

High school senior year: The agony and the ecstasy of writing essays for college applications

By Ian S. Port
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In 600 words or less, tell us how you're special.

Tell us about the challenges you've faced in your short life so far. Tell us about your convictions and how they came to be. Tell us about your favorite idea. Tell us about your academic contributions and preparation (but don't mention the classes you've taken).

Tell us what we want to hear. Make sure you stand out. And show us a side of you we won't see anywhere else.

For thousands of high school seniors around the country, the fall and winter months mean grappling with those kinds of questions — often a dozen or more of them — as part of that essential teenage ritual, the college application.

And while there's very little students can do while applying to change their grades or their test scores, when it comes to the essay, virtually everything is up in the air — sometimes even the details of what students have seen, accomplished and endured in their lives.

"They ask you to write about yourself, and I know myself better than anything, and so that makes it seem like it would be easy," says Torrey Pines High School senior Ionie Bernstein. "But it is very difficult because you have to really fit each essay specifically to what it's asking you."

In affluent, educated areas such as Del Mar, Carmel Valley and Rancho Santa Fe, the average student applies to around a dozen colleges, local counselors say. While high test scores and top-shelf grades are common, that only increases the pressure on students to produce an insightful, interesting essay that really says something about their personalities — a task for which their education has given them precious little prior experience.

"In school it's literary essays, argumentative essays," Bernstein says. "I've never had to write about myself in such a detailed way before."

Typically, each college requires students to respond with a 500 to 600 word essay to a choice of prompts, which can range from the painfully bland to the inanelly esoteric.

"From one of the colleges, it was, 'If you were stranded on a desert island, what would you take with you?'" explains Torrey Pines college counselor Jaymie Williams. "And I think it's hard for kids to know how does that apply to college? What do I have to write about that you're in turn going to see me on your campus?"

Students say the hardest prompts, though, are the ones that seem to leave little room for injecting their own personality or passions, leaving them bored. One question on the University of California application this year asks students how they've taken advantage of the

educational opportunities they've had to prepare for college. And Williams says the UC isn't looking for a listing of their difficult course loads.

"It seems like it's already on my transcripts, and everybody else has the same thing, so I don't know how my academic preparedness would be different from anybody else with the same transcript," says Torrey Pines senior Mead Bauer of the UC prompt. "My favorite prompts are the prompts that lend themselves to speaking about your passions or your background."

San Diego Jewish Academy senior Alexandra Leon agrees.

"The ones where you get to talk about something that you're really passionate about, even though it's a lot of work and I've written five or six drafts for some of them ... it's something that I enjoy talking about and something that I feel really strongly about. So I have a lot to say about it and I enjoy sharing that story."

Like many students, Leon has about three essays on different topics that she's tweaking for seven different schools. While prompts do vary widely, many find that one essay topic will cover several schools' applications.

The topics tackled also vary widely with the students' backgrounds. Leon says she wrote about her community service experience and her religious background. Bernstein covered her long-held passion for music that culminated in an arts competition. Bauer says he wrote about family matters from a humorous perspective.

But whatever the specific topic, Williams, the counselor, says it's crucial for students to make sure they're answering the question being asked of them. Though she admits that some questions are so open-ended, it can be difficult to tell what constitutes an answer, contributing to further anxiety.

A few choice essay prompts:

"Newton's First Law of Motion states that an object of motion tends to stay in motion unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change direction." (University of Southern California.)

"If at the end of your four years at Pitzer we were to recognize you by citing your contributions to the Pitzer community, what do you think we might say about how you made a difference here?" (Pitzer College.)

"Create a short story using one of the following topics: The end of MTV; Confessions of a middle school bully; The professor disappeared; The mysterious lab." (Tufts University.)

"Please describe a daily routine or tradition of yours that may seem ordinary to others but holds special meaning for you. Why is this process significant for you?" (Barnard College.)

Bernstein says she got lucky on that last question — she wrote about a daily tradition of sitting down for coffee with her mom.

"But if I hadn't had something like that, the coffee thing, it would have been killer for me," she says. "I don't know what I would have written. Brushing my teeth?" Students' typical essay maneuver — tweaking the prompt a little to fit their experience — also sometimes takes place in the opposite order, where students slightly enrich an experience they've had for the sake of a good story.

Counselors say this is rare — but it doubtless does occur, although the difference might be so subtle it doesn't matter.

"There's probably just one essay that I wrote where I stretched the truth a tiny bit — but it was just barely at all," says Leon. "It would have sounded really weak without doing that."

So, often the difference between a standout essay and one that's just so-so depends solely on the range of experiences a student has lived. Community service, a turbulent life or creative talent all help — and probably the more, the better.

Remembers Leon: "When I was first looking at all the essay topics, I was really happy with all the stuff I'd chosen to do in high school, because I could just picture a bunch of my friends looking at it and having nothing to say. And I was like, Wow, I'm glad I went through all of those hard experiences because as bad as some of them were, it gives me something to write about for college."