How much does your transcript say about you? How about your SAT scores? In certain ways, not much. No matter what your grades and test scores are, they don't capture—or communicate—who you really are.

Almost any college or university you apply to wants to know more about you than your grades or test scores can tell them. This is why they have you write an essay. The essay question may be “Describe a person who influenced you,” or “Tell us why you and this school are a good match;” some colleges don’t even have a specific question, but will ask, “What more do we need to know about you?” Whatever the question, the essay gives you a chance to show aspects of your personality and abilities that can’t be easily quantified—your sense of humor, your dedication to social justice, your strong sense of tradition and family.

I graduated from college a year ago last June, but I clearly remember the agonizing process of writing the essay. I’d stare at the computer screen, my mind filled with questions. What makes me different from other people? What kind of essay will let them see that I’m mature enough for college, and have the brains and personality to do well there?

These are big questions, and I can’t answer them for you. But you can answer them for yourself. To help get you started, I consulted the experts at some popular colleges and universities, and have put together a strategy that should make the essay-writing experience a lot easier, and maybe even fun!

Putting Pen to Paper

Most application essays require no research, no five-paragraph structure, and no bibliography. However, waiting until the last minute to write is not a good idea. You need time to brainstorm, to write multiple drafts. It’s the one part of your application that can truly reflect your personality, and it’s worth making the effort to show yourself clearly.

“The hardest part is getting started,” says Steve Colee, director of admissions at Macalester College. “I sometimes advise students to do a quick and informal survey of people they trust, maybe teachers, or parents if they have that kind of relationship. They should ask: ‘When you think of me, what qualities stand out?’”

You might also want to try keeping a pad of paper with you at all times. Write down ideas as they occur to you. If you keep a journal, read over your old entries. Write letters. Practice getting your thoughts down on paper.

All About You

“The key is for people to write what they think is important for us to know, not what we want to hear,” notes Eric Kaplan, associate dean of admissions at the University of Pennsylvania. Write about things that interest you. Include details of your academic accomplishments, but don’t just reiterate your statistics.

Be patient with your own false starts. I wasted two weeks working on an essay entitled, “What I Learned From Failing the Driver’s License Test Six Times.” It may seem to you, as it did to my mother, to be the perfect humorous starting point, but it didn’t work for me—I found my repeated failure to legally take the wheel more infuriating than funny. The point is, if humor is your strong suit, go for it. If not, don’t feel that you have to be a comedian. The same goes for “meaningful moments” about the death of the dog you hated, or the trip to China when you were 2 years old. If you initially choose a topic that just doesn’t work, brainstorm again, and find something else.

Editing Yourself

“Presentation is important,” says Kaplan. “We read the essays very
Three Real Essays: Two That Work, and One that Doesn’t

1. An Essay About a Change in Your Life

I used to be a pretty deep guy. I watched foreign films, read Nietzsche, and stayed up all night “contemplating jazz.” I was Jack Kerouac living in a fire hut on top of Desolation Peak. I was Gary Snyder seeking enlightenment in a Buddhist monastery in Thailand. I was Ken Kesey, Jimi Hendrix, and Timothy Leary all rolled up into one gigantic mess of pseudo-intellectual, adolescent, fancy boarding school beat poet wannabe. I was a moron.

I blew off my schoolwork, not because I was lazy, but because I thought that schoolwork was shallow, too insignificant for me, the vivacious intellectual, the dharma bums, the Zen lunatic wanderer. How could my teachers expect me to do homework when life around me was all so futile, so meaningless? I was sure that I was a tortured soul destined to lead a life full of angst and pain.

That was last fall, more than a year ago. In February of last year, I left my hipster friends and their coffee-house conversations behind, to move back to the suburbs of Philadelphia and my conservative, distinguished public high school. Suburban Philadelphia is not the easiest place in the world to be six hundred and stylish. There aren’t many smoke-filled coffee houses or hip hippie wanderers. It’s clean here, upper middle class—you know, the Pont Explorer, Saturday evening Mass, country club for dinner scene. I came back to Philadelphia because it isn’t all that “hip,” because there is nothing “profound” to do. I came home to get myself together.

Writing Your Own

Have you learned something new about yourself during high school? Everyone has gone through changes, and explaining the details of your experience can make a great essay.

Why It Works

This writer provides convincing details behind a basic change in his life—improved academic performance. The essay shows maturity, a sense of humor, and a refreshing lack of pretentiousness.
2. An Essay About Someone Important To You

I have always wanted to take his picture there in rehearsal, when he stands in the middle of a semicircle of upturned eyes and open mouths, waving his endless arms as though he were swimming through the music. At eight-thirty in the morning, when the rest of us are barely awake, Johannes Somary is at his lovable best. The sun opposite me shines on the sopranos and altos and silhouettes his aristocratic nose, shaggy brows, and frizz of hair against the window pane and the morning sky.

"Rrrroll your Rs!" he says. Then he stumps and wiggles, bellows and whispers, puts his fingers to his chin as if in prayer and opens his blue eyes so wide they seem to leap out directly into mine, to discover that mine are closed; I am nodding asleep to the marches rhythms of Handel’s Mass in Time of War. But not for long. He goes through every conceivable contortion and exertion to energize our eighty sleepy faces. It is as if his wild gestures could conduct electricity as well as music through the drowsy air into our voices. Sometimes I wonder what he would do if we returned in kind, bugging our eyes out, wiggling and twisting our bodies to the music. As it is, we continue to hold our notes too long or not long enough and we refuse to “dance” with the 3/4 time.

Every once in a while he launches into a boiling tirade. He “Swisses out.” Then he reverts to European discipline: “If not every person is in this room at exactly eighteen minutes past eight o’clock, there will be no concert.” He is the quintessential Swiss in other ways as well: we must learn to speak English, not Americanese, we must not be “cool” when singing Haydn, we must get eight hours of sleep, be prompt, attentive, enunciate our consonants, and think about nothing else. This is the law according to Somary.

It works. His ridiculous energy and steaming rages do make us sit straighter, hold our scores higher and try a little harder. When he pleads, “Both feet on the floor—you cannot hope to sing if you do not support yourself,” there is a second or two of shuffling and creaking as 160 legs are crossed and uncrossed. Then he spreads his own feet wide and arches his back a little, sticking out his pot belly and hitching up his belt. He’s forever tucking in a stubby shirt tail set free by quick tempi or forte passages. There is a lot of child in him. He can glow as furiously as a two-year when he says “Elephants have memories, people have pencils—write it down!” Or he can smile so widely and coyly that I am afraid his grin will devour his ears and, like Beethoven, he will have to conduct from memory.

Of all my teachers, I feel the most loyalty to him because he devotes his entire self to his work. He does more than just wheedle a Haydn Mass out of us at a sleepy hour. His endless arm is as ready to wrap itself around my shoulders with a reassuring squeeze as it is to gyrate in 4/4 time, and he gives advice and drops of Somary-wisdom as freely as musical instruction. When he sits behind his messy desk after rehearsal and we sprawl—legs, arms, chatter, book bags—on the couch in his comfortable office, he looks like a complacent Swiss Buddha, nodding and smiling those blue eyes at us, always there, always quirky, always inspiring to me.

Why It Works

This is an essay about someone else, but we learn a lot about the writer as well. She respects dedication, discipline, and kindness. She enjoys writing, and does it well. All these details make the essay a good personal statement, one that will impress its readers.

Writing Your Own

Choose someone you respect, and make a list of notes about him or her. Include details about what the person looks like, how he or she behaves, things he or she says. Use your notes to develop a strong portrait of someone you admire.
3. An Essay About Yourself

If someone were to ask me to describe myself, I
would have to say that I am a person of many
interests. I enjoy simple life, yet I am not afraid to
try new things.

I have been fortunate enough to become exposed
to a variety of life-styles at a very early age. During my
travels to Europe I was able to visit Germany, Italy,
and Switzerland. There, I learned about different cul-
tures and how other people live. Watching and meet-
ing people is one of the many things that I enjoy.

Since the age of four, I have been dancing with
"Dance Capri," a countrywide Italian-American folk-
dancing group. My involvement in this organization
has introduced me to people who are interested in the
same things I am. We enjoy learning about our Italian
heritage and pride ourselves in keeping up the folk-
dancing tradition.

Along with dancing, traveling, and meeting new
people, I enjoy skiing and gymnastics. I usually ski in
Vermont during my vacations, but last year I had the
opportunity to ski in Quebec, Canada, for a week. I
have always been on gymnastics teams, during the
school year and the summer, and although I never
won any special honors, I enjoy competitive gymnast-
ic meets, especially the balance beam. For me,
competing with a team has taught me what working
for one common cause and reaching one common

goal are like.

One of the most relaxing hobbies I enjoy is
cooking. When time permits, I bake and I prepare
special meals for my family. I learned how to cook
through various cooking courses that I took when I
was younger. In high school, I could only fit one food
preparation class into my program.

Along with this class, I enjoyed a variety of other
courses in high school. However, the ones I liked the
most were jewelry, Italian, and history. I believe,
though, that I made the most out of every course I
took in high school.

Out of school, I invest a good deal of time in
various part-time jobs. My work experience includes
cashier and hostess work in an Italian restaurant, and
my present job, which is working as a Gal Friday in an
insurance office. I also babysit when I have the time.

High school was and still is a time of growing
and maturing for me. Although working hard and
getting good grades has always been my first priority,
I also established and set many of the values that guide
my life today. I can confidently say that in my senior
year of high school I am ready to meet the challenges
of college. I am ready to move on, and I see a bright
future ahead of me.

Why It Doesn’t Work

Did you enjoy reading this? Do you
feel like you know the writer better?
Probably not. This essay lists the writer’s
myriad interests, but says nothing about
why they matter to her. There are many
interesting essays hidden in this piece,
but we don’t get to read them. She could
have described visiting Italy, and her
experiences there as an Italian-American.
She could have explained what it is
about cooking that thrills her. She
could have explored the idea of tradition
and explained why it matters to her. By
mentioning so many different activities
without delving into the details on any
of them, the writer sells herself short.

How To Avoid Writing
This Essay

Any one of us could write an essay
like this—general, distant, and
unfocused. Re-read this piece and circle
items that could be developed into a
strong essay (e.g. “Although I never won
any honors, I enjoy competitive
gymnastics meets”). Cross out items that
are too general, or unsubstantiated.
When you write your own essay, try
to be just as tough. It’s scary to reveal
things about yourself, but it’s better than
not giving the reader details they need to
understand your point of view.