

WRITE A WINNING COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY FOR HARVARD Or the College of Your Choice

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IVYLEAGUE ADVANTAGE

“Harvard is definitely my first college choice.”

This is a common refrain among the many enthusiastic high school students attending programs at Harvard this summer. For those who will join the more than 42,000 applicants seeking to become one of the less than 2,000 students admitted to the college annually, submitting compelling applications will be crucial. An applicant's personal statement may prove to be the singularly most consequential essay he or she will ever write during high school. The daunting importance of this relatively short writing assignment has led many applicants to stare desperately at blank computer screens for hours on end.

So what are the components of a personal statement worthy of serious consideration by Harvard or other highly selective colleges and universities? The potential formats and topics of stellar application

essays are as varied as the myriad applicants who write them. However, all compelling application essays open a window into a student's true character and personality, providing a personal portrait that adds vitality and breadth to the facts and statistics listed in the application. The most effective essays will also trigger in the reader a positive emotional response. If the readers of your personal statement do not empathize with you, and moreover, do not find you engaging, likable and interesting, your essay has failed its fundamental mission.

How can you identify your best topic or topics to write about? Begin by reflecting upon the most defining interests, talents, events, dynamics and obstacles that have shaped your life. Also consider the personal qualities, values and beliefs that you would like to showcase in your essay, and then identify the stories that offer the best opportunities to paint the most accurate and appealing picture of yourself. You can comfortably write about up to three thematically- connected, similar or contrasting, experiences within the typical 650-word limit. Personal statements begin to read like resumes when you attempt to incorporate too many disparate stories. The application platforms---Common, Coalition and Universal Applications---offer broad personal essay prompts that give students the freedom to write about themselves in a creative and unrestricted manner.

How do you start the process of writing your essay? Waiting until your concept emerges in your head in a complete and dazzling final draft will leave you staring at a blank Word document indefinitely. Put your most significant essay content stories into writing, without concern for grammar, word choice or style. For instance, if you hypothetically want the focus of your essay to be on your passion for music, write a few independent paragraphs describing your most meaningful or pivotal musical activities, followed by a few sentences in which you reflect on what these experiences have meant to you. Once you have your core content in writing, you can begin to shape the story arc and stylistic elements of your essay.

How can you refine your personal statement for applications to top tier schools? Vary your sentence constructions and upgrade your word choices, without peppering your draft with obscure vocabulary words; it is vital to polish your prose, while continuing to convey your authentic voice. Then look for opportunities to add depth, nuance and sophistication to your essay with literary devices, such as metaphors and framing techniques. For example, I worked with an outstanding pianist who had performed at Carnegie Hall, as well as a multi-talented musician who played four instruments and sang in three ensembles during high school. Both of them wrote outstanding essays, which they enhanced with literary devices---one is now a student at Harvard and the other was accepted at Wharton. The pianist wrote about how he metaphorically lived in an austere black and white world until he discovered vibrant color in his musical life when he began to study and play the works of Rachmaninoff. The versatile musician framed her essay about her musical proficiency with a narrative structure about the challenges of being left-handed in a world that favors right-handed people---including the challenges of playing instruments that have been designed for right-handed players.

Some final thoughts: Crafting an outstanding personal statement for applications to the most competitive colleges and universities in the world requires a thoughtful, introspective and methodical approach. Ideally, students should carve out sufficient time to work on their essay drafts, and seek feedback from several qualified individuals, such as English teachers, college counselors and writing coaches.

For more information about Leslie Drew and her college application essay services, please see:

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