

May 25, 2016

Dear Strake Jesuit Senior (Class of 2017),

This information comes from Mr. Saltzman, to help you launch your college application essays.

Why do colleges require application essays? Admissions officers want to get to know you, the man behind the numbers—the grades, the test scores. If you are academically competitive for a college, your essay writing, along with your resume, recommendations, and in some cases interview, can help you stand out favorably from the crowd of other strong applicants.

This packet contains

- I. Links to sample college application essays
- II. Writing exercises and readings to hone skills for personal essays
- III. Current Common Application and Apply Texas essay topics
- IV. Advice for drafting and editing application essays

I. Read sample application essays

- a. Good application essays are personal essays, not analytical essays like ones for English or History class. Application essays describe experience. They emphasize narration—story telling. They are detailed—clear and immediate. They unpack moments.
- b. Below are links to successful application essays from some highly selective northeastern schools. Study some essays from each school.
  - i. Connecticut College:  
<http://www.conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/>
  - ii. Hamilton College:  
<https://www.hamilton.edu/magazine/fall14/even-more-essays-that-worked>

- iii. Johns Hopkins University: <http://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays/>
  - iv. Tufts University: <http://admissions.tufts.edu/apply/essay-questions/past-essays/>
- c. The next section of this packet helps you hone skills for application essays.

## II. Sharpening Narrative and Descriptive Writing Skills

- a. Read this information about free writing:  
<http://www.wikihow.com/Freewrite>
- b. I believe free writing is the best way to get a personal essay off the ground—to keep you from staring at a blank screen, unsure how to begin. Free writing a topic might not give you a full first draft, but it often yields promising ideas and descriptions for moving the project forward.
- c. Try two or more of these topics, free writing at least 15 minutes per topic.
  - i. Would you prefer to live by the ocean, by a river, by a lake, or by no body of water? Why?
  - ii. “My life is like a (pick one: a trip on a sailboat, a walk in the rain, a confrontation with a band of ninjas, a scientific experiment, a basketball or baseball game or tennis match, a garden, a bag of groceries, a video game with many levels) because...
  - iii. What is your favorite inanimate possession that does not run on gas, steam, or electricity? Why is it your favorite?
  - iv. Do you prefer a front door with or without a window? Why?

- v. What are the most likely pitfalls of getting rich quickly without working hard or taking significant risk to earn it?
- d. Some helpful reading assignments:
- i. *The Elements of Style*, a succinct, masterful guide to clear, concise, crisp writing: <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>
  - ii. Tips on introductions: <https://www.ashland-city.k12.oh.us/staff/jurawson/catchyintros.pdf>
  - iii. Introduction to descriptive writing: <http://www.englishbiz.co.uk/downloads/describe.pdf>
  - iv. Search the Internet for articles from major magazines and newspapers about topics like sports, travel, food, entertainment. Look for the best examples of narrative and descriptive writing. How do the authors build captivating stories? Select details to put the reader on the scene?
- e. Narrative and descriptive writing exercises
- i. Spend at least an hour or two on this section, including the personal topics at the end. In this section, complete as many of the exercises as you can.
  - ii. Here are some lists of descriptive words. Download these lists, read them, and practice writing sentences with them:
    - 1. <http://www.waunakee.k12.wi.us/faculty/lcarothers/EffectiveWriting/Descriptive/Sensory%20Words.pdf>
    - 2. [http://www.mobap.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/list\\_of\\_adjectives.pdf](http://www.mobap.edu/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/list_of_adjectives.pdf)

### iii. Telling vs. Showing

1. Telling puts the reader on the outside; showing, on the inside
    - a. Tell: He was in a bad mood.
    - b. Show: He stomped his foot, waved his fist, and turned beat red in the face.
  2. Convert the following from telling to showing.
    - a. She is a great athlete.
    - b. He has weird habits.
    - c. That room is dirty.
    - d. Zombies are scary.
- iv. In at least five sentences describe a change that occurs in 10 seconds, such as a change in facial expression or change in mood, an abrupt change in the weather, a change in the behavior of students in a classroom, a change in the behavior of a crowd at an athletic contest or other event, a change in driving conditions. Open the moment, capturing all the important details.
- v. Imagine 5 people seated around a table having a holiday dinner (you can pick the menu). Guest #1 loves the food. Guest #2 just likes the food. Guest #3 is indifferent about the food. Guest #4 mildly dislikes the food. Guest #5 hates the food. Without any reference to speaking or interacting with other guests, describe what each guest does, including facial expressions, to reflect his opinion about the food.
- f. Now, apply your narrative and descriptive writing skills to some personal topics. (If you wish, you may free-write any of these topics.)
- i. To what academic subject do you feel most personally connected? Why?
  - ii. Describe your most significant achievement in the last year.

- iii. According to the Loyola Press, “Finding God in all things is at the core of Ignatian Spirituality and is rooted in our growing awareness that God can be found in every one, in every place and in everything.” Describe an experience in which you discovered this truth for yourself. (Source: <http://www.loyolapress.com/ignatian-spirituality-finding-god-in-all-things.htm>)
- iv. Describe an experience that illustrates what “community” means to you.

### III. Application Essay Topics

- a. Most likely, your college list includes institutions that use the [Common Application](#) or the [Apply Texas](#) application. Is one of your colleges a Common Application or Apply Texas school?
  - i. Click [here](#) for current list of Common Application member schools.
  - ii. Click [here](#) for current list of four-year schools that accept the Apply Texas application.
- b. National Common Application Essay Prompts for 2016-2017 Application Year (<http://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/common-application-announces-2016-2017-essay-prompts>):
  - i. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
  - ii. The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

- iii. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
  - iv. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
  - v. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.
- c. 2014 Apply Texas Essay Prompts for 2014-2015 Application Year ([https://www.applytexas.org/adappc/includes\\_v2/essay\\_prompts\\_2017.pdf](https://www.applytexas.org/adappc/includes_v2/essay_prompts_2017.pdf))
- i. Essay A: What was the environment in which you were raised? Describe your family, home, neighborhood, or community, and explain how it has shaped you as a person.
  - ii. Essay B: Most students have an identity, an interest, or a talent that defines them in an essential way. Tell us about yourself.
  - iii. Essay C: You've got a ticket in your hand – Where will you go? What will you do? What will happen when you get there?
- d. Other topics
- i. Some colleges have topics asking you to explain your interest in the school. Consider how the programs and philosophy and even people of the school suit your values.

- ii. For competitive scholarship essays, study the scholarship criteria carefully.

#### IV. Advice for launching and editing application essays

##### a. Pitfalls to avoid with application essays

- i. Colleges recruit high school students. Most successful essays emphasize experiences that represent who you are now. Writing about getting lost at an Astros game as a seventh-grader will not help the reader understand the qualities you have that will contribute to a college community. Referring to an event from your pre-high school years can succeed, but the essay must make absolutely clear how this event contributes to a favorable understanding of who you are now.
- ii. NEVER write in an essay about getting angry at someone. The typical Strake Jesuit boy is a gentleman. The admissions reader of your essay does not see you every day. Don't leave the wrong impression. In general, avoid sharing negative information about yourself.
- iii. Never represent yourself as a know-it-all. Never get preachy or put others down. Write with your Grad-at-Grad virtues in command.
- iv. Is it ok to write about sports? Sure. But what can you write that will show your human side, your passion, sympathy, eagerness to be challenged and to learn? Your ability to enjoy the mundane details of life, such as going to practice every day? Wherever there is a good story, there is a good essay.
- v. No sloppy grammar or misspelling. Show that you care about the quality of the essay.

- vi. Writing about a triumphant moment, such as hitting the home run or winning an award, can be good, but the bulk of the essay must be the background story—how you grew, what you learned, how you formed relations along the way that contributed to the joy of the outcome. The application essay is not a resume.
  - vii. Never exceed the word limit. Do you applaud when your teacher gives you an extra-long reading assignment?
  - viii. No essays about your pets or love life.
  - ix. An essay about someone you admire can work if it is about your relationship with this person. You are applying, not the person you admire.
- b. No perfect method exists for launching application essays. However, some ideas do come to mind to keep you moving forward.
- i. Start writing whatever comes to mind about the topic, using the free writing guideless linked earlier in this packet. Keep the pen moving or the keyboard clicking for at least 30 minutes. In my experience, students using this method will spend 10 to 15 minutes foundering a bit until they discover the experiences they can most successfully employ to develop the topic.

Long before I came to Strake Jesuit, a high school senior asked me, “What should I write about?” I told her to start writing about an activity she enjoys. About a half hour later she returned with her draft, about her favorite activity, golf. The first half page was filled with random observations about the activity. But, midway through the page, she found her groove, you might say. She started writing about why she started playing golf. It was an interesting story. Her big sport had been softball, but she found the pressure from the team and coach overwhelming. So, she switched to golf, a sport that allowed her a much larger role to motivate and coach herself.



Writing is a discovery process. If you have no idea what to write for a college essay, that is fine. Quite likely, you won't know until you start writing about the topic and discover what you have to say. Once you have a draft, you can always shape it up afterward for organization, clarity, succinctness, and formal correctness.

- ii. Divide a piece of standard printing or notebook paper lengthwise. In the left-hand column, briefly describe an incident that relates to your topic. Directly across from the incident, write a comment—your opinion—about what happened. Fill this page, even a second page or more with such descriptions and comments. See what your comments have in common. What has emerged that you can use for the essay?
- iii. Make a list of words that relate to the topic. Then, describe an experience that relates to each word.
- iv. Don't know how to start your essay? Well, don't start it! Write the middle first—or any portion you think you are ready to write. See what happens from there. You don't have to write the parts of the essay in order. You can piece them together later. In the age of the Word Processor, strictly linear composition is for the birds!
- v. Draft a conclusion to the essay. Work back from there.
- vi. Pretend you are drafting the essay as a letter to a close friend ten years your senior. This approach should help you to find the right tone.
- vii. Describe an experience that relates to the topic. Then another. Then a third. By this point, a workable approach to the essay is likely to emerge.

- viii. Make a list of nouns, action verbs, and even adjectives that apply to the topic. Assemble the pieces into descriptive sentences. Then, sentences into paragraphs.
- c. After you've written your draft, then what?
- i. Edit like mad for brevity. Omit needless words. Replace clumsy noun constructions with action verbs. ("It was my decision to join." → "I decided to join.")
  - ii. Even though this is a personal essay, avoid overusing the first person. As much as possible, describe events according to their component parts. ("I became afraid." → "Fear overwhelmed me." "I noticed that the room was untidy." → "A sea of clothing, strewn and dirty, covered the floor.")
  - iii. Avoid long-winded sentences. Break some of them up by using phrase modifiers. See <http://www.jccc.edu/student-resources/tutors-accessibility/writing-center/files/free-modifiers-short-list.pdf> .
  - iv. If you are clicking away at your iPad or laptop, take a break from time to time. When you return to your computer, reread your entire essay, from the beginning. Edit as you do. Reacquaint yourself with the flow of the essay.

I hope this information has been helpful. Please let me know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,



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