

DANGER: SLEEPY PROSE AHEAD

(or, The Sandman Cometh)

Now you've gotten a glimpse of the road your application will travel and had a peek at your reading audience. You've seen the piles of folders that fill up their houses and their lives like big clumps of fallen leaves over a sewer, a blockage that naturally begins to affect the flow of minor details like eating and sleeping. You know that when they're poring bug-eyed over twenty or thirty or forty applications a day, they're liable to let sleeping essays lie. And *your* application may be in that stack—it may be number thirty-eight. Your first job, then, is this: prevent them from falling asleep.

Go back to the writer's questions: What kind of piece is it? The word essay comes from the French word that means "attempt." It's a short piece not intended to exhaust the subject—or the reader. Even among essays, the college essay is a form all its own, with conventions and clichés that admissions officers like Henry Haggard, lying catatonic at midnight on couches all across the country, know only too well. You, as a practitioner of the form, should know them too, and steer clear. (Admissions officers may be tired, but it's hardly your responsibility to *help* them catch up on sleep.) Let's hack into Henry Haggard's database for some of the most common snooze potions whipped up by seniors. We don't have to dig very deep:

1. *The Trip*. This is the one about the visit to Europe, Israel, Kansas, or other exotic land. Applicants make The Trip in the company of family, peers, or even alone in one of the many programs that take students into the home of a foreign family to live. But wherever they are, 99 percent of the travelers seem determined to ignore the small and homely (but significant) details around them in favor of sweeping banalities: "I had to adjust to a whole new way of life. The first thing I noticed was the food, which was very different, as were all the customs; my adopted family's habits were quite different from anything I was used to, but, by the end of my stay, I had come to accept them. I realized that neither I nor they were wrong, but simply different." These essays, as you may be able to guess by now, are *not* very different. It seems that all writers of The Trip "eventually got used to all the cultural differences" and "finally felt like part of the family." But where are the colors and textures and flavors of something seen and experienced fresh?

These travels, of course, "broadened my horizons" and "gave me a new perspective on my native land, the United States." Often, applicants report that living in a foreign country, whose language they had been studying in school, "increased my fluency and facility immensely." Surprise!

Also well trampled are the Trip paths leading to vague forms of self-discovery in far-flung ancestral homelands. "I got a very religious feeling from the Sistine Chapel and I was proud to be an Italian." These essays usually show the strong influence of the brochures and airplane travel magazines from which they were lifted. At the end of the Ancestral Trip, writers swell with pride and platitudes at having "learned more than I ever could in history class about my cultural heritage."

Even wilderness trips, like Outward Bound, can somehow get boiled down into this soggy formula. "On my trip to the Grand Tetons, I learned to work with people and stretch my abilities to the utmost." Change the first phrase to "In my work as a terrorist," and the sentiment still holds.

2. *My Favorite Things*. This "list" essay (save your lists for your poems) is usually written in a hand which dots its *i*'s with little circles and often takes off from an opening something like, "Things I am for: puppy dogs, freedom, big soft pillows, and Mrs. Field's cookies. Things I am against: nuclear war, pimples, racial discrimination, spinach." Written by males and females alike, it is the unmistakable sign of what we used to call the Fluffball.

3. *Miss America*. The Big Issue questions, like "Please comment on an issue of national or international concern," lead a lot of people into this trap. "I think World Peace is the most important issue facing us today . . ." and so on like a beauty queen. Equally flimsy stuff pops up about almost any front-page issue—the economy, global warming, the Middle East.

At best these pieces sound like the small-town editorials of outraged old ladies. The arguments, no matter how powerfully right you feel, no matter how seriously you study the topic in school or debate it across the dinner table, are plagiaristic and generic. Admissions committees do not want to know how slavishly you can regurgitate views of parents, teachers, or cable news networks.

4. *Jock*. This is not a topic as much as a whole way of thinking, so it is certainly not confined to essays by neckless mouth-breathers. It seems to have spread like mildew into writing on every activity students pursue and is by far the most common approach among earnest and intelligent students trying too hard to impress an admissions committee. Musicians, actors, lab interns, yearbook editors, club officers—students from every walk of high school life have succumbed to the questionable charms of the Jock essay, flocking like doomed ducks to a wooden decoy. Still, though, scholar-athletes sound its most familiar and resonant note: "Through wrestling I have learned to set goals, to go all out, and to work with people." Now *that's* a frightening prospect.

Anyone can (and too many do) fill in this formula: Through *blank*

(piano playing, spider collecting, candle-pin bowling) I have learned Noble Value A, High Platitude B, and Great Lesson C. The result affects an admissions officer like sodium pentathol and doesn't show anything about you, except that you may have succeeded in spending seventeen happy, thought-free years.

5. My Room. A common variation on number two. "I don't know what to tell you about myself, so I guess I'll describe my room. That just about says it all." This opening is followed by a highlighted tour up and down the room's Himalayas of DVDs, devices, baseball gloves, and miscellaneous junk, accompanied by some self-conscious (and very old) jokes about messes and cleanliness: "Anyway, a clean desk is the sign of an empty mind." So is this essay.

6. Three D's. Another recipe that tries to tell readers what to think of you. "I honestly believe that I have the *discipline* and *determination* and *diversity* of interests to succeed at whatever I do." Maybe. But probably not at the college that receives an essay beginning with that line, because those three D's equal one more: *dull*.

7. Tales of My Success (or, The Time I Won My Town the Race). A particularly deadly Jock/Three D combination. "But, finally, when I crossed the finish line first and received the congratulations of my teammates, I realized all the hard work had been worth it." Why must all stories of sports, elections, and other "challenges" (there's another cliché for you) end on a note of Napoleonic triumph? Or, if not triumph, then the righteous tone of the principled crusader who stood for what was right but, alas, went down to defeat. Other people will be more persuasive about your success—teachers, counselors.

8. Pet Death. Maudlin descriptions of animal demise, always written by the Fluffball. "As I watched Buttons's life ebb away, I came to value the important things in this world."

9. The Perspirant. Writing about "a challenge you've faced," students sometimes allow their anxiety to lead them into "This essay is the greatest challenge I have ever faced. . . ." The other Common App topics may tempt you to write about the process of applying. Listen carefully here: **DO NOT WRITE ABOUT THE PROCESS OF APPLYING!** We used to describe such applicants as "sweaty." If you don't have anything more worthwhile to write about than the application itself, it leads a reader to the inescapable idea you don't have much to add to campus life.

10. Selling and Telling—Autobiography. Trying to say anything meaningful about a whole life in five hundred words can reduce any writer to absurdity. So if your essay begins, "Hello, my name is . . ." your application is going into the cyber hole from which nothing escapes. If you've gotten anything out of this book so far, you probably won't make such a simple gaffe, though every year a surprising number of perfectly capable students do.

Other autobiographical strategies are only slightly better. "I am a very unique person with many interests and abilities and goals." Would you want to read three hundred of those?

The Family Salute is another. "I come from a close-knit family. I have a very close relationship with my parents and siblings"—not sisters and brothers, notice—"and my eighty-three-year-old grandmother and I are especially close." The writer's parents may have been close for years (once, at least, they were *very* close) and are probably standing close behind her as she writes her essay. But admissions officers do not get close to the writer, her eyes and ears and mind and heart.

One more word about the pitfalls of the autobiography. I knew an admissions officer who used to pick up his pencil when he noticed too many sentences beginning with a capital *I*. Then he'd start circling them. When the total number of circles got too high for him to bear, he simply recommended a reject and went on to the next file.

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Henry Haggards nationwide are snoring like polar bears over these essays because students writing them are still asking, "What do they want on those college essays?" The point is, you can't force the committee into liking you. You can't tell them what to think. Admissions officers are unusually well equipped with a device Ernest Hemingway prescribed for writers: "a built-in shock-proof shit detector." They're awfully hard to snow with strategies of any kind—no one hates the hard sell more than an admissions officer.

By now, you may be thinking I've blown all your ideas out of the water. Hang on. There are ways to get them to like you without a lot of advertising talk and salesmanship, without assigning yourself a sampling of virtues you think sound good, without empty take-no-chances rhetoric. In fact, getting rid of all those things improves your prospects immediately.

How do you do it? What's left to write about?

Everything.