



Bearing Witness: College Admissions Essay Writing Coaching
www.bearingwitnessadmissions.com -- bearingwitnessadmissions@gmail.com

The average student attends school 180 days each year. Multiply that by 12 years and by the time you graduate you get 2,160 compulsory school days. You would think after all that reading, writing, studying, test-taking, and amassing of extracurricular and civic engagements that writing a college admissions essay would be a breeze. For many, however, that could not be further from the truth.

Sadly, somewhere around seventh grade, American schools shift from an emphasis on narrative and descriptive writing to expository and persuasive writing. As most of college and university admissions departments favor narrative and descriptive essays, even advanced high school writers may find the college admissions essay difficult to write.

The author of several acclaimed personal narratives, including the groundbreaking and National Endowment for the Arts (NEA), funded "Sitting in Circles with Rich White Girls: Memoirs of a Bulimic Black Boy." I have spent the past eight years leading writing workshops at over 70 colleges and universities, making me uniquely skilled at helping students write heartfelt, authentic, and compelling admissions essays – the kind of essays that invite admissions officers into the writer's life to experience it firsthand.

Here are "5 Things To Know Before Writing Your College Personal Statement" and "10 Tips For Writing Admission-Worthy Essays." Additional tips, tools, videos, exercises, writing prompts, examples, and information on our one-on-one services, which range from essay review to comprehensive start to finish coaching, can be found at **bearingwitnessadmissions.com**

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5 Things To Know Before Writing Your Personal Statement

What admissions officers *really* want to know

At the heart of all personal statements is a desire to know “Who are you?” “How will you benefit by being admitted?” and “How will the university benefit by admitting you?” Many students forget to answer the last one. Think of your essay as your opportunity to show the university what you will bring to the relationship. What makes you more dateable than their thousands of other suitors.

The difference between an Average Personal Statement and a Standout Personal Statement

While your personal statement need not win a prestigious writing award you do want to stand-out from those telling similar stories. Personal statements consist of three main ingredients: The topic, connections, and writing style. Average personal statements consist of **common** topics, connections and writing style. Standout personal statements consist of **uncommon** topics, connections and writing style. Given the shared experiences of high school seniors, finding an uncommon topic or writing style is difficult. The good news. Even common topics have uncommon connections. These essays are often amazing.

For example, sports are a common topic among personal statements. Knowing this, put yourself in the essay reader’s seat. Would you rather read another essay about teamwork, perseverance, camaraderie, and discipline or an essay on how playing competitive sports took the applicant to different parts of town, exposing them to racial and class disparities many non-athletes do not experience, and how this exposure shaped and challenged the applicant, revealing who they are and who they want to be?

The importance of a well told story

This is not an analytical essay in which the writer dissects an issue, arguing or “telling” their point in a thesis statement. This is also not a resume. Rather, here in your personal statement, you are asked to tell a story. Think of yourself as both the storyteller and the main character. The person reading your essay knows little about you and nothing about anyone else in your essay until you tell them. Your reader is interested in your thoughts, feelings, and experiences. For this reason, standout personal statements share many elements with fiction: characters, plot, conflict, setting, action, humor, and descriptive language. These elements connect you and the reader, humanizing you and making your reader want to care about you and your story,

How and why your essay must show transformation

Impactful personal statements show transformation. They reveal to the reader who you used to be in relation to who you are now, providing a glimpse into who you might become. Start by identifying a Central Moment, something important, intense, powerful, and/or transformative that occurred in your life. It may even be connected to some issue out in the world that is equally important, intense, and powerful. Then identify the moments that led up to it. What was happening in and around your life? Who were you a year, month, week, day before that moment? What did you think/know to be true about yourself before the Central Moment?

When it comes to transformative storytelling, leading moments are as important as the Central Moment. Also important are Turning Points, what happened after the Central Moment and brought you to where you currently are. You don’t have to have walked on burning coals, for your story to be transformative. See bearingwitnessadmissions.com “Tools” for more on Central/Leading/Turning Points.

The important role structure plays

A good personal statement requires more than an interesting story. It uses structure to tell the story in a way that engages the reader. Even highly compelling stories can present as scattered and long-winded. Admissions officers read hundreds of essays; they have neither the time nor inclination to try to figure out where you are going, or what you are trying to say. Think of your personal statement as a road trip. Structure is your personal statement's GPS. Without it, admissions officers tend to get lost. Set your essay apart from others on similar themes by using techniques like *psychological time*, *flashback*, and *flashforward*. See bearingwitnessadmissions.com "Tools" for more on Structure.

10 Tips for Writing Admission-Worthy Essays

1. Write in the Right Style

The first writing tip I want to share is to select the right writing style for your admissions essay. The vast majority of college admissions essays are personal narrative and memoir. Both draw upon real-life experiences to tell true stories in a fictionalized style that includes characters, plot, conflict, setting, and theme.

Personal narrative relays the storyteller's thoughts, feelings, and experiences on a certain event. Memoir focuses on one moment or series of moments, centered around a theme and usually drawing certain conclusions. In personal narrative and memoir, you are both the storyteller and the main character.

2. Know Your Voice, Use Your Voice

When we talk about voice as it relates to writing, we are talking about a combination of word choice, syntax, diction, character development, dialogue, etc. Given the importance of the college admissions essay, students tend to look for a different, more desirable voice. **Don't do this.** Admissions essays are not about how smart, funny, or distinguished you sound. They are an invitation for you to authentically bear witness to who you used to be and to how you got to be who you are now.

Whatever voice you have been using up to this point is your authentic voice. **Use it.** Also, be mindful that, unlike the spoken word, the written word is unable to convey inflection, body language, facial expressions, etc. This awareness is critical; for most of us, the college admissions essay is our first experience writing for someone completely unknown to us.

3. First Write How You Speak, Then Edit

Often our speaking, texting, and social media "voice" differs from our academic or traditional writing style. We use this voice more than we write, so this voice tends to be our dominant, authentic, more honest, and less censored representation of ourselves. The first step of personal narrative and memoir style writing is to get your thoughts -- in your authentic voice-- on paper without edits from your internal academic writer. In other words, let your speaking, texting, and social media voice share your story.

This is just the *first* step since, for most of us, this voice in written form often presents as scattered, repetitive, fragmentary, and long-winded, qualities which can easily tank an admissions essay, even one with a highly compelling subject. The best way to showcase your authentic voice while avoiding these pitfalls is to begin by writing at least two drafts long-hand with little emphasis on punctuation and grammar.

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4. Make Every Word Count

Not all words have to make a reader's hair stand on end. Each word should contribute, not distract. Words and phrases that rarely contribute include: *like, really, just, you know, actually, I guess, also, that, I mean, a lot, and kind of*. Not sure whether a word or phrase contributes or distracts? Read the sentence aloud without the word. Avoid five-dollar words when a fifty cent one will do.

If admissions officers are reading your essays, you have already passed the smart enough test. Personal narrative and memoir style writing uses words to create images in the reader's mind and to engage them. To achieve this, use descriptive words and sensory imagery when describing your characters and setting. Try replacing emotional qualifiers, such as angry, overjoyed, fearless, tender, devastated, etc., with brief action-reaction event descriptions that create the context for that emotion.

Remember, your goal here is to transport the admissions officers to a time and place showered in such vivid detail that it is as if you have personally invited them into your past, to experience your life first hand.

5. Don't Forget the Middle

Everyone knows strong openings and closings are critical when constructing admission worthy essays. Far too many people forget the middle is just as important. Unlike your high school English teacher, admissions officers are under no obligation to finish reading your essay.

Considering admissions officers' hectic travel schedules and the sheer volume of essays to be read, there is a good chance that, if read, your essay will be read piecemeal over multiple sittings. If you are writing a 650-word essay, something compelling enough to keep the reader's attention --or to make them want to return-- needs to happen between the 250 and 320-word marks.

6. Backstory

To effectively craft a personal narrative admission essay you will need to provide a back story. In addition to offering setting and context, the backstory plays a critical role in determining the degree to which the reader feels invested in you and your narrative.

The problem arises when the back story *becomes* the story. If you find yourself unable to tell the story you want to tell absent a significant and overtaking back story, then tell a different story. While not the easiest method, a seamless way to introduce a backstory is to weave it into the story you are trying to tell. It is worth noting some of the most informative and compelling backstories have been told in one sentence.

7. Stay On Topic, Be Specific

Admissions essays are not autobiographies, streams of consciousness, resumes, or opportunities to further address and/or explain that which can be contained in your application. They are also not invitations to reimagine what is being asked of you.

Most admissions essays ask you to describe, recount, explain, identity, or discuss an event, experience, time, or life lesson. Whichever you choose, begin by focusing on the specific details surrounding your story. Look for the stories within the story. If you find one, consider telling that story. Be specific, not only in the story you tell but how you tell it. Readers expect you to be as specific as you can usefully be. Watch out for generalities.

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8. Don't Oversell, Don't Undersell

While admissions essays are the perfect place to brag about your accomplishments, **don't oversell**. Only brag if it's worth bragging about. Nobody cares if you served Thanksgiving dinner to the homeless. They care if you started a take home food pantry at your school so kids didn't have to go hungry over the weekend. Admissions essays are also not the place to undersell. If it took two years and a sit-in to start a Gay/Straight Alliance at your school, make sure that you include that detail, not simply that you started a GSA.

9. Tell on Yourself

One of the biggest mistakes students make is to try and craft essays which show only their best qualities. Colleges and universities are not looking for perfect people. They are looking for *authentic* people. Authentic people are flawed people. Some of our most compelling stories are the ones that open by showing us in less than favorable light.

Throw in your lessons learned or what you have done to repair past wrongs and redeem yourself, and you have the makings of a compelling redemption story. Admissions officers have read hundreds of stories from kids who were bullied. They are dying to read the reformed bully's story.

10. Writing About Difficult Experiences

This last writing tip is a tough one. We've all had painful of experiences. Many of these experiences are difficult to talk about, let alone write about. However, sometimes, if there is time, distance, and healing between you and the experience, you can not only revisit the experience but also articulate it as an example of how even the most painful of experiences can be reclaimed, transformed, and accepted for what they are, the building blocks of our unique identities.

If you can do this, go for it. When done well, these types of narratives are the most impactful. Do remember you are seeking admission into a community for which the admissions officer is the gatekeeper. They need to know that, if admitted, not only will you be okay, but your fellow students will be okay as well.

Additional tips, tools, videos, exercises, writing prompts, examples, and information on our one-on-one services, which range from essay review to comprehensive start to finish coaching, can be found at bearingwitnessadmissions.com

Chad Goller-Sojourner, Founder
Bearing Witness College Admissions Essay Writing Coaching
Email: bearingwitnessadmissions@gmail.com
Website: www.bearingwitnessadmissions.com
Facebook: [@bearingwitnessessays](https://www.facebook.com/bearingwitnessessays)
Instagram: [bearingwitnessadmissions](https://www.instagram.com/bearingwitnessadmissions)
Twitter: [@essay_coaching](https://twitter.com/essay_coaching)

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