**10 topics to avoid in a college admission essay**

(MoneyWatch) For students who are applying for college, one of the scariest parts of the admission process is writing the dreaded essay.

A common mistake that students make when tackling their college essays is to pick the wrong topics. It's a huge turn off, for instance, when applicants write about their sports exploits or their pets. I asked Janine Robinson, who is the creator of a wonderful website called [Essay Hell](http://www.essayhell.com/) and the author of an excellent ebook entitled "[Escape Essay Hell](http://www.essayhell.com/escape-essay-hell)," to identify those essay topics that teenagers should absolutely avoid.

* [5 tips for writing a winning college essay](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505145_162-57516425/5-tips-for-writing-a-winning-college-essay/)
* [5 myths about getting in and paying for college](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505145_162-57424191/5-myths-about-getting-in-and-paying-for-college/)
* [10 great opening lines from Stanford admission essays](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505145_162-37245695/10-great-opening-lines-from-stanford-admissions-essays/)

Here are Robinson's college essay no-no's:

**1. Listing accomplishments.** You might be the most amazing person on the planet, but nobody wants a recitation of the wonderful things you've done, the people you've encountered and the places you've visited.

**2. Sports.** Do you know how many millions of teens have written about scoring the winning goal, basket or run? You definitely don't want to write about your winning team. And nobody wants to read about your losing team, either.

**3. Sharing how lucky you are.** If you are one of the lucky teenagers who has grown up in an affluent household, with all the perks that goes with it, no need to share that with college admission officials. "The last thing anyone wants to read about is your ski trip to Aspen or your hot oil massage at a fancy resort," Robinson observed.

**4. Writing an "un-essay."** Many students, particularly some of the brightest ones, have a negative reaction to the strictures of the admission essay. In response, Robinson says, "They want to write in stream-of-consciousness or be sarcastic, and I totally understand this reaction. However, you must remember your goal with these essays -- to get accepted! Save the radical expression for after you get into college."

**5. Inflammatory topics.** It's unwise to write about politics or religion, two of the most polarizing topics. Avoid any topics that make people angry.

**6. Illegal activity.** Do not write about drug use, drinking and driving, arrests or jail time. Also leave your sexual activities out of the frame. Even if you have abandoned your reckless ways, don't bring it up.

**7. Do-good experiences.** Schools do not want to hear about your church or school trip to another country or region to help the disadvantaged. You may be able to write about a trip like this only if you focus on a specific experience within the broader trip.

**8. The most important thing or person in my life.** This topic is too broad and too loaded, whether you want to write about God, your mom or best friend. These essays are usually painfully boring.

**9. Death, divorce, tragedies.** The problem with these topics is not that they are depressing, but that such powerful topics can be challenging to write about. Absolutely no pet stories -- admission officers hate them.

**10. Humor.** A story within a college essay can be amusing, but don't try to make the entire essay funny.

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**5 tips for writing a winning college essay**

(MoneyWatch) This is the time of year when high school seniors start agonizing over the dreaded [college essay](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505145_162-57516425/5-tips-for-writing-a-winning-college-essay/Avoid%20hackneyed%20and%20controversial%20subjects.%20).

But writing this all-important essay doesn't have to be torturous. Here are five tips to help teenagers get the job done:

**1. Don't write a "McEssay."** This advice comes from an administrator at the University of Virginia, who complains that such generic essays (typically five paragraphs) "consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalization. They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure and spelling, but they are boring."

**2. Start with a snappy opening line.** During the hectic admission season, admission staffers can become numb to all the essays they must slog through. Start your essay in a compelling way. Here are a couple of winning opening lines from previous Stanford University essays:

"I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks."

"I have old hands."

In one of my previous posts, you can see more fascinating opening lines from [Stanford college essays](http://www.cbsnews.com/8301-505145_162-37245695/10-great-opening-lines-from-stanford-admissions-essays/).

**3.** **Pick a subject carefully.** Avoid hackneyed, controversial and sensitive subjects. Subjects that you should seriously consider not touching would be writing about politics, abortion or your own mental illness. Hackneyed subjects to avoid writing about include your sports team or a school trip to, say, help the disadvantaged. Also don't apologize, whine or complain in your essay.

**4. Find your voice.** Whatever you decide to write about, your [college essay](http://www.thecollegesolution.com/6-college-essay-topics) must convey a strong sense of yourself. Your personality needs to emerge. The essay needs to reflect what kind of person you are now, not the person you were in middle school or when you got lost on vacation as a kindergartner.

**5. Put your essay aside**. Once you've finished your essay, let it sit for a day or two. After you've taken a break, you might be surprised in returning to it that you can find ways to improve your essay.

*Image courtesy of Flickr user* [*Turinboy*](http://www.flickr.com/photos/turinboy/2946943615/in/set-72157621679870359)

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# 10 Great Opening Lines from Stanford Admissions Essays

When you're writing your college[**admissions essay**](http://moneywatch.bnet.com/spending/blog/college-solution/6-college-essay-tips-from-a-top-pro/2306/), do not be boring!  
A bland [**admission essay**](http://www.virginia.edu/undergradadmission/writingtheessay.html)can put an overworked college rep to sleep. I attended a conference once where an administrator at [**Yale University**](http://www.yale.edu) mentioned that 20 staffers at his Ivy League school read 50 [**college admission essays**](http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/the-college-solution/2010/06/29/need-help-with-your-college-application-essays-ask-the-experts) a day, six days a week during the application season. That's a lot of papers to slog through.  
  
Now that it's summer, you've got time to write a great college essay. And to get your college [**admissions essay**](http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/tipsheetgelb/) off to the right start, begin with a captivating opening line.  
  
Want examples? Here are samples from winning [**college essays**](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/) courtesy of [**Stanford University**](http://www.stanford.edu). These are opening lines of admissions essays that the Stanford admission reps especially liked. All of the essay writers were accepted as members of the class of 2012. You can find even more opening lines of [**sample admission essays**](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/) in the Stanford Magazine.

## ****10 Opening Lines from Stanford Admission Essays****

1. I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.
2. When I was in the eighth grade I couldn't read.
3. While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?
4. I have old hands.
5. I was paralyzed from the waist down. I would try to move my leg or even shift an ankle but I never got a response. This was the first time thoughts of death ever cross my mind.
6. I almost didn't live through September 11th, 2001.
7. The spaghetti burbled and slushed around the pan, and as I stirred it, the noises it gave off began to sound increasingly like bodily functions.
8. I have been surfing Lake Michigan since I was 3 years old.
9. I stand on the riverbank surveying this rippled range like some riparian cowboy -instead of chaps, I wear vinyl, thigh-high waders and a lasso of measuring tape and twine is slung over my arm.
10. I had never seen anyone get so excited about mitochondria.

Lynn O'Shaughnessy is author of [***The College Solution***](http://www.amazon.com/gp/product/0132365707?ie=UTF8&tag=asly-20&linkCode=as2&camp=1789&creative=9325&creativeASIN=0132365707), an Amazon bestseller, and she also writes her own college blog at [***The College Solution***](http://www.thecollegesolutionblog.com/).

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