10 Tips for Writing the College Application Essay

**1. Be concise.** Even though the Common Application essay has only a suggested minimum of 250 words, every admissions officer has a big stack to read every day; he or she expects to spend only a couple of minutes on the essay. If you go over 700 words, you are straining their patience, which no one should want to do.

**2. Be honest.** Don't exaggerate your achievements, titles, and offices. Not everyone has to be the star at everything. You will feel better if you don't strain to inflate yourself.

**3. Be an individual.** In writing the essay, ask yourself, "How can I distinguish myself from those thousands of others applying to College X whom I don't know—and even the ones I do know?"

**4. Be coherent.** Write about just one subject at a time. Don't try to cover everything in an essay.

**5. Be accurate.** I don't mean just use spell check. Attend to the other mechanics of good writing, including conventional punctuation in the use of commas, semi-colons, etc. If you are writing about Dickens, don't say he wrote Wuthering Heights. If you write about Nietzsche, spell his name right.

**6. Be vivid.** A good essay is often compared to a story: In many cases it's an anecdote of an important moment. Use details to help the reader see the setting. Use the names for the other people in the story, including your brother, teacher, or coach. This makes it sound more natural and unique.

**7. Be likable.** Colleges see themselves as communities, where people have to get along with others, in dorms, classes, etc. Are you someone they would like to have dinner with, hang out with, have in a discussion section?

**8. Be cautious in your use of humor.** You never know how someone you don't know is going to respond to you, especially if you offer something humorous. Be funny only if you think you have to. Then think again.

**9. Be controversial (if you can).** So many kids write plain essays that don't take a stand on anything. It is fine to write about politics, religion, something serious, as long as you are balanced and thoughtful.

**10. Be smart.** Colleges are intellectual places, a fact they almost always keep a secret when they talk about their dorms, climbing walls, and how many sports you can play. It is helpful to show your intellectual vitality. What turns your mind on? This is not the same thing as declaring an intended major; what matters is why that subject interests you.