**Common Application Essay Advice for 2013-2014**

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When the new Common Application essay questions were released back in February, we gave students some high-level advice on how to tackle the essays. Now that we have had even more time to think about the essay prompts, we’re back with some more advice on what you can do to ace the essays and maximize your chances of college admissions success.

Before going any further, be sure to read our initial article to familiarize yourself with the Common App essay questions and start to get a feel for which one your should tackle. Once you have done that, keep reading for three ways that you can take your college admissions essay from good to great…

**Be Honest**

When we say “be honest,” we don’t mean “you shouldn’t lie.” We absolutely don’t want you to lie, but here, when we discuss honesty, we’re referring to the idea of showing the real you. Don’t write what you think college admissions officers want to hear. The result will likely be stodgy, stiff, and uninteresting. Rather, tell them something about you that will actually help them get to know you better by the time they finish your essay.

Keep in mind how many applications a competitive college receives… The University of Chicago alone received more than 30,000 applications last year! If your Common App essay does nothing more than rehash something already in your application, or if it offers up bland, play-it-safe drivel, then what’s to stop an admissions officer from simply moving on to another, more memorable application?

This doesn’t mean you should resort to stunts or other funny business in a desperate attempt to stand out. But do reveal some of the real you, even if that means putting a vulnerability or shortcoming on display. That can be a risky proposition for a writer — especially with admission to a top university on the line — but this is a matter of high risk, high reward.

**A Little Humor Can Go A Long Way**

When you look at this year’s essay prompts, it’s easy to think that there’s not much room for a humorous essay. The Common App questions ask about failure, challenging a belief, and transitioning from childhood to adulthood… Those all sound like pretty serious topics. There is absolutely room in these essays for humor, however.

Think about anyone in your life who knows how to tell a great story. Even when telling a serious or sad story, they’re able to share great little asides and personal details that make you laugh and make the story that much more real and memorable. You don’t have to, but you absolutely are allowed to, employ this same technique to your college admissions essays. A warm, funny opening such as this can make an admissions officer smile and make her want to keep reading: “I always thought the phrase ‘His face turned red’ was just an expression… until the day I damaged $10,000 worth of inventory at my summer job.” Think about how you might tackle one of the Common Application’s essay prompts with a story like this.

**Try Tackling More Than One Question**

You will only submit one essay (650 words maximum), but that doesn’t mean that you have to pick one right out of the gate and then make it work no matter what. It’s entirely possible that you’ll start two or three essays, write and rewrite multiple drafts, delete everything and then then start over, and then start over yet again before settling on the idea that works best.

Don’t be afraid to try out multiple questions and topics before settling on what’s right for you. Chances are that you will end up tackling an essay prompt and submitting an essay that are entirely different from what you first planned. The beauty of this process is that you only have to submit the final product, not all of the messy drafts you’ll generate between now and the day you submit your college applications!