

Express Yourself: How to Tell Your Story

You have a zillion opportunities to show colleges how unique you are. Time to accentuate the positives in your life

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AP storytelling probably never appeared on your class schedule, so consider this your crash course. The key to mastering college applications is to think of them as your opportunity to tell your tale—and to make sure it stands out. Sure, it can help to have medaled in the Olympics or published a novel (although not a plagiarized one), but you don't need a miracle. You just need to prove you have made valuable contributions inside the classroom and out—and will continue to do so if accepted. "Students have more control over this than they think," says Bruce Poch, dean of admissions at Pomona College. "We're trying to figure people out. They set up the buoys and we swim through them." Let's dive in.

Why your transcript rules. A big part of your story is grades. So while your transcript may seem like a list of A's, B's, and C's (and you hope not too many D's), to people like Jess Lord, dean of admission and financial aid at Haverford College, it's the way to find out who you are. "It's not just grades but increased rigor of classes and growth in a certain area," he notes. Just how important is it? "On a scale from 1 to 10, the transcript is a 10," says Jim Miller, Brown University's dean of admission.

Colleges look to see that you've pushed yourself by making the most of what high school has to offer. "If they're not planning to be science majors but stuck with it at a high level, even if they're not getting the best grade, that's impressive," adds Liz Woyczynski, Case Western Reserve's director of undergraduate admission.

Cherry-pick your teachers. The plot doesn't end with your report card. Teacher recommendations provide context for those choices and grades. So selecting your recommenders carefully is critical. Find teachers who understand your learning style and know what you can handle academically. In larger schools, where teachers are loaded down with writing stacks of recs, make a "brag sheet," suggests Eliot Applestein, who runs the college counseling service Best Four Years, based in the Washington, D.C., area. This is not a chance to remind your teachers of your score on that tough test—they have that in their grade books—but an opportunity to jog their memories about the way you tutored that struggling classmate in chemistry or that kick-butt presentation on Sri Lanka

you gave in social studies. But check with your teachers first—they may prefer to write the letter without your input.

Filling in the blanks. At this point, admissions committees are deep into your story, and they think they have a sense of who you are—but maybe they're off a bit. Take a look at your own transcript to see what kind of info admissions officers might infer from it. Is there a semester where your grades plummeted? Is there an AP class you should have taken but didn't? Do you have an unusually high number of absences? These things may raise red flags, even if they happened for understandable reasons: a problem in the family, a spat with a teacher, a scheduling conflict. Guidance counselors should be aware of these issues and explain them in their recommendation letters to schools, but you can't always count on that. "If there's more to say, throw in an extra piece of paper. Students should never feel like we don't want that information," says Lord. A short paragraph will do. There's no reason to write a dissertation on how your school offered AP French and AP Biology the same period

Extracurrics. Don't be locked in to thinking that only formal, school-related activities count. Rob Seltzer, director of admissions at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, can't believe how often students leave off work experience. "It's rare that someone tells us they started in the stockroom and became a manager," he says. That's just as impressive as making your way up through the ranks of your high school's 4-H club—maybe more so.

Pam Proctor, author of *The College Hook: Packaging Yourself to Win the College Admissions Game*, encourages students to figure out whatever it is that stands out about them and put that first instead of the stuff their competition also has. "They'll put a sports team first, but that doesn't make sense if you're not good enough to be recruited. It's impressive—it shows teamwork, commitment, leadership—but it's not a hook," she says. So if you're on a mission to visit every Civil War battlefield, or you've set up an active fan website devoted to Jane Austen novels, put those down in the activity slots, too.

Letters from adults associated with your activities can give colleges a better sense of what kind of effort was involved in your pursuits. The politician whose campaign you slaved for, the adviser for your environmental club, your boss at the runaway hotline, these are people who can take that one line of information you've provided and make it come to life.

Ace the essay. Up until now, you've let lists and adults tell your story. With the essay comes your chance to speak for yourself. Sarah McGinty, author of *The College Application Essay*, says, "Put a lot of time into thinking and chewing before you start writing. Make a list of what your application already says about you. If you did well on the SATs, your scores show that. If you know big words, your English grades show that. If you've played soccer for years, your coach's letter will say that. Augment what's in the folder."

Narrowing in on the right topic can drive a kid bonkers, but McGinty says there's no reason to think you can't do this well: "If you ask the average high school student to pick

a scene from *The Great Gatsby* and show how that illustrates Gatsby's character, it's easy for them. Writing your essay is no different, except you don't have to read a novel. You look through your life and illuminate a moment." The tricky part is being reflective. McGinty suggests finding a time your opinion changed. That kind of situation lends itself to explaining how you think.

While you want to catch the eye of admissions boards, don't be gimmicky. "Someone once wrote their essay in blood. No one wanted to pick it up," Miller recalls. "We asked for 500 words, not 2 pints."

Essays can be effective even when they pinpoint something that might seem insignificant in the grand scheme. Bev Taylor, a New York-based independent counselor known as the Ivy Coach, worked with a young woman who discarded several failed ideas before writing about her lucky rubber-band ball and how it connected her to her family and friends. Her admissions letter from Williams College included a rubber band for her collection. One of Applestein's students with average grades and scores wrote his essay about a day a classmate wrote a derogatory statement about their Chinese teacher on the blackboard while the teacher was out of the room. He got up and told the other students how stupid that was and erased it. "He alienated himself from some of his classmates, but it showed he stood for something," Applestein says. "I was amazed at some of the schools he got into, but this is the kind of person schools want." Still, Miller cautions, an essay isn't going to erase every shortcoming: "Essays can heal the sick, but they can't raise the dead."

The business of professional essay editing—and disturbingly, also essay buying—has grown tremendously in the past few years. That's why Daniel Walls, Emory University's associate vice provost of enrollment management, says, "The voice should be of a 17- or 18-year-old student, not a 40-year-old parent." Asking for some editing and proofing help is expected, but don't let Mom and Dad, counselors, or anyone else do the work for you.

Michael Mills, associate provost for university enrollment at Northwestern University, says that for all of the complaints people may have about the new writing portion of the SAT, it allows schools to see an unedited sample of students' work. "Everyone has to stand and deliver on equal terms," he says. The past two years, in a few cases, Mills' staff peeked to check the writing section when there was a disconnect between the essay and grades and scores. Poch has done the same thing at Pomona. "In some of those cases, it seemed to be the same voice," he says. "But when it's not, it raises questions—although not answers about authorship. And that could negatively affect the application." This practice will probably become more common.

Interview. Interviews are weighted differently from school to school. Some are mainly informative rather than evaluative. But you can't underestimate the power of face time with an admissions officer or another representative. "What I look for is what they have to say about what they do," says Lord. "It's great to see someone get excited."

"Passion" is again the key. Demonstrating energy and enthusiasm for your academics and extracurriculars indicates to interviewers that you'll take that pep with you to campus.

The interview can be a good chance to explain any blips in your record, and it can prove that you're the kind of person schools would want other students to strike up a conversation with in the dining hall. It's also a chance to share bits about yourself that didn't fit anywhere else in the application, like your hobby of reading Russian literature in your spare time. Taylor, who tells her teens to train for the interviews by answering her list of questions into a tape recorder, instructs them to bring an activity sheet ("I don't like to call them resumes when you're 17") to help break the ice.

No college is expecting everyone to be an extrovert, but if you clam up in front of adults or can't articulate your interests, the interview might not be such a good idea, Taylor advises. "Some kids I tell, 'Don't ask for it—don't answer the phone,' " she says. "One kid, I referred to him as the blob. He just sat there. He ended up doing very well, but he could not interview."

That avoidance approach could backfire, though, even if interviews are optional. "A student from the suburbs of Philly, we'd be upset if they don't do it," explains Lord, whose Haverford campus is outside Philadelphia. "If a student from California can't come, our interpretation of that is different." The same can be true of alumni interviews or local receptions—if you're not making that effort, you can appear unenthusiastic about the school.

Say it as though you mean it. It may seem small, but that slip-up could keep you from getting in. In this era of huge applicant pools and students who apply to more than 20 schools, demonstrating your desire to go to a particular one is key. If the college wants an interview, do the interview, and head there knowing something about what makes it unique—the killer classics department, senior projects that require off-campus internships, the dorm where everyone speaks Esperanto. (And besides, you should do enough research before applying to a school that you're excited about something beyond the color of the bumper sticker.)

Every year, Emory has a handful of applicants who write that they're excited about the school of engineering, Walls says. What's the problem? It doesn't have one. "This is a student who hasn't done the research we expect. The feeling is this student has other schools in mind," he explains. Laura Miller, college counselor at the North Shore Hebrew Academy in Long Island, asked the University of Pennsylvania admissions office why a student of hers who got into Yale didn't make the cut at Penn's school of engineering. "In the short essay on why do you want to go to Penn, he didn't mention engineering in his answer," she was told.

Editing your story. In the past, those materials would have completed your application and ended your tale, but in the Internet age, you have to think about the possibility of a surprise epilogue. Inside jokes with your pals on MySpace or Facebook could be no laughing matter if an admissions officer finds them and sees references to underage

drinking or other illegal activities. "We're in the information business," says Harvard's director of admissions, Marlyn McGrath Lewis. "We don't routinely check [the Web]. But we will do it." Poch says Pomona won't go looking for incriminating dirt online, but if it's called to the admissions staff's attention, it could be hard to ignore. "The lesson is, don't put up anything you wouldn't want your mother to know," says Applestein.

The truly Internet savvy may follow another Proctor suggestion: Bolster your hook by highlighting it on your sites, too.

And this may seem obvious, but don't forget to submit everything. Seltzer says that as students are upping their number of applications, they're getting careless with deadlines and forgetting about extra bits. A missing check, transcript, or supplemental essay can stall or even derail your chances of admission. So get everything in early, and check back to make sure nothing got lost in transit. That's the best way to ensure a happy ending to that story of yours.

tip. Be genuine. Every student knows a classmate who picked up an activity (or instrument or sport) to look good on paper. Colleges can spot that sort of thing a mile off.