



RAISE YOUR ODDS OF GETTING IN

What Not to Do When You Apply

Admissions officers share their pet peeves.

BY RETT FISHER AND KEITH SINZINGER

For the class of 2017, colleges and universities across the nation expect to see a record number of applications. As always, students are searching for an edge, looking for some way to stand out. Most do a good job

of putting their academic records in the best light, but there are always some who make basic mistakes that drive admissions counselors crazy and (if applicants only knew) doom their chances of being accepted. *U.S. News* asked a number of admissions officers around the country to share some of the common missteps by students during the application process. Excerpts:

Tom Delahunt

Vice president for admission and student financial planning,

Drake University, Des Moines, Iowa

Being someone you're not

I become leery about a candidate when I notice his or her list of extracurricular activities increase significantly during senior year. Shortly before application time, it seems the student has an immense interest in serving the poor, working with children with special needs, and protecting the rain forest—as well as participating in the chess club, drama club, the yearbook staff, student ambassadors, and pep club (all on top of the hours volunteered weekly at the Humane Society)! I don't necessarily doubt the authenticity of the student's list, but I do question the candidate's sudden dedication to multiple causes. Instead of a laundry list of commitments, we admission officers want to know which one (or two) of these activities is truly a passion. We are trying to shape our university community to include a diversity of interests and getting a clear read on the student not

only helps us—it helps the student find the right kind of environment.

Submitting group-edited essays

Whenever I read a wonderful essay, the first thing I do is check the applicant's transcript to see if his or her grades match up with the writing sample submitted. I've been jaded by years of reading captivating pieces only to meet the student and realize that he or she could not possibly have used the vocabulary relayed in the writing. I understand the need to have someone review the essay before being submitted, but the essay should preserve the voice of the student. When I read an essay that gives me the impression that I have a young Hemingway coming our way, and see sub-par scores on the transcript—particularly in English courses—it sours me on the whole application. It makes me wonder what else has been altered, exaggerated, or fabricated. Students should submit their strongest work, not someone else's.

Kasey Urquidez

Assistant vice president for student affairs and dean of admissions, University of Arizona, Tucson

Neglecting the personal statement

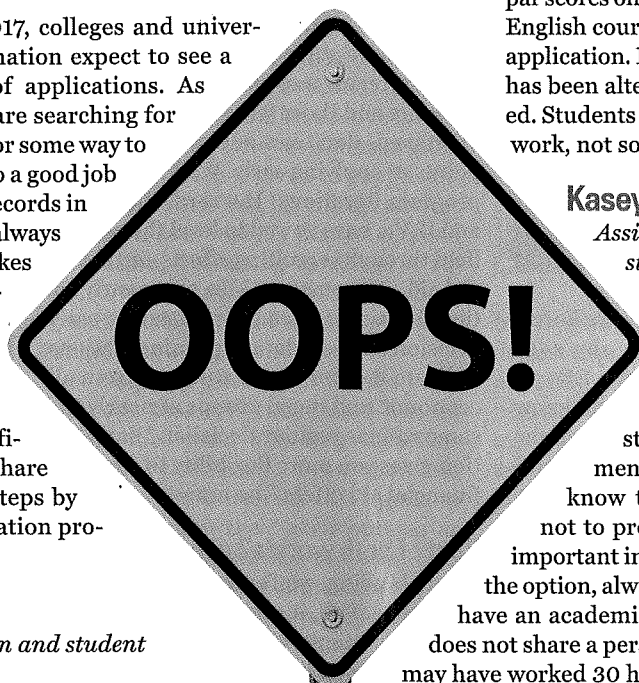
While we do not specifically state that our personal statement is optional, we let students know the following: If you choose not to provide one, we will be lacking important information about you. If given the option, always take it! There are times we have an academically borderline student who does not share a personal statement. This student may have worked 30 hours per week to help his/her family financially, or maybe a family tragedy contributed to a semester or year of below-average grades. Without the statement, we cannot consider additional circumstances. On the flip side, when a school says it does not require recommendations or want supplemental materials, adhere to that. And we have received some wild supplements—from a music video made by a parent sharing why her son is so wonderful to a restraining order against the applicant (sharing why she needed to go to school out-of-state)! Yes, we looked at them, but I can't say they helped the applicants.

Adele C. Brumfield

Director of admissions, University of Wisconsin-Madison

Writing about the wrong school

There was an applicant who talked about our exciting school spirit, fun football games, and tremendous



academic programs, all to mention that Ann Arbor would be a great town to live in. Definitely not good, since this is Wisconsin! This is a classic mistake, using a generic essay for similar schools and switching out the name. Instead, invest the time to know about each university and to demonstrate that knowledge.

Mentioning majors we don't offer

One student wrote about the many years he was interested in designing buildings and how this was his life's passion. If he would have researched more carefully, he would know that we offer landscape architecture, but no major in architecture. It's all right to be undecided or to have an interest in different fields, but it shows a great lack of attention to detail to see a student write about a major we don't offer.

Suzi Nam

Director of admissions, Swarthmore College, Pa.

Asking questions that make us go, hmmm...

When I receive E-mails or calls asking me about deadline dates, whether or not we have a certain major, or what is required to apply, I can't help but wonder how the student will navigate the complexities of college life with all this information plainly stated on our website and all of our printed materials. Perhaps some students think they need to send E-mails or make a phone call to show "interest." As Oprah says, what I know for sure is that we do not want our inboxes cluttered with "just want to say hi" or "feigning interest" E-mails. Instead, we want you to display, through your application, that you have a meaningful understanding of our institution and how and why you see yourself as being a good match. This kind of authentic, thoughtful engagement with the admissions office is what all colleges value most.

Paul M. Cramer

Vice president for enrollment, Elizabethtown College, Pa.

Forwarding vague recommendations

The best letter of recommendation is not the one from the teacher of the class the student "aced." Rather, it is the one from the teacher of the class in which the student had to work extra hard to succeed. The following recommendation did not tell us anything we didn't already know about Robert (not his real name), and so did not contribute to his candidacy: "Robert is an outstanding student in my class. He keeps a good notebook and is always well prepared." On the other hand, the following recommendation gave us confidence in Mary's ability to weather the challenge of an Elizabethtown degree and suggested she would take advantage of the many resources we offer students to aid in their academic success: "Mary is a strong student at XXX High School. Midway through a difficult first quarter, Mary sought extra help in my optional study sessions. As a result of that extra help and concerted efforts on her part, Mary's grades improved in the first quarter and throughout the year."

TIP
DON'T PROVIDE A LAUNDRY LIST OF EXTRACURRICULARS. DISCUSS THE ONE OR TWO FOR WHICH YOU HAVE A GENUINE PASSION.

Bruce Latta

Dean of admissions, U.S. Naval Academy, Annapolis, Md.

Being careless in social media

Your presence on the Internet matters. We encourage our applicants to exercise due diligence when sharing pictures, posts, tweets, and videos with the public. We often interact with our applicants via Facebook and YouTube to provide information and answer questions.

Many of our applicants tag themselves in photos after they have visited the campus, so it's not hard for us to see what profiles are open to the entire world. We

encourage our applicants to take a very close look at their privacy settings on Facebook and recheck them often. My best advice is to remember that if your grandmother wouldn't be proud to see what you're posting online, it probably shouldn't be public.

Using slang in essays

From your writing, we want to get a sense of you, your character, and your ability to articulate what is important to you. We expect to see meaningful content that is grammatically correct and reflective of your personality, wit, and values. Slang such as "LOL," "YOLO," and ":-)" under-

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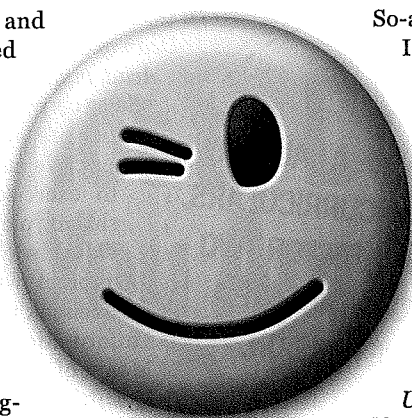
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mines your expression and would not be considered appropriate in your college essay. While there is a time and place for short-cuts, emoticons, and other symbols of contemporary communication, your application should reflect formal standards that would make your English teacher proud.



Robert McCullough

Director of undergraduate admission, Case Western Reserve University, Cleveland

Disrespecting staff members

One of the cornerstones in the admission office is the frontline support staff who have been in their roles for 20, 30, or more years. You can imagine all the things that they've seen. They are people who love this work, and they love the students. A few years ago, a student really just kind of laid into one of these staff members on the phone. He was so vitriolic—using foul language. What ended up happening was that we withdrew the application because that was just an out-pouring of disrespect.

Stephen Farmer

Vice provost for enrollment and undergraduate admissions, University of North Carolina—Chapel Hill

Trying too hard to curry favor

Students can definitely go overboard. A few years ago a person I worked with had a strange experience: A student actually found out where he lived and sneaked around to the back of his house, left a cake inside his fenced backyard on his picnic table, and the cake was decorated in some way encouraging the guy to admit him to the school. This all seemed kind of creepy—the student was sneaking into a gated backyard—and also not very smart, since if you leave a cake outdoors, you're going to make a lot of ants happy.

Being pretentious

I once read an application where the student referred to himself consistently in the third person—very much like a sports interview, except I think he repeated his entire name. He had some long name like

So-and-So Smith or Jones III, so over and over and over again he repeated his whole name, in every essay, everything that he wrote. It was a little strange.

Robert Blust

Dean of admissions and enrollment planning, Marquette University, Milwaukee

Missing deadlines

At Marquette we have one admission deadline: It's December 1, and we hammer that point in every publication and every presentation we do. December 1 is almost like a mantra. Several years ago, we had a huge snowstorm in Milwaukee, and the whole university was actually closed. I think we got about 15 inches of snow on December 1. And literally there were people who, you could tell by the footprints in the snow, were walking up the steps of our building, shaking the doors, you know, "Let me in! I have to drop off my application!" in a complete panic. Our voice mail had hundreds of messages of people calling. So yeah, we did extend it one day, but waiting until December 1 was way too late.

Eric Furda

Dean of admissions, University of Pennsylvania, Philadelphia

Disregarding directions

Whenever I give advice to students, I want them to be aware that admissions officers take care to hear their voice and get to know them, but our time is limited—perhaps 15 minutes per application. Through the Common Application and the Penn Supplement, we know where to find certain pieces of information. When an admissions officer needs to get to that information, seeing the term "SEE ATTACHED RESUME" on the application means we need to spend time *searching* instead of *learning*. This is a minor annoyance for officers, but more problematic for applicants. Focus our attention in the areas provided, and utilize the supplemental information question of the Common Application or arts, athletic, or other supplements to provide greater detail and context. ●



Why I Picked...

TRINITY WASHINGTON

Washington, D.C.

Jameka Hodnett, senior

I visited Trinity in the summer before college and fell completely in love. The campus was beautiful and quaint, but right within the hustle and bustle of D.C., which made it perfect. Being at Trinity makes you feel truly at home, as the professors and staff are welcoming and eager to give you a dynamic and challenging education. At an alumni gathering, I was able to meet and become inspired by many Trinity grads, including Nancy Pelosi. With the programs and many opportunities it offers, Trinity shows its women that they are powerful and gives them the skills necessary to lead.

