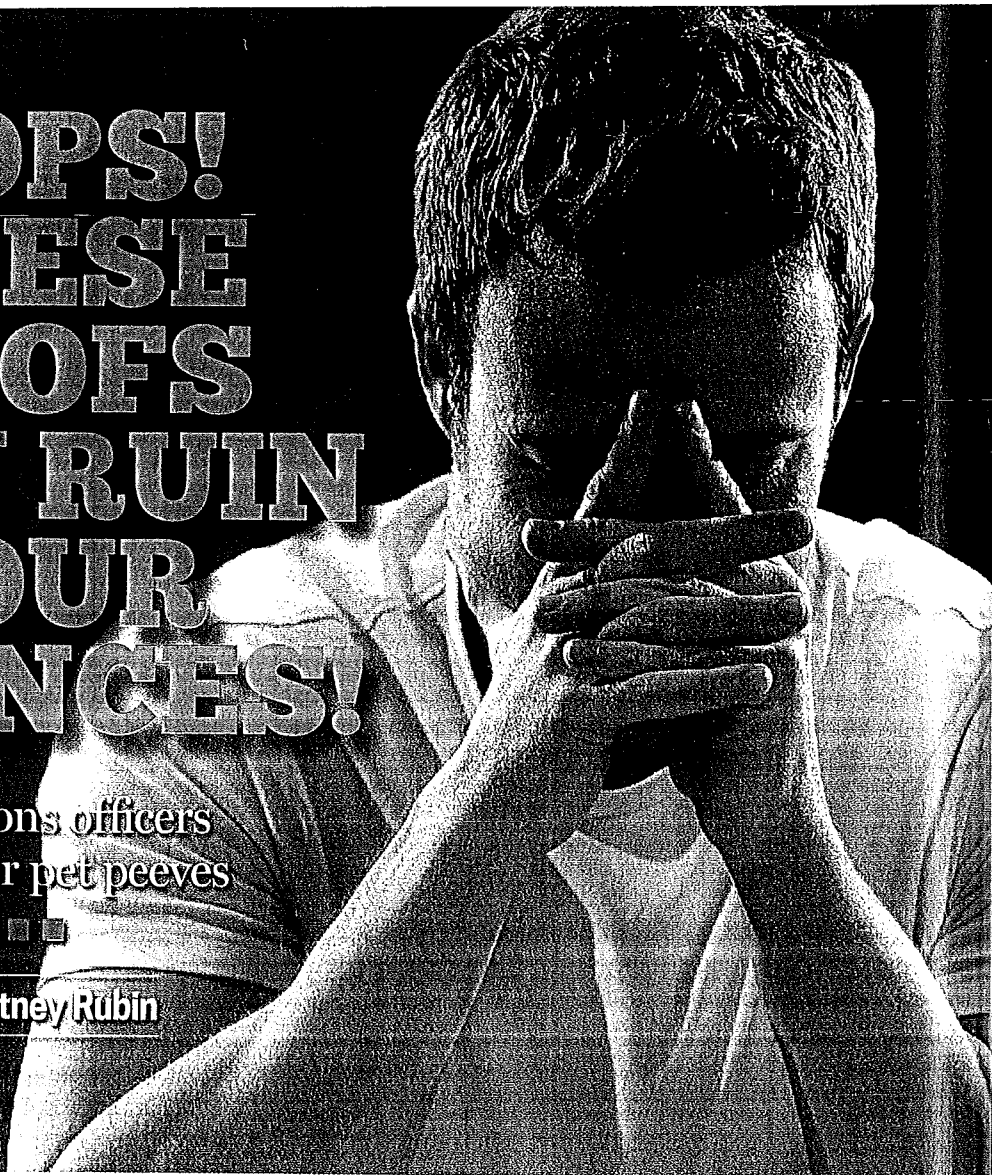


# OOPS! THESE GOOFS MAY RUIN YOUR CHANCES!

Admissions officers  
share their pet peeves



By Courtney Rubin



**C**olleges are sure to find your international baccalaureate degree impressive – but not if you call it an “international bachelorette” on your application. That’s a spell-check-induced gaffe cited by deans of admission at more than a couple schools.

“You don’t want to give administrators a reason to remember your application beyond how great you are,” warns Robert Barkley, director of undergraduate admissions at Clemson University in South Carolina.

What are some other mistakes that drive admissions staffers crazy (and sometimes send the applicant straight to the rejection pile)? U.S. News asked pros from around the country to weigh in on what they’d strongly rather you not do:

## Neglect to read directions

**Robert Barkley**

*Director of undergraduate admissions  
Clemson University, Clemson, S.C.*

We have a place on our application that is marked clearly for international students. But we have gotten applications from American students who have not read that, and where it asks, “Do you have a visa?” they say yes. And when it asks

what kind, we’re expecting to see an F1 or a J2, something administered by [the government]. In one case we got Bank of America. And where we asked for the number of the visa, we got the credit card number. We were not impressed.

## Let parents take the lead

**Tom Weede**

*Vice president for enrollment management,  
Butler University, Indianapolis*

It doesn’t tell us that a student is interested if we get 15 phone calls from Mom. Some parents are annoying – we get that. We try not to hold it against the student, as long as he or she has played a role in the process. We want families involved. But the student needs to take the lead.

## Submit a lengthy résumé

**Leigh A. Weisenburger**

*Dean of admission and financial aid  
Bates College, Lewiston, Maine*

At my stage in my career, I shouldn’t have a three-page résumé. So no 17-year-old should be submitting a three-page

résumé. I know many college counselors encourage students to write one as a process to help the kid recognize all she's accomplished, but we don't need to see it if you've filled out the application properly. It just rubs me the wrong way when students submit a résumé rather than filling out the activity portion of the application.

## Hit submit without proofreading

**Debra Chermonte**

*Dean of admissions and financial aid  
Oberlin College, Oberlin, Ohio*

Using spell-check isn't enough – you have to proofread. Julie Taymor, who wrote and directed "The Lion King," is a graduate of Oberlin, and we had a student who was really passionate about [Taymor's] work and wrote a really well-done essay about it. But she neglected to proof it, and throughout she referred to the musical as "The Loin King."

She didn't get in. It wasn't just because of that; it didn't help, though. It was a really good essay, but that just put the pause button on it.

## Wait until the last minute

**Julie Shimabukuro**

*Director of undergraduate admissions  
Washington University in St. Louis*

Many students who submit on the date of the deadline assume that everything transmitted and was received. But sometimes things are lost in cyberspace. By the time we process the thousands of pieces of information that come in on the final day, the actual deadline has come and gone, and it's possible that something is still missing. We try to give a few days' grace period, but colleges and universities expect you to confirm that your application has been received and that it is complete.

Check your status through the college's or university's website first to see if everything is there. Many students forget this very important step. If something looks odd, call or email your colleges and universities before asking your counselors to send another copy of a recommendation or transcript; many times they have been received but are still being processed. And pay special attention to scholarship deadlines. At many colleges and universities, these applications must be sent to special faculty committees or scholarship review boards, and there is little deadline flexibility. It is always sad when students miss out on great opportunities because they missed deadlines.

## Repeat yourself

**Amy Jarich**

*Assistant vice chancellor and director of undergraduate admissions, University of California–Berkeley*

When I keep hearing the same thought over and over, I really feel like it's a missed opportunity. In the application, real estate is so valuable! Each part of it should be telling us something new. If you've given us a list of your activities in one part of the application, don't give us an essay that's just

a regrouping of them. Pick one and go deep. If you've told us in one essay how you live with your extended family and how important that is in your life, don't tell us in the second essay about how the person you most admire is your grandmother.

People think that we're trying to find reasons to pull you out of the pool. No, we're trying to find reasons to admit you. So give them to us. You want us to think: "That brings a new piece to this puzzle. I like that."

## Ask for information easily found

**Emily Simmons**

*Associate dean of admission  
Emory University, Atlanta*

When you're visiting colleges or meeting a visiting admissions counselor, ask for information you won't be able to find out anywhere else: the personality of the campus, the counselor's favorite things about the school. If you're asking us about test scores, it sounds like you haven't done your research or like you're asking a question just to ask a question, maybe because your parents told you to. We're not keeping track of who asks ridiculous questions. But if you ask thoughtful questions, it's a chance to wow us. We might remember you and look forward to your application. That can help you.

## Give us what you think we want

**Henry Broadus**

*Dean of admission*

*The College of William & Mary, Williamsburg, Va.*

Please, please don't give us the personal statement that opens with a couple of minutes left in the game and ends with how winning isn't everything or how you learned the value of teamwork! Or the classic service trip essay that's about how everyone can make a difference. Or how if everyone just rolled up their sleeves and worked together we could solve everything. We're a lot more interested in the rough edges. Tell us something original.

One of my favorite service trip essays was by a girl who always takes pictures and makes scrapbooks. She goes on the service trip and gets so dispirited when she realizes that she and her classmates are there to help but that these people resent them being there. She sees a degree of poverty she realizes is not going to be fixed anytime soon. And then she gets home and realizes she hasn't taken a single picture. What you get here is somebody who's offering us an experience she's struggling to make sense of. And you can just see this mind at work – not willing to dress things up in ways that conform to convention or are clearly intended to impress us. And that is impressive.

## Write a one-size-fits-all essay

**Chris Muñoz**

*Vice president for enrollment  
Rice University, Houston*

If you write an essay for a university, and then you write that essay again and it's just a matter of changing the name of the university, then it's probably going to be a poor essay. And

## ■ Getting In

yes, we have gotten students who forget to change "Northwestern" to "Rice." It's not just about name-checking a faculty member or academic program, either. How does a faculty member's work speak to you as an applicant? Why, specifically, have you chosen us? Demonstrating true interest and care can make a difference on the margin. And when you're talking about universities that admit under 20 percent of applicants, you may need it.

### Skip optional essays

**Lindsay Dold O'Sullivan**

*Senior assistant dean of admission  
Occidental College, Los Angeles*

Optional essays at small liberal arts colleges like ours are not really optional. You should opt to do them. We've been thoughtful about the questions. Don't view them as hurdles, but as a way to let us know you've thought about your place at a particular institution.

### Trump up your extracurriculars

**Sarah Richardson**

*Director of admissions and scholarships  
Creighton University, Omaha, Neb.*

We want to know where a student's passions lie, and genuine interests tend not to appear suddenly in senior year. I'd

rather see quality over quantity. And students need to help us develop an understanding of the personal significance, not just with the essay, but when submitting information about extracurricular involvements. When they detail the amount of time that they spend with those activities, as well as any leadership roles they've taken on, that allows us to understand the level of commitment. Also, keep in mind that admissions officers might not be familiar with the organizations that exist in your school. Include as much detail as you can so that we can understand what kind of a fit you'll be for our institution.

### Fail to check our requirements

**Kelly A. Walter**

*Associate vice president and executive director of admissions, Boston University*

Students today often begin their college searches during freshman and sophomore year, and they do an exceptional job of learning about majors and general admission requirements. But they don't dig down that extra level, to specific curriculum requirements - it's the one area of the application process students pay the least attention to, in my experience.

For example, we expect students wanting admission to our engineering program to enroll in physics and calculus in high school. There's nothing more disappointing than to review an application of a student who might otherwise be competitive for admission and realize she is ineligible because she didn't take the required courses. For very focused and specific programs and majors like business, you're required to have specific quantitative skills. Or for physical therapy and athletic training, a very strong foundation in both science and math is a critical factor in the admissions process. So look at all the curriculum requirements for things you may be interested in. You don't want to have that "Aha!" moment senior year where you realize there were courses you should have taken.

### Force us to fill in the blanks

**Karen S. Giannino**

*Senior associate dean of admission  
Colgate University, Hamilton, N.Y.*

If there's something on your transcript or in your activities list that would raise a question, answer the question. If maybe you've gone all the way up to Honors French 3, and then you're not taking a language senior year, that's a question for an admissions officer: Why didn't she continue to take French? Maybe it was a scheduling conflict. Tell us, so we don't just assume you decided to take it easy senior year. Or if you didn't play soccer for two of your four years of high school, tell us if it was because you had an injury. You can add an additional statement to your application, or get your guidance counselor to tell us in her recommendation. And get some adult - not your parents - to look at the file you've put together and invite them to ask you questions about it. It doesn't have to be an adult in the know. Sometimes naive questions are the best ones. ●


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