

College Application Essay Writing: Common “Traps” to Avoid

A one-page condensed version of “The College Essay Trap” by Cassie Nichols

Trap #1: Submitting an English Paper

- Do NOT use FORMULAIC writing.
 - Thesis + topic sentences + evidence + conclusion = NOT a good college essay.
- Tell your story in your own voice (1st person).
- Still use good grammar & writing style, but express your PERSONALITY and CHARACTER.
- If you must write about a more “academic” prompt (that asks you to reference a literary figure or other historical context), show a deep connection to what you chose to write about that goes beyond school.
 - Write about YOU more than him/her/it!

Trap #3: Telling Someone Else’s Story

- IF you write about your parents/family, you must show that you understand how your background/history helped mold YOU into the person you are today.
- Finding your own story may necessitate some digging through the larger story around you.
 - Showing that you can look beyond your own needs or situation to see the bigger picture and understand others around you is good!
 - Let stories of important people in your life serve as a backdrop for YOUR story!

Trap #2: Submitting a Resume’

- Do NOT regurgitate your accomplishments!
- DO explain who you are in & OUT of class.
 - What will you bring to the college?
 - Will you represent the college well?
 - What can you do to benefit classmates?
 - How do you interact with others?
 - What really matters to you?
- Extracurricular activities do NOT define who you are and should NOT dictate your essay topic.
 - You can use an activity as the framework for your essay IF it is very personal.

Trap #4: Pretending You’re Superman

- Be HUMBLE! Be GENUINE!
- Be willing to admit that you’re NOT perfect and ***you expect to learn & grow in college.***
- It’s ok to admit mistakes/shortcomings as long as you explain how you deal with them.
 - How do you handle disappointment, failure or confusion, and/or confront your weaknesses?
 - Have you ever taken a risk & failed? How did you respond/learn & grow?
- Convey that you see yourself as HUMAN.
- Show how you’ve GROWN as a friend, family member, student & community member.

Additional Pointers:

- Your topic should ADD to what is already reported in your application. Create a more complete picture of who you are.
- Don’t try to impress with “big” or overly “fluffy” words. Use YOUR voice and write well.
- When it comes to whatever strong feelings you have about religion, politics, or culture, BE RESPECTFUL! Remember - the Admissions Officer is human and has his/her own beliefs.
 - You must show openness to and/or tolerance for other ideas and a willingness to consider all sides of an issue.
- Don’t force humorous or witty writing! 😊
- Avoid writing about going abroad. If you must, focus on a particular moment that had special meaning.