

COLLEGE ESSAY-WRITING PRIMER

First, here's a brief recap of the major guidelines we described in the assembly about essays:

- The essay is the one part of the application that is really in your control, so make sure it sounds like you. An essay written in a natural, authentic voice gives you three-dimensionality; the college admission officer can get a true sense of you. When an essay is successful, admission officers say that the student "steps off the page," that the essay simply fits with the rest of the application or person.
- In thinking about what to write, consider the narrative threads – the themes – that run through your life. How do all the different "dots" in your life – your interests, your activities, your experiences, your successes, your challenges – connect? What "stories" do they tell about you? And which of those stories captures you best?
- Don't worry about length in the first draft. The important thing is to get all of your ideas down. Where you start is not necessarily where you want to end.
- Be specific. Be concrete.
- Be precise in your language. Watch out for loaded words that can be misinterpreted or dismissed: *unique, interesting, perfectionist*.
- But dig deeply, too. Engage fully with the question being asked. College admission offices know Milton, and they expect depth and comfort with complexity from Milton students.
- Think of your essay as a conversation with, or a letter to, an adult with whom you feel comfortable. Don't be too high brow or too low brow. Your writing should have ease and energy.
- Remember that nouns and verbs are the engines of good writing. If you find yourself using lots of adjectives and adverbs, step back and consider what you are really trying to say. Excessive modifiers usually indicate uncertainty.
- Use the present tense whenever possible. You want your essay to have immediacy.
- Don't have too many advisors. The advice may be tempting but you risk losing sight of your own story.
- Treat short answers as seriously as the essays.
- When you have finished a draft, put it aside for a day or two, then reread with an editor's eye: Does the essay sound like you? What will the reader really know about you by the end of the essay? What do you want the reader to know about you?

Some quick thoughts about writing from two gurus of non-fiction:

We thought you might be interested in some insights about autobiography, self-realization, and memoir from William Zinsser in his book, *Writing About Your Life*, and from Natalie Goldberg in her book, *Thunder and Lightning*.

About finding a topic **Zinsser** advises: "Write about things that are important to you, not what you think readers will want to read... If it's important to you, it will be important to other people."

In writing about important places: "You must give us a picture of what the place looked like and felt like: pure description. But why does it still stick in your mind? It sticks because it embodies an idea that is larger than the place itself. Try to find that idea."

About pressures to succeed: "I tell my students there is no one 'right' way to get ahead – that each of them is a different person, starting from a different point and bound to a different destination. I tell them that change is a tonic and that all the slots are not codified or the frontiers closed."

About voice and vulnerability: "[H]ave confidence in your accumulated knowledge and make yourself available...*No hiding.*" (our italics)

Goldberg talks about getting started: "I hear people say they're going to write. I ask, when? They give me vague statements. Indefinite plans get dubious results. When we're concrete about our writing time, it alleviates that thin constant feeling of anxiety that writers have – we're barbecuing hot dogs, riding a bike, sailing out in the bay, shopping for shoes, even helping a sick friend, but somewhere nervously out at the periphery of our attention we know we belong somewhere else – at our desk! Scheduling lets our free time be our free time and not a constant case of playing hooky."

Goldberg also worked with her students to create a list of questions "that each person wanting to write should be able to answer." They are questions that help aspiring writers "find out what's really alive for us, not what we think we 'should' be writing or our self-image of what kind of writer we'd like to be." A few of those questions:

What's really important to you?

What are the subjects that really pull you?

What are you willing to be witness to – to stay in there and carry for a long time?

Whom do you write for?

Additionally, and importantly, in looking at her own writing and the comments that she gets from her editor, Goldberg notes that almost all of the comments are some version of Can you be more precise?