

The Almighty Essay

Even for a seasoned author, memoir writing is tough. So why are 17-year-olds expected to nail it?

On a freezing Saturday in February, my wife and I sat through a full-day introduction to college admissions for the parents of 11th graders. This was our first little step on the high-anxiety journey thousands of families trod each year. As parents of twins, we were double-booked. There wasn't a vacation day in the next eight months that one of us didn't spend on a college campus, somewhere.

That day, at a workshop called "Behind Closed Doors: the Life of the Application," an admissions dean from a prestigious small college in Connecticut described carrying home a teetering armload of folders every night during her decision season. She told of examining a student's high school transcript, the SAT or ACT scores, the letters of recommendation.

"And then," she said, her manner growing brighter, almost big-sisterly and confidential, "I turn to the personal essay, my favorite part."

She recalled one student who had used her essay to compare herself to tofu because she was imbued with the personalities and flavors of the many people she had mixed with in life. The dean seemed to glow with the recollection. There was no need to add that the young lady had been accepted. We *knew*.

It was a theme I was to hear many, many times in more than a dozen campus visits. The personal essay, they all said, growing soft and fuzzy, is the one element where a student's own voice can be heard through the fog of quantitative data.

But what if it can't? What if, like most 17-year-olds, a high school senior sounds wooden or pretentious or thunderously trite when trying to express himself in the first person? Prose in which an author's voice emerges through layers of perfectly correct sentences is the hardest kind of writing there is. Plenty of professional authors can't manage it. How reasonable is it to expect of teenagers?

Nevertheless, college gatekeepers have made a fetish of the personal essay. Twenty-six percent of admissions offices deemed it of "considerable importance" in deciding who gets in, according to a 2009 survey by the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

It has become more important over time: only 14 percent said so in 1993.

The more exclusive the college, the more weight the essay is given. Among the most selective colleges — defined by the counseling group as those accepting fewer than 50 percent — nearly half said the essay was of considerable importance. In fact, these colleges give more weight to the essay than grade-point average. Let me restate that: one writing assignment is more critical to a high school senior's chances of getting into many top colleges than his or her average grades from four

years of high school.

To be sure, the essay is not the single weightiest factor. Grades in college prep classes (as distinct from overall G.P.A.) and strength of a high school's curriculum count for more. Scores on the SAT or ACT outranked the essay in the latest survey, but just barely.

Factors like recommendations from teachers and guidance counselors and extracurricular activities trail far behind.

Admissions experts say the personal essay has gained this mighty weight because elite colleges are flooded with qualified applicants. When so many of them have A averages and test scores in the 98th percentile, colleges tend to throw up their hands.

"Admissions officers are running out of calibration devices," says Barak Nassirian, associate executive director of the American Association of Collegiate Registrars and Admissions Officers. "All else being the same or similar, the essay suddenly becomes meaningful because it becomes a tie breaker."

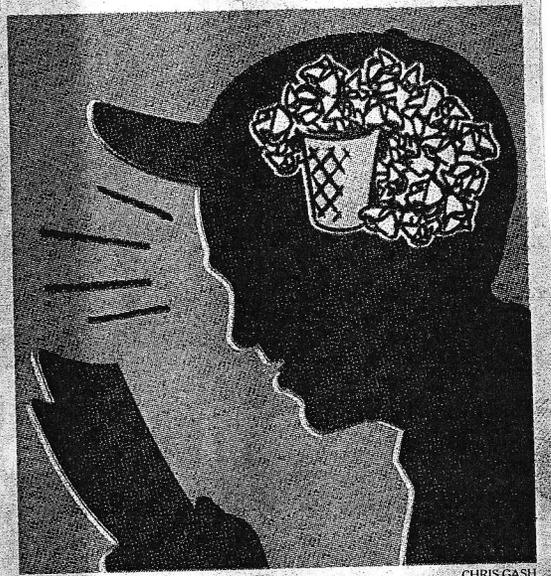
Is this really fair? Certainly some students will succeed in writing wonderful essays. But mostly this will be because of natural talent or dubious outside help. First-person writing is rarely taught in high school English. This is even truer for the brightest students, those who take A.P. English courses, which stress, in the words of the College Board that guides their curriculum, "expository, analytical

and argumentative essays."

But rather than ask applicants to send the most muscular, impressive example of the writing they have spent four years honing — a class assignment on "Romeo and Juliet" or the origins of the Civil War — colleges ask for a genre of prose they have almost no experience with.

Is it any surprise that one admissions dean at the University of Virginia reveals on the college's Web site, in the guise of offering tips to applicants, that 90 percent of the essays he receives are bad? What did he expect. "Running With Scissors"?

No one will be surprised that the indus-



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try that exploits families' insecurities by selling admissions advice offers to massage students' essays. Prices range from \$150 for a quickie online critique to \$2,500 for five hours of consultation with a Princeton graduate who, through the independent college adviser Michelle Hernandez, offers an Application Boot Camp Essay Package.

As I toured campuses with my sons, another refrain we heard was that students shouldn't worry if they hadn't had enough life experience to write about the great themes of literature. Small, everyday subjects were just as good, and more likely to produce revealing portraits.

And so an admissions official from a prestigious private college fondly recalled the essay by a young man who had been a fat child, and by great willpower had lost weight, but now had to be hyper-vigilant when thin friends gorged on junk food without thinking.

And there was the Ivy League official who recounted the essay by an A-plus student and standout athlete, who wrote about the one time he had failed spectacularly at something. In the last paragraph, he described showing the essay to his father, who had advised against submitting it because it revealed a weakness.

I am happy for all of them — for Mr. Humility, for Slimmed-Down Boy and for Tofu Girl. I'm sure they are having great college careers. I'm pretty certain that has little to do with their personal essays. ■

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