:

**Have your parents write it for you.** I see this a lot; honestly, it's easy to tell, especially for admissions officers who have been doing this for years. Trust your child to represent him or herself, and examine your own ethics. This is not to say you can't offer assistance (after all, it's a big part of what we do at No Anxiety Prep), but a middle-aged woman's voice is quite different from a teenage boy's. Colleges have also gone on record saying admissions essays written by parents are a major reason they reject students.

**Write about camp.** If there is one thing every admissions officer, counselor, or educational consultant would probably agree

on, it is no more camp stories. There is the rare exception that works (probably because it uses camp as a vehicle to explain something else), but camp is unfortunately a very basic and ubiquitous experience for most kids and does little to make you stand out. Please, no more camp.



(SOURCE: PEXELS)

**Tackle risque or controversial topics.** Seems like an obvious one, but I've had kids make jokes about guns on campus, subtly put down other religions, or want to write about drugs and sex. Even if you're applying to institutions that encourage healthy debate and discussion about a variety of topics, be very careful about just how "creative" you are.

Finally, it's also really important to remember that outside critique of your es-

say should be taken with a grain of salt. That's not to say that friends, parents, and English teachers don't bring value to the table; rather, the college essay is a different piece of writing than what you've done in class or what your loved ones may want to see. Seeking feedback is wonderful, but don't lose your own voice or direction because of pressure from someone else. Ulti-

mately, what you submit should be your decision and no one else's. Be genuine, be relatable, be engaging, and be passionate; those are the traits that will net you the sought-after "fat envelope" of acceptance.

Nikkee Porcaro is the founder and president of No Anxiety Prep International, a Greater Washington area-based educational consulting firm that assists students with their educational goals. You can contact her at [nikkee@noanxietyprep.com](mailto:nikkee@noanxietyprep.com).