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Overused Essay Topics

June 2020

SAT Cancelled

13th—ACT and ACT plus Writing

Seniors – Thank teachers and others who helped you

Thank scholarship providers

Have your final transcript sent to your college

Summer 2020

Do Something Interesting

Job, internship, or community service; summer program

Explore Colleges

Use websites, guidebooks, virtual online tours and info sessions

Rising Seniors

Begin to work on Common Application and other applications as they become available

Craft your essay

Narrow college list

Prepare for fall SATs and/or ACTs

Underclassmen

Prepare for fall PSAT

Watch for announcement of SAT/ACT exams to be held in late summer and fall

Writing your college essays can be either a drudge or a wonderful time of self-reflection and creativity. Understanding what colleges are looking for is the key to your selection of topics, and the way to figure that out is two-fold – first, know yourself and what you are looking for and second, know the mission and ethos of the colleges and what kind of applicant they are seeking to join their campus community.

Unfortunately, many applicants do themselves a disservice by taking on topics that don't resonate well with the admission readers, thus giving a false or incorrect impression of the writer. The focus, or topic, of the essay must engage the reader from the very first sentence, share a positive, optimistic, and truthful picture of the applicant, and allow the reader to feel confident that this particular applicant fits their profile. Here are some overused and unhelpful topics that students are encouraged to avoid.

A laundry list of accomplishments that sounds both arrogant and boastful and fails to share anything substantial about who you really are. Don't exaggerate your achievements because it will probably show through in your writing and that lack of authenticity breaks all the requirements for a solid and original college essay.

Sports essays are far too frequent. The overused "I scored the winning goal and it changed my life" is a boring story that again fails to tell a personal story. Admission readers have read more than a life-

time of stories about the 'thrill of victory and the agony of defeat' – please don't add to the list. Enough about how you value teamwork and hard work - it's so overrated. Instead, tell more about some aspect of your sport that has given you a deeper insight into who you are and what you want. If you must write about sports, personalize your experiences.

Another dodgy subject to avoid is *humor*. If you are a truly funny person, tell a story that illustrates this about you, but trying to be funny just to amuse the reader is usually not going to work. Don't tell off-color jokes or make fun of anyone; your reader wants to get to know you, not attend a comedy show. Take risks but don't be risqué.

Given the current state of polarization in many parts of the world, it is best to avoid topics such as *politics, abortion or religion*; remember, you don't know who is reading your essay. Again, know yourself and know your college. Be careful about being too controversial in your essay, and avoid any descriptions of illicit behaviors, profane language, drugs or alcohol. Don't try to shock your reader as a way to be memorable; it will likely backfire horribly.

Many students participate in community service and, for those lucky enough to have significant resources, may complete *international travel with a volunteer component*. These essays can also prove to be a big snore to the reader because they fail to share anything personal (continued on p.3)

Career Paths for Philosophy Majors

- banker
- business professional
- counselor
- lawyer
- teacher
- public relations director
- publisher
- journalist
- writer
- accountant
- retail manager
- librarian
- marketer
- chaplain
- consultant
- researcher
- computer scientist
- social worker
- professor
- self-employed
- labor relations worker
- foreign service officer
- public policy official



Majoring in Philosophy

Do you enjoy exploring complex questions about the human experience? Is Aristotle your greatest role model? If so, you might want to consider a major in philosophy.

Philosophy is essentially the study of the universe. Philosophers aim to answer questions about existence, human nature, knowledge, and ethics, but practically any area of study can be examined through the lens of philosophy.

Early on, philosophy majors study the long history of philosophy dating back to the Ancient Greeks. Subject matter includes ethics, metaphysics (the nature of reality), logic, epistemology (the study of knowledge), and aesthetics (the nature of art).

Majors learn about the ideas of acclaimed philosophers such as Aquinas, Descartes, Plato, Aristotle, Hegel, Kant, Hume, Wittgenstein and John Dewey. They also focus on how philosophy is connected to other subjects such as religion, computer science, and physics.

It is important to note that the structure of a philosophy major program is very different from many other major programs. While many programs study small, clear concepts one at a time, philosophy is known for circling back on the same questions more than once, and there is never just one answer to these questions. At times, students go from feeling confused to feeling slightly less confused. If the capacity to hold more than one solution at one time is uncomfortable for you, then philosophy may not be your preferred discipline.

Actually, philosophy majors develop many skills useful for daily life and for the workplace. Because philosophy asks such multi-faceted questions that often have no

clear answers, students must learn how to make a compelling argument. Thus, philosophy majors leave the program with an enhanced ability to formulate and communicate compelling arguments. Furthermore, philosophy studies the process of reason itself, so students spend a lot of time understanding and developing the ability to reason. They become familiar with logic as well as creative thinking because both are necessary to success in the program.

The skills honed in this major are applicable to a wide variety of careers. For example, philosophy can prepare students for law school, which requires many of the skills discussed earlier.

In addition, philosophy is a good background for writing. Majors often become journalists, authors, or publishers. With a strong basis in ethics and creative thinking, philosophy can be helpful for students interested in the written word.

Perhaps surprising may be the connection between philosophy majors and jobs related to computer science. In many ways, the two disciplines overlap. Because philosophy pushes students to think analytically and logically but also to question everything, it is helpful when attacking new software problems. Also, society would benefit greatly from software developers who are used to considering ethical issues.

Philosophy majors may work for companies in public relations, dealing with maintaining a company's or person's public image, or as marketers. Finally, they may instead use their background to work for the government. Some examples include policy officers, who ensure that policies are followed, and local government officials.

Financial Matters: Before Leaving For College



There are a few legal and financial issues that should be addressed before your son or daughter goes off to college. If your child has turned or will turn 18 during the next year, she is legally an adult, and you, her parent, lose the legal authority to make decisions on her behalf. That means that you have no legal right to see her grades, to manage her finances (although you remain responsible for paying her college tuition), or to make medical decisions or speak with her doctor. So, before she goes off to college, consider asking her to sign some documents that will allow you to continue to help.

•**FERPA release:** with your child's permission, you can speak with the college about his performance. Colleges often have their own FERPA release forms, so ask your college for a copy.

•**HIPAA Authorization:** allows you to access your child's health records and speak to his doctors about his medical issues.

•**Advance Care Directive for Health Care:** allows you to act on your adult child's behalf in the event that she is incapacitated and unable to make decisions for herself.

•**Durable Power of Attorney:** allows you to act on your adult child's behalf regarding legal or financial matters.

You can get the last three forms mentioned from your family lawyer. Each of these forms can be revoked at any time, but having them in place while your child is away at college makes sense.

This is also a good time to address money management issues.

•**Set up a bank account** that will allow you to easily transfer money to your student's account. An online bank account may be the most useful, especially if the bank has special student accounts that will give parents access to bank information. Find out which

banks have ATMs close to campus. Be sure to check on fees for using an ATM that's not part of your bank's network. Those fees can add up!

•**Property insurance:** College kids tend to have a lot of valuable electronics and computer equipment. Renter's insurance can protect your investment if these items were to disappear. Your homeowner's policy might also cover dorm room possessions—check with your agent.

•**Health insurance:** check out options provided by the college and compare these policies with your existing family medical coverage.

•**Car insurance:** check with your agent. If your child will not have a car at college, you may be eligible for a discount on your auto rate.

•**Discuss credit card dangers:** college students are besieged with credit card offers—discuss how the misuse of credit cards can affect their ability to get credit in the future. Look into debit card options or provide your offspring with a card in your name that can be monitored.

Overused Essay Topics (continued from page 1)

about these wonderful opportunities. Don't write another laundry list of 'what I did in Costa Rica to save the green turtles' – write about a local volunteer whom you connected with, someone doing work important to you, and from whom you learned an important life lesson. Keep the focus on what you learned about yourself, about the world around you, and how hard you worked.

The classic essay that is way too often brought into play is the one about *someone else!* That's right, not about you but about your grandmother/father/sister/neighbor/coach – you get the idea. This one always falls flat be-

cause, invariably, the reader comes away thinking that they would love to meet your grandmother, and not you!

Many students dig around for some kind of *challenge* they have had to overcome. Some are real, such as death and divorce, but others are manufactured and must be avoided. This might include the pain of an ingrown toenail or the fury at not being given a car for your 16th birthday! Yes, those are real topics chosen by applicants in recent years. Keep it real, and keep the focus on you, honestly.

COVID19—admission officers are already dreading this topic. You'll want

to talk about this only if your experience was unique.

Be honest, authentic, original and real. Take the time to brainstorm ideas for essays that don't give you a specific prompt. Stay focused on one moment in time that had a significant impact on your life and stay away from clichés, exaggerated lists of events and achievements, and allow your true, best self to shine. Start with a strong opening and grow from there – make your admission readers smile, jump up from their chair and share your essay with colleagues. Let them know the real YOU!

Staying Healthy—On Campus and at Home

Being sick at college is no fun because it means missing classes and social events and then catching up on your work. Your physical and mental health is most likely to determine your happiness and success both on campus and at home.

Here are a few tips on how students can stay healthy at college. Most of this is common sense, but unfortunately, that is often in short supply for 18-22 year olds.

Wash your hands. Yes, the easiest way to prevent illness is to be vigilant about hand-washing. There is no need to be a germaphobe, but it does make sense to wash before eating and to carry a small container of hand sanitizer and use it when touching surfaces.

Drink water. Coffee may wake you up, but water will keep you going. Substitute at least one glass of water for a cup of coffee each day. Or, better yet, drink a cup of water for every cup of coffee you consume daily. You will feel better. Just carry a water bottle in your backpack and fill it up regularly.

Refuel with healthy snacks. Sometimes students' schedules prevent them from having "normal" meals at "normal" times. Carry some healthy snacks (granola bars, dried fruit, etc.) that will tide you over until your next meal.

Don't fill up on fried foods. It's so tasty,

and easy to take advantage of fast-food offerings in the dining hall or in the area surrounding the college campus. Focus instead on a few healthy items that you like and make sure you have at least three fresh/non-processed foods each day.

Track your sleep. Staying up late and then getting up early for class the next day works for about one night in a row. The quickest way to run down your body is to not provide sufficient nourishment through food, water and sleep. There's so much to do, so many people to hang with, but you'll miss out on all of it if you get sick. Sleep is the single greatest under-rated commodity on college campuses.

Be social but careful about congregating in groups. Observe social distancing guidelines whenever possible. Strike a balance between your academic life and your social life.

Exercise. Plain and simple, you'll feel better.

Check out student services. Every campus offers academic support as well as mental health services. Thankfully, much of the stigma of seeing a counselor/therapist has dissipated and students are more willing to get help sooner. That said, many students unfortunately wait until they are very unhappy and then the road to recovery is longer.

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