

THE GRAY AREA

OK, so you're not an A-plus student at HardAss Prep, captain of three sports teams, third author on a published cancer research breakthrough, with 2300 SATs and a grandfather who was seventh president of First Choice University; you're not the caboose in the class either. If you're like most of the hundreds of thousands of applicants to selective colleges every year, you fall into that murky netherworld peopled by those whose credentials are neither easily accepted nor easily denied: the Gray Area.

Don't panic. Everyone's in the Gray Area somewhere. (Almost everyone. If the hot-shot profile above could be you, toss this book like a wedding bouquet back to your classmates in the Gray Area; as long as you don't write an essay about the pleasures of sticking pins into small furry animals, you're First-Choice bound.) In fact, things get a lot grayer if you're not from one of the built-in Lobby Groups in the process: recruited athletes, development prospects (those who can spare a dozen million in pocket change to build the new gym), members of a historically under-represented group, or children of alumni. All these applicants have special advocates for them in close contact with the admissions committee. Everyone else is Just Folks.

But whether you're Just Folks or belong to a Lobby Group, no one

knows or will *ever* know why you, personally and actually, get in or not. Your teachers don't know. The *New York Times* doesn't know. Your parents' neighbor's cousin's sister-in-law who teaches in the med school at First Choice University doesn't know. College Confidential doesn't know. I don't know. (I assure you.) Your college counselors, who may have been admissions officers themselves quite recently before switching over to the side of the angels, don't know.

Yet ignorance, blissful as ever to exercise, maintains its steady stream of theories. Your *this* or *that* was too low (or too high); colleges were looking for one-talent "pointy" (or well-rounded) students; you got a B in physics (didn't take physics), blah blah blah. But the only ones who really know what happens with your application are the small handful of admissions officers who read your file and make the actual decision. That's because the needs of an admissions office, and therefore the "criteria," are always adjusting to shifting ground, such as the number of applicants in any year, the pressure from the basketball team or the math department, the college's history with your high school, and whether the administration is silly enough to take seriously the goofy "rankings" concocted by various media: "The Best 20 Medium-Sized Suburban Colleges for Left-Handed Economics Majors." In the massive Gray Area, the same application that's admitted one year might be rejected the next. There's plenty of luck involved.

Even though quotas are a thing of the past, no college pretends its process is "fair." An example of how it really works is this: "legacies" (children of alumni) are more than twice as likely as Just Folks to be admitted. Another is this: Three fine goalies have been convinced by the hockey coach to apply. The current goalie is a senior. The backup is a junior. The admissions office has "given" the hockey team a certain small number of places in the class. Result: At least one of the goalies applying is going to get in. Period. His grades and test scores may be lower than thousands of Just Folks who've already been rejected, but it doesn't matter. The hockey team needs a goalie.

Of course, plenty of applicants from the Lobbies are in the Gray Area too—those other two goalies, for instance. Still, at a college like Columbia, which in 2011 had just about 35,000 applications for 1,400 places (they admit about 2,400, or just *under* 7 percent, knowing a little over 40 percent will go elsewhere), after the admissions office finishes with the Lobbies there's hardly anything but scraps left for Just Folks. Practically everyone's in the Gray Area at Columbia—as well as at many other colleges with similar selection ratios.

Word of warning and inspiration: Looking down the barrel of stats like these, you have a helpful realization—you can't game the system. I know, I know—then why are you reading this book? Here's why: There's only one route to getting *in*, and that's going *through*—through the self. It's about accepting this rite of passage, with all its tedious elaborations invented for the colleges' own needs, and taking it back from them to use for your own nefarious purposes, *bwoohooahahahaha*.

So all right, I was wrong. You *can* game the system, apparently. A very good book called *The Early Admissions Game* by Christopher Avery, Andrew Fairbanks, and Richard Zeckhauser argues conclusively from an impressive alp of data that Early Decision and Early Action applicants have a measurable advantage. But you already knew that. Still, even that information, now almost ten years old, may be out of date in the fluid admissions world; it might be worse, it might be better. The colleges read that book too. My point is, whether you're applying early or regular, now or later, you can't game the essay.

At best, life in the Gray Area means the admissions committee suspects you're someone who can do the work and even do it well at their school; at worst it means you are indistinguishable from the monsoon of other students with similar backgrounds and credentials who (happily for the colleges) overflow their application pool. This year I heard the director of admissions at an Ivy League college that shall remain nameless (all right, it was Yale) admit that if he flushed the entire admitted class and

accepted instead a couple thousand rejects from that year, there would be no appreciable drop in "quality."

So just getting into the Gray Area at First Choice is an accomplishment. Enjoy the Gray Area. (I don't know, imagine you're in Scotland.) The trick, of course, is getting out of the leaden shadow of sameness and into the sunlit tropics of acceptance. To do that, you have to become three-dimensional to the committee. The best way: write a good essay. But first you have to understand the essay in context.

Is it the most important part of the application? No. Don't be under any illusions about that. You can't control whether they want anthropologists or breaststrokers, but if you *are* choo-chooing along contentedly doing the minimum, even the snappiest essay won't deliver you to an Ivy League station.

THE TRANSCRIPT

The honor of "the most important part of your application" belongs to your high school transcript. Admissions officers, in sickness and in health, cherish this document above all others. And the most important part of it is not the grades, it's the courses themselves. Ironically, the transcript—that sterile list—is the one place where your personality is on display most clearly. Admissions officers are looking to see what your interests are and how you challenge yourself in pursuing them given the choices you have.

The highly selective colleges appear, and often are, conservative: They cast a cold eye, rightly or not, on courses they feel are best left to the colleges, like Art History or Psychology. And in some high schools, these courses are in fact 99 percent mental bubblegum. If they are worthwhile at your school, talk to your counselor to make sure the colleges know it.

But most important of all, a highly selective college is interested in students who are interested in the world and in their lives. The best route to a successful application (and beyond, forever!) is to follow your interests

in order to discover what you love, and then to pursue it. Haven't found anything to love yet? Congratulations! That's what your education is *for*. Even your required courses are not there to torture you, despite your mud-wrestle with chemistry; requirements let you discover something interesting you might have been too afraid to explore. Requirements are an aid to courage.

But when you do have electives, authentic interest always shows. Some schools, for example, offer independent study programs. Parents and counselors often wring their hands about such a deviation from an imagined Ivy "track" and worry that it looks like fluff on a transcript. But if you're pursuing a passion, you're helping yourself as an applicant. How much? According to calculations, which I am making up as I go along, your application improves exactly 11.3 percent. Seems incredible, doesn't it? Yet that is what the calculations show. If you are taking an independent study course to coast and kick back, that shows, too.

Rigid pronouncements advisers may sometimes make, such as "You must take physics to get into First Choice," are often false, based on rumor, anecdote, and anxiety. If you make your choices on the basis of your real curiosity you will never go wrong.

A note about advanced placement courses: Once a way to earn college credit—few colleges grant it these days—they have now become primarily an admissions tool. An AP class may be a way to indulge your passion for a particular subject. But if you're taking it because you "need to have it on your transcript," then it's not doing you much good and may in fact be hurting you. And all APs are not even created equal. The "same course" varies from school to school, even from teacher to teacher in the same school. Surprise! I know of a school that designates the entire junior year in English as "AP." One suspects (at least, this one suspects, and he is joined by many demanding high schools that have abandoned the AP) that AP courses have become a kind of scam.

Anything you take to "look good" almost infallibly does the opposite.

How do they detect it? Reading 20,000 applications over five months for a few years can go a long way toward teaching the intricacies of teenage (if not human) frailty.

After checking the character of your program, admissions officers naturally look at the grades. (I'm misleading you deliberately here. They don't really look at courses first, grades second; that would be impossible. But I'm giving you an idea of their priorities.) And now for the fifty-thousand-dollar-a-year-tuition question: Is that B in an "honors" or "advanced" course the equivalent of an A in "regular?" If you've been following along, by now you should know the answer: it's the wrong question.

THIS IS ONLY A TEST. IF IT HAD BEEN A REAL EMERGENCY . . .

Twenty-four years ago I thought the SAT was fading fast as admissions criteria.

Now *there* was a spectacular failure to sniff out the future. Maybe it was just wishful thinking. Certainly I was rosy about the speed of the wane; today any fade in the influence of standardized testing is barely visible to the naked eye.

In fact, there's *more* testing now. Like a gangster coveting rival turf, the ACT—once seen as more of a Midwestern test—has muscled in on the SAT's Eastern and West Coast clientele and now claims to be the most widely accepted entrance test in the country.

But does the SAT sit idly by? No sirree, Bob. First it changes its name, retaining the medieval "Scholastic" and the menacing "Test," but replacing the pretentious and inaccurate "Aptitude" with the safe bureaucracy of "Achievement." That may not seem like a game-changer to you, but in this world of branding, such little shifts apparently matter.

Then the SAT makes another depressingly genius move, in the best-defense-is-a-good-offense category: it adds *another test*, the writing sample, and so another 800 points.

Many students now take both the SAT and the ACT, fishing for the higher score. And so it appears, in our numbers-obsessed dizziness, that standardized testing has (especially at the thirty or so most-selective schools) actually *grown* in importance—although we might also note that when colleges are accepting 10 percent or less of all applicants, *everything* grows in importance.

At the same time, my old (and current) point is that the number of four-year schools that do *not* require *either* the SAT or the ACT is also growing: 815 currently, and the list includes schools such as American University, Bennington, Bard, Bowdoin, Bates, Connecticut College, DePaul, Dickinson, Earlham, Franklin and Marshall, Hampshire, Holy Cross, Lewis and Clark, Mt. Holyoke, Providence College, Sarah Lawrence, University of the South (Sewanee), Smith, and Wake Forest.

Fine schools such as Middlebury, Colby, Hamilton, Colorado College, and Bryn Mawr don't require the 2400-point SATs if a student submits the SAT II subject tests, or the international baccalaureate, or AP scores. The University of Texas at Austin considers the SAT only if its grade-point threshold isn't met.

Whether you should take the SAT or the ACT or both is another one of those questions for which there is no answer. (Statistical folk wisdom says girls and grinds should take the ACT, boys and bright slackers the SAT, but those tendencies, even if real, don't necessarily apply to your particular case. That's one of the problems with statistics. And folk wisdom.)

All this is just to say admissions officers will look on the SAT with a little skepticism *if you give them a reason to*. That means you should come across as you at your most interesting. After all, they've seen too many

students with scores way below the class average (admitted for various reasons) wind up four years later in the Cum Laude lists, or become successful alumni who support the college with huge donations.

Admissions officers use the SAT as a reflection of your academic accomplishment versus your background: what have you done with what opportunities you've had? In other words, an 1800 from a Chicago private school boy whose parents, a financier and a lawyer, went to Princeton is not the same as an 1800 from a bilingual Southside public school girl who will be the first in her family to go to college.

In any case, admissions officers know—as even the test makers admit, according to FairTest, the watchdog group that nips insightfully at the heels of all standardized testing—that “people with very different scores on one test administration might get the same scores on a second administration. On the SAT, for example . . . two students' scores must differ by at least 144 points (out of 1600) before they are willing to say the students' measured abilities really differ.”

Your statistics-and-probability teacher can tell you something similar: a 600 on one part of the SAT means there's about a 50 percent chance that your score falls between 570 and 630.

What have certainly grown in importance are the SAT IIs, the subject tests, since they seem to admissions people to reflect more of what you're actually learning in school.

Contradictory note about the vast galaxy of test-prep companies spawned by SAT and ACT anxiety: They work, within limits. Evaluate the time such a course demands. I won't say (though I should) that every hour spent on such a course—and they require many hours—is a total waste. I will say that every hour spent on them is one you could have been pursuing your interests, changing the world, discovering the passion of your life—or even just reading a book, fishing, watching a movie with friends, working on your jump shot, making a baguette, playing monsters with your little brother, daydreaming, or any of the other gazillion

activities that will make you a far better person than any achievable increase in score points.

Remember that even the transcript and testing together don't tell your whole story to the admissions committee. At Brown, we routinely turned down students with superb grades and high scores. “What does he offer us,” we had the luxury of asking, “besides numbers?” The kicker for the committee is still their personal response to you, the flesh on the statistical bones. Where do they find the real you?

THE MYTH OF THE INTERVIEW

Never in the interview. Unlike employers, selective colleges use interviews for public relations, not evaluations. Interviewers are trained (sort of) to be charming and warm, no matter what they think of a candidate. (I know, you had a bland lump of plasma for an interviewer. But just because they are trained doesn't mean they learn; think of your math class.) The object of an interview from the college's point of view is to give you a terrific experience of their school. After all, despite what the interviewer thinks, you may get in. So don't make a stain. You'll be fine.

The interview counts so little because the majority are done by alumni, graduate students, and even undergrads (that's how I got my start in admissions), and admissions officers can't depend on these impressions. They don't even know all their interviewers personally. Another reason is that one shaky conversation in a coffee shop or law office can hardly outweigh four years of your life. The colleges have finally come clean on this. Amherst, for example, says on its application, “we do not offer interviews as part of the application process.” Many schools have followed suit. At Tufts and many other colleges, the interview is “optional.”

The interview has become one of the most precious recruiting tools a college has, at least partially because it costs them nothing—alumni interviewers volunteer for the job.

TEACHER RECOMMENDATIONS

Still, admissions officers are looking for the real you, not a statistical profile. If not in the interview, then where? One place is certainly in the teacher recommendations, but these are only as good as the teachers writing them. How well does the writer know you and how clearly can he or she paint a portrait of you for a reader? Many recommendations are absolutely crucial in a decision, others much less so.

Here's how to pick a teacher to write for you: Don't automatically go for the one who gave you an A. It should be someone who knows you well and writes well. In an ideal world, you might get to see samples of his or her writing beforehand, but here on earth asking for such a thing might put a wee strain on teacher-student relations. In place of samples you can make an educated guess about a teacher's writing based on his or her teaching. Good teachers are usually good because they communicate vividly, and so are a good bet to write well. Beware the recommendation from the dull, indifferent teacher, even though you aced the difficult course. It will read, "Susan is a very fine student and a nice person who is very thorough and completes all work in a neat and timely manner. She is well groomed, etc."

You don't want *that*. What you need is a letter that will make you come alive—the same specificity and vividness you're searching for in your own essay writing. Once you have such teachers in mind, you naturally want to know whether they'll support you strongly or not. But you can't ask, "Will you write me a good letter for First Choice?" After such a crass question, the chances that it *will* be a good one immediately recede to the vanishing point.

Instead, try, "Would you write my college recommendation?" and then pay close attention. The following answers bode well:

"Sure."

"Happy to."

"Certainly."

And similar responses, given without hesitation. If there is any throat clearing or paper shuffling, find someone else. For instance, a teacher might begin with a slow "Well . . ." or "I'll tell you what—"

"No problem," you say. Then smile and skip out to the hall, where your heart can crash safely into a thousand tiny pieces on the floor. It's hard to take these little rejections, but it's a lot easier than taking a big one from First Choice because of lukewarm recommendations.

If a teacher says, "Have you tried someone else? If you get stuck, come back to me," don't ever come back. Read faces. If the expression says *I have so much work I am in physical pain at the idea of this new burden*, excuse yourself and say, "That's OK, I've got Mr. Schenkler lined up." If you have trouble finding enough people who know you, you've been doing something at school that even the best essay can't repair.

THE MEDIA ARE THE MESSAGE

Some things that aren't part of the application can have a massive, if hidden, effect: Facebook and other social media. It's like Stealth Criteria—you'll never know they saw it. But if you think admissions officers do not check the Facebook pages of applicants, then you're probably not astute enough to be going to college. Put yourself in their shoes—you know you would look. It's too tempting. And remember, with swarms of applicants buzzing in the Gray Area they are only too happy to find reasons to swat some away. So a word to the wise: all those supposedly coded, inside jokes and pictures on your wall about how wasted you got at the Homecoming Party? Uh-uh. Manage your Facebook pages and settings.

RÉSUMÉ

Does an eighteen-year-old really have a résumé? I think not. (OK, if you've been on the Broadway stage since you were nine or have published poems in the *Paris Review*, *Granta*, and *Tin House*, I suppose our judges will allow it.) I know the résumé seems like a concise and time-saving way to answer the questions about activities and extracurricular activities, in the same way that I suggest tailoring one essay to several questions later in this book. But a résumé, especially a professional-looking one, *really* reeks of extreme "packaging," a huge turn-off at the selective schools.

PUBLISH OR PERISH

In the admissions committee's search for who you are, the essay is, in fact, no more important than any other part of the application, with this important difference: it's the only place they can hear *your voice*, just as you want it. One big difficulty with that is obvious: you've probably never written anything like this, and certainly not for an audience you can't (and may never) see. It's not the same as the history paper for Mr. Snoozleman on the causes of the Civil War, or the English assignment for Ms. Hackenbush on the significance of the green light at the end of the dock in *The Great Gatsby*. In those assignments, the readers aren't waiting breathlessly to read your words in order to learn something themselves or take pleasure in what you say; they have probably studied these topics for years. At best such assignments are *exercises*, literary pushups supposedly in preparation for college, but meaningless in themselves. At worst, writing them is not writing at all—you're more like a cat in a lab, coughing up hairballs.

But your college essay is not an exercise; it's a Real Game. It is, in fact, a piece of "published" writing. Like a book or magazine article, it goes out into a world of unknown readers who will judge you without being on

your side from the beginning, the way a teacher is. In fact, it disappears into the hellish hole of the admissions office, never to resurface.

Admissions officers are not your friends. (See all those boxes and checklists on the Common App for your counselor and teacher to check off? The colleges are trying to get your counselor and teacher to do the admissions officer's job, which is to rate the candidates. Those boxes don't help *you*.) Although they are not your friends, admissions officers know more about you, information of a particular kind, than some of your friends do—and most of your teachers as well. At most colleges, the materials in your file are placed in a strict order, beginning with your "numbers": class rank and SATs, which are the first information about you an admissions officer sees on her laptop. You can see from the order of the Common App that by the time admissions officers get to your essay, they know your family and your schoolwork very well. They already know a great deal about your school, and they're seeing certain patterns about you. It's like the moment at the dance: You're standing around the punch bowl when you see *her* arrive. You've seen each other around school, you know each other's names, have a few common friends, and have been in one class together; you've seen her play on the basketball team, and she knows you're the sweeper in soccer. You're acquainted with her, in other words, but you'd like to get to know her much better. OK—now what? What will you do or say that will not be a crock, a tired line, a pathetic pose?

The committee has the same relationship to you: they are acquainted with you, and now you want them to know you better. Understanding all this may seem only to add to your procrastination at first. But you'll be able to use this knowledge to advantage if you approach your college essay the way published writers approach their work:

1. Who is my audience?
2. What kind of piece is it?

3. What do I have to say to these readers? (Not, What do they want to hear?)

Begin at the beginning. Who are these people who hold your fate in their hands? (Actually, they don't hold your fate in their hands—that's your mission, should you choose to accept it. It's far more important who you are and are becoming, now and when you get to college, than which college you go to. You heard it here first.) Now that you know where your essay fits into the application, let's find out where it fits into an admission officer's life.

Breathe and proceed.