

Advisory Goal 4:

Grade:

To provide advisees with the resources and information necessary to make thoughtful decisions about the future

12th

Gathering: Go-Round (an activity in which students take turns responding to a question or prompt; see Glossary)
10 MINUTES

Activity/Topic: College Application Essay Dos and Don'ts
30 MINUTES

Closing: Popcorn (a technique in which a set amount of time is allotted for sharing ideas in a random order; see Glossary)
5 MINUTES

Materials: Sample College Application Essays (one copy per pair), Why Do Colleges Ask for the College Application Essay? (written on chart paper, board or interactive whiteboard), Sample Essay Critiques, College Application Essay Dos and Don'ts

Grouping: Whole group, pairs

Session Goal:

The purpose of this session is to provide students with an opportunity to evaluate college application essays to determine the dos and don'ts of writing an effective essay.

Grouping: Go-Round

What have you accomplished this past week on your College Planning Task List, and what is your goal for this week?

Or

If the college you were applying to this year had only one space left in its freshman class, why should that space be offered to you?

NOTE: This is a **suggested** gathering for 12th-grade advisories that meet once a week. If you meet more regularly, you may want to use the alternative gathering.

Activity/Topic: College Application Essay Dos and Don'ts

1. If you did the suggested gathering, explain that the question is a common one that appears on college application essays. Explain that the essay, when required, is an important part of the college application. The purpose of today's session is to familiarize students with the Dos and Don'ts of writing an effective college application essay.
2. Draw students' attention to the chart paper, which lists the reasons why colleges require the application essay:
 - to tell admission officers something about you that may not be evident in the rest of your application (special interests, your values, significant experiences, expectations for the future)

- to reveal your creativity
 - to assess your writing and critical thinking abilities.
3. Say to students: “I am going to give you three college application essays to review. Imagine you are a college admission officer, and decide which essay you think best fits the criteria stated in step #2.

NOTE: *Emphasize that while two essays best fit the criteria, each essay has strengths.*

4. Divide students into pairs, and give one copy of the Sample College Application Essays to each pair. Give students time to read each essay.
5. Ask each pair to discuss which single essay best serves the purposes discussed in step #2. Emphasize that they do not have to agree with each other; if they disagree, they can try to convince each other of their position.
6. Afterward, call on a few volunteers to share their opinions with the rest of the advisory. Encourage students to respond to one another.
7. Distribute the critiques of the three essays. Ask volunteers to read the critiques aloud.
8. Invite students to respond to the critiques:
- What did the evaluators say that students noted earlier?
 - What is the biggest difference between the essays according to the evaluators?
 - Did you find any surprises?

NOTE: *The biggest difference between the essays is that the writers of Sample Essays B and C use vivid details to share dimensions of their character and personal qualities by connecting these traits to stories of an activity they enjoy (Essay B) and literary characters and adults they admire (Essay C), while the writer of Sample Essay A tells about his newfound confidence but does not include a story to demonstrate how this confidence has made a difference in his life.*

9. Create a T-chart and ask the class to brainstorm a few Dos and Don'ts about the college application essay, and record their answers on the board. *Example of Dos: Have a tight focus. Example of Don'ts: Tell them what they already know.*
10. Distribute the list of Dos and Don'ts and ask volunteers to read it aloud. Afterward, ask:
- What's one tip you already knew?
 - What tip is something new?
 - What's one tip you have a question about?

Debriefing:

- What was it like to look at the sample essays?
- What are you still wondering about the college application essay?
- Who can support you in writing your essay?

Closing: Popcorn

When it comes to the college application essay, I used to think ... Now I know ...

Sample A¹⁹

I have learned a great many things from participating in varsity football. It has changed my entire outlook on and attitude toward life. Before my freshman year at [high-school], I was shy, had low self-esteem and turned away from seemingly impossible challenges. Football has altered all of these qualities. On the first day of freshman practice, the team warmed up with a game of touch football. The players were split up and the game began. However, during the game, I noticed that I didn't run as hard as I could, nor did I try to evade my defender and get open. The fact of the matter is that I really did not want to be thrown the ball. I didn't want to be the one at fault if I dropped the ball and the play didn't succeed. I did not want the responsibility of helping the team because I was too afraid of making a mistake. That aspect of my character led the first years of my high school life. I refrained from asking questions in class, afraid they might be considered too stupid or dumb by my classmates. All the while, I went to practice and every day, I went home physically and mentally exhausted.

Yet my apprehension prevailed as I continued to fear getting put in the game in case another player was injured. I was still afraid of making mistakes and getting blamed by screaming coaches and angry teammates. Sometimes these fears came true. During my sophomore season, my position as backup guard led me to play in the varsity games on many occasions. On such occasions, I often made mistakes. Most of the time the mistakes were not significant; they rarely changed the outcome of a play. Yet I received a thorough verbal lashing at practice for the mistakes I had made. These occurrences only compounded my fears of playing. However, I did not always make mistakes. Sometimes I made great plays, for which I was congratulated. Now, as I dawn on my senior year of football and am faced with two starting positions, I feel like a changed person.

Over the years, playing football has taught me what it takes to succeed. From months of tough practices, I have gained a hard work ethic. From my coaches and fellow teammates, I have learned to work well with others in a group, as it is necessary to cooperate with teammates on the playing field. But most important, I have also gained self-confidence. If I fail, it doesn't matter if they mock or ridicule me; I'll just try again and do it better. I realize that it is necessary to risk failure in order to gain success. The coaches have always said before games that nothing is impossible; I know that now. Now, I welcome the challenge. Whether I succeed or fail is irrelevant; it is only important that I have tried and tested myself.

¹⁹From <http://www.internationalstudent.com/>, essay supplied by EssayEdge.com. Last Accessed April 2011.

Sample B²⁰

It is the simplest of movements: right foot, left foot, right foot. It is the simplest of actions: run, relax, breathe. For me, running is both the most basic and the most complex activity I perform in any day. While my body adjusts to the challenges of gravel paths and steep inclines, my mind is free to drift, to sift through whatever needs sorting or disposing -- the upcoming day's tasks, an argument with a friend, some nagging stress.

As my calf muscles loosen and my breathing settles into its deep rhythm, I am able to release that stress, forget that argument, and set my mind in order. And at the midway point, two miles into the course, I stop at the hilltop vista overlooking my little town and the surrounding woodlands. For just a moment, I stop to listen to my own strong heartbeat. Then I run again.

Sample C²¹

Of all the characters that I've "met" through books and movies, two stand out as people that I most want to emulate. They are Attacus Finch from *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham from *Field of Dreams*. They appeal to me because they embody what I strive to be. They are influential people in small towns who have a direct positive effect on those around them. I, too, plan to live in a small town after graduating from college, and that positive effect is something I must give in order to be satisfied with my life.

Both Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham are strong supporting characters in wonderful stories. They symbolize good, honesty, and wisdom. When the story of my town is written I want to symbolize those things. The base has been formed for me to live a productive, helpful life. As an Eagle Scout, I represent those things that Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham represent. In the child/adolescent world I am Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham, but soon I'll be entering the adult world, a world in which I'm not yet prepared to lead.

I'm quite sure that as teenagers Attacus Finch and Moonlight Graham often wondered what they could do to help others. They probably emulated someone who they had seen live a successful life. They saw someone like my grandfather, 40-year president of our hometown bank, enjoy a lifetime of leading, sharing, and giving. I have seen him spend his Christmas Eves taking gifts of food and joy to indigent families. Often when his bank could not justify a loan to someone in need, my grandfather made the loan from his own pocket. He is a real-life Moonlight Graham, a man who has shown me that characters like Dr. Graham and Mr. Finch do much much more than elicit tears and smiles from readers and movie watchers. Through him and others in my family I feel I have acquired the values and the burning desire to benefit others that will form the foundation for a great life. I also feel that that foundation is not enough. I do not yet have the sophistication, knowledge, and wisdom necessary to succeed as I want to in the adult world. I feel that college can guide me toward the life of greatness that will make me the Attacus Finch of my town.

²⁰Adapted from <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/qt/short-answer-essay.htm>. Last accessed September 2012.

²¹Source: <http://www.quintcareers.com/collegelate10.html>. Last accessed September 2012.

Sample A

- The strength of this essay is that it is well organized\
- The focus is clear – how the applicant has matured and changed since freshman year as revealed through the topic of football.
- The essay would have been better if the applicant showed us where his confidence made a difference by including a story. As it is, he only tells us about his newfound confidence and drive.

Sample B

- The strength of this essay is that although it is short, it is very concise and the author is able to paint a picture of an activity she values.
- The focus of this essay is very clear – how something as simple and commonplace as running helps this author mentally review her goals, deal with stress and find peace and equilibrium in her life. We are able to see dimensions of her character and personal qualities which we value at our college.

Sample C

- The strength of this essay is that the author selected literary characters that possess specific traits that reflect on his own personality. He managed to reveal a good deal about himself through his selection of literary personalities.
- The essay makes readers feel the author is sincere because the author gives a personal basis for his values and future goals; for instance: being from a small town, learning from his grandfather's example, etc.

TIPS FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY²²

College application essays are your opportunity to:

- Show admission officers who you are
- Provide information about yourself that didn't fit into other areas of your application
- Demonstrates your creativity

RULE 1: Be yourself!

Present yourself as who you are to a college, rather than how you imagine they want you to be. You want a college to take you – not your imaginary friend. Right? Presenting yourself as who you are is your best bet in the college admissions process.

—Jeff Brenzel, *Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, Yale University; paraphrased*

RULE 2: Start early!

Sooner rather than later, during your senior year. So you can do a draft – like any good writing assignment – maybe put it aside, pick it up again, have somebody read it, and then kind of work on the piece of writing.

—Mike Sexton, *Vice President for Enrollment Management, Santa Clara University (CA); paraphrased*

Check out these other tips and apply them to your essay writing to craft your best college essay.

Choose a Topic That Will Highlight You

- Share your personal story and thoughts
- Take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren't covered in other parts of the application.
- Connect the topic back to you – don't focus on the great aspects of a particular college or the dedication generally required to become a doctor

Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

- Focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are; selecting a single topic allows you to write about that aspect of yourself in depth.
- Remember admission officers are using the application essay to get to know you better – trying to write about too many topics prevents you from covering any of them in detail.
- Remember the readers must identify your main idea and follow it from beginning to end; have a parent or teacher read your introduction and tell you what he or she thinks your essay is about

²²Adapted from <https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/essays/tips-for-writing-an-effective-application-essay-college-admissions>. Last accessed September 2012.

Show, Don't Tell

- Include specific details, examples, reasons and so on to develop your ideas.
- Be descriptive! You want to tell a story, not just state facts.
- Consider the following questions if you get stuck stating a fact to get an idea across:
Fact: "I like to surround myself with people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."

Consider:

- What were you doing?
- Whom did you talk with?
- What did you take away from the experience?

Use Your Own Voice

- Write in your own voice. Avoid overly formal or business-like language and don't use unnecessary words
- Remember admission officers will be able to tell if your essay was edited by an adult
- Consider the following if you get stuck relying on phrases or ideas that people have used many times before:
Overused statement: "There is so much suffering in the world that I feel I have to help people."

Consider:

- What is a real experience that you had and how did it make you feel you had to take action?
- What action did you take?
- What were the results?
- What would you do differently or want to know if something similar happened again?

Ask a Teacher or Parent to Proofread

Ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes – remember a computer's spell check won't catch all mistakes.

Examples of typos a computer will miss:

- "After I graduate form high school, I plan to get a summer job."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best fried."
- Ask those proofreading for you if the writing sounds like you.