June 1, 2010

Dear Eleventh Grade Students and Parents,

In order to make productive use of the summer, the English Department has devised a summer assignment which will walk students through the college essay writing process. In the attached packet, students will find a description of the assignment, a rubric with which it will be graded, writing tips, advice from college admissions directors and sample essays. By October 31st 2010, seniors should have completed and turned in this assignment to their twelfth grade English teachers. For answers to any questions or for more information, students should contact their current eleventh grade teachers. We have found that it is never too early to begin the college essay writing process.

Sincerely,

Mrs. Bonnie Guarino

Humanities Administrative Intern

BG/ed
Encl.
Cc  J. Leavy
    C. Leonardi
    J. Finello
Dear Eleventh Grade Student,

As a way to make your summer vacation more productive and your senior year less stressful, on the next page you will find a summer assignment—your college essay. Following the assignment is the rubric which will be used to grade your essay. The accompanying packet will walk you through the requirements and should answer any questions you may have.

The completed essay is due at the end of October 2011 and is to be turned in to your twelfth grade English teacher. It will be graded, so please look at the rubric and through the packet before you leave for the summer break, and if you have any questions ask your current English teacher.

Good Writing,
The English Department
* Your summer assignment is to respond to one of the topics below in approximately 500 words.

**College Essay- Common Application Topics**

The majority of colleges require the applicant to write an essay. The application may simply ask for a personal statement and leave the decision up to you as to how you wish to respond. Other colleges might ask you to write about suggested topics. Some of the questions Common Application colleges have asked are:

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experience adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.
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<th>Content</th>
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EVALUATOR'S NAME ______________
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Steps to a Great College Essay
You, in 500 Words or Less

The college essay application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision and spirit to the admission office. It’s a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. It’s also a chance to separate yourself out from the stack of essays and applications facing the admissions office. Make yours memorable. Don’t let the chance disappear.

- The essay should provide new information that is not available elsewhere in the application.
- Write about yourself/focus on one aspect (an in depth look is better than a look at everything)
- Teach the reader something they never knew before
- Have an emotional hook in your personal statement
- An unusual writing style can be a positive
- Use your own voice/ be genuine/tell what’s important to you
- Tell a good story
- Steer clear of topics that are way overdone (What my room says about me)
- Share your opinions, but avoid anything too risky or controversial
- Consider a mundane topic which can be revealing (daily bus ride to school, what the family goldfish observed from the fishbowl in the kitchen)
The Essay Writing Process

Okay, boot up your computer and let’s get to it. To write a college essay use the exact same three step process you’d use to write an essay for class: First pre-write, then draft, and finally edit. This process will let you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you’ll need to support it.

Pre-writing
To begin, you must collect and organize potential ideas for your essay’s focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- **Brainstorm**: Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on strengths of personality, not things you’ve done. For example, you are responsible (not an “Eagle Scout”) or committed (not “played basketball”). If you keep drifting toward events not characteristics, make a second list of the things you’ve done, places you’ve been, accomplishments you’re proud of: use them for the activities section.
- **Discover your Strengths**: Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline**: Now, next to each trait list five or piece of evidence from your life- things you've been or done-that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections**: Look for patterns in the material you’ve brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?
Now it’s time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body and conclusion.

- The **introduction** gives your reader an idea of the essay’s content. It can shrink when you need to be precise. One vivid sentence might do: “My favorite science project was a complete failure.”
- The **body** presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to **show rather than tell**.
- The **conclusion** can be brief as well- a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you’ve described.

An application essay doesn’t need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the *Congress of Vienna*, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main parts.
Nine Tips for Better Writing

1. Express yourself in positive language. Say what is, not what is not.

2. Use transitions between paragraphs. Transitions tie one paragraph to the next.
   - A transition can be a word, like later, furthermore, additionally, or moreover; a phrase like After this incident...; or an entire sentence.
   - If you are writing about Topic A and now want to discuss Topic B, you can begin the new paragraph with a transition such as “Like (or unlike) Topic A, Topic B...”

3. Vary your sentence structure. It’s boring to see subject, verb, object all the time. Mix simple, complex, and compound sentences.

4. Understand the words you write. You write to communicate, not to impress the admissions staff with your vocabulary. When you choose a word that means something other than what you intend, you neither communicate nor impress. You do convey the wrong message or convince the admissions officer that you are inarticulate.

5. Look up synonyms in a thesaurus when you use the same word repeatedly. After the DELETE key, the thesaurus is your best friend. As long as you follow Tip 4, using one will make your writing more interesting.

6. Be succinct. Compare:
   - During tenth and eleventh grades, there was significant development of my maturity and markedly improved self-discipline towards homework.
   - During my sophomore and junior years, I matured and my self-discipline improved tremendously.

The first example takes many more words to give the same information. The admissions officers are swamped; they do not want to spend more time than necessary reading your essay. Say what you have to say in as few words as possible. Tips 7, 8, and 9 will help you to implement this suggestion.

7. Make every word count. Do not repeat yourself. Each sentence and every word should state something new.

8. Avoid qualifiers such as rather, quite, somewhat, probably, possibly, etc.
   - You might improve your writing somewhat if you sometimes try to follow this suggestion.

The example contains nonsense. Deleting unnecessary qualifiers will strengthen your writing 1000%. Equivocating reveals a lack of confidence. If you do not believe what you write, why should the admissions officer?

9. Use the active voice. Compare:
   - The application was sent by the student. (Passive voice)
   - The student sent the application. (Active voice)
Advice from UVA Experts

- Fast Food. That's what I think of when I try to draw an analogy with the process of reading application essays.

- **The bad.** Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call McEssays - usually five-paragraph essays that consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalization. They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure and spelling, but they are boring. Sort of like a Big Mac. I have nothing against Big Macs, but the one I eat in Charlottesville is not going to be fundamentally different from the one I eat in Paris, Peoria or Palm Springs. I am not going to rave about the quality of a particular Big Mac. The same can be said about the generic essay. If an essay starts out: "I have been a member of the band and it has taught me leadership, perseverance and hard work," I can almost recite the rest of the essay without reading it. Each of the three middle paragraphs gives a bit of support to an abstraction, and the final paragraph restates what has already been said. A McEssay is not wrong, but it is not going to be a positive factor in the admission decision. It will not allow a student to stand out.

- A student who uses vague abstractions poured into a preset form will end up being interpreted as a vague series of abstractions. A student who uses cliché becomes, in effect, a cliché. If we are what we eat, we are also what we write.

- Not only does a preset form lead to a generic essay, so does a generic approach to what is perceived as the right topic. Far too many students begin the search of what to write about by asking: What does my college want to hear? The thinking goes something like this: If I can figure out what they are looking for, and if I can make myself look like that, then I'll improve my chances.

- Several years ago we asked students to describe an invention or creation from the past that was important to them. Our No.1 response - at least a thousand people - was the Declaration of Independence. This might make some people think that our college bound students are wonderfully patriotic, but given that my institution was found by Thomas Jefferson, I have a better answer. My guess is that a significant portion of the people who chose the Declaration did so because they thought we would want to hear about how much they admired Thomas Jefferson. While this may be a noble sentiment or, in some cases, a cynical maneuver, it ultimately meant that we had a thousand essays that sounded pretty much alike and therefore did not affect the admission decision. We are not looking for students who all think the same way, believe the same thing, or write the same essay.

- Too often, however students who want to avoid sounding generic with respect to form or content choose exactly the wrong remedy; they think that bigger topics - or bigger words - are better. But it is almost impossible, in 500 words, to write well about vast topics such as the death of a loved one (see excerpt: "the bad"). I am not advocating longer essays (just remember how many applications admissions officers need to read); I am advocating essays with a sharp focus that allows for detail. Detail is what differentiates one essay from another, one applicant from another.
Instead of detail, however, students try to impress us with big words. In trying to make a topic sound intellectual, students resort to the thesaurus and, as a result, end up sounding pretentious or at least insecure about using the voice they would use to describe an event to a friend. The student assumes that these "impressive" words intensify the experience for a reader rather than diminish it. Before students send off their essay, they should always read it aloud to someone who knows them well; let that person decide if an individual voices comes through.

**The good.** A good essay is not good because of the topic but because of the voice. A good writer can make any topic interesting, and a weak writer can make even the most dramatic topic a bore.

Students need only to recall the difference between two simple concepts - showing and telling. A good essay always shows; a weak essay always tells.

By showing, a writer appeals to all of the senses, not just the visual. To show means to provide a feast for the eyes, ears and, depending on the essay, the mouth, nose or skin. But rather than telling a reader what show is, it is much easier to show what showing is.

The student whose essay appears below, an example of "the good," has undertaken the task of describing - that is, of showing, in detail - the deterioration of her father as he gets treated for cancer. I do not know of a single member of our staff who was not deeply affected by this essay, the whole of which is as well done as the excerpt. What is impressive about the essay is the willingness of the writer to carefully notice everything that is happening. She opens with a sound, that coughing, and then creates a visual scene that we can see clearly. I said before that writing about death and sickness is perhaps one of the most difficult topics to tackle in a college essay, but here we have an example of why this topic can demonstrate not only writing ability but the courage to face a terrible situation head-on with intellect and power. Compare this with the other essay about death. There, even though the writer was saturated with emotions, he was merely telling us, in abstract terms, what he felt.

A writer who shows respects the intelligence of the reader; a writer who tells focuses on the ideas, or the perceived ideas, behind the details. He or she is more concerned about demonstrating the ability to be abstract than the ability to be precise. In a short, personal essay, precision is power.

**The risky.** Any student who has already learned the basics of showing should think about taking a risk on the college essay. What kind of risk? Think about starting an essay with: "I sat in the back of the police car." Or, as in the example (below): "The woman wanted breasts." These first sentences use what journalists call a hook. The sentence reaches out from the page and grabs our attention. It creates a bit of controversy and an expectation that the writer might be willing to take academic risks in the classroom. A good hook does not mean that a good essay will follow, but it does mean that a reader will look forward to seeing what will unfold.

A risky essay can border on the offensive. In some cases, as in the excerpt, it is possible that a few readers might write off an applicant based upon questionable taste. That is the danger of taking a risk. People wonder if they will be penalized if they do take a risk in an application. They want to know, in other words, if there is any risk in taking a risk. Yes, there is. I can say, however, that my experience in the admissions field has led me to
conclude the great majority of admissions officers are an open-minded lot and that to err on the side of the baroque might not be as bad as to stay in the comfort of the boring.

- The best essays are crafted not from a formula for success but by a voice that is practiced. Those who are willing to take a risk, to focus on that part of the world that matters to them and to show the passion and the practice it takes to write about it well, will help their chances of admission through their essay.

- **Excerpts from essays to U.Va.**
  
  --**The bad:** From an early age, we accept death as the inevitable, but do not comprehend its actual denotation. Death is the impending future that all people must eventually grasp. In my early teens, my grandfather tragically perished. As a youth who did not identify with such a cataclysm I was saturated with various emotions. Initially, I was grieved by the loss of a loved one and could not understand why this calamity had to befall upon my family. I always considered death to have a devastating effect, but was shocked by the emotional strain it places upon an individual.

  --**The good:** The coughing came first, the hacking in the middle of the night. Then there were the multiple doctor visits, each one the same: the little white rooms with magazines where I tried not to stare at the bald, gaunt woman across from me. One of the white coats finally said something, steadily, forecasting an 80 percent change of rain. The list of second opinions grew too long to count, looking for someone to say the right thing. Finally, there was relief in hearing the name of a kinder killer: lymphoma.

  --**The risky:** The woman wanted breasts. She had fame waiting on her like a slave, money dripping from her fingertips and men diving into her being. Yet she wanted breasts because the world wanted her to have a bust. She looked at the big black and white glossy of herself arching on a silken carpet and knew that the world would be satisfied with her airbrush deception.

  ----------This woman is us. My family has been in existence for nearly 20 years now, and we are aging and losing our own breasts and tight face - the giddy happiness of a child's unconditional love for his family, the young family's need for each other. Yet, we are constantly pressured by society's family icons into compromising our change and age instead of accepting it.
Discovering Voice: Essays That Matter

Students *always* ask about the essay. Topic selection, length, style, message - there is so much to think about. We realize that it is not an easy process, to say the least.

These pieces captured the distinct voices of these young men and women, and forged a powerful and affective human connection with their readers. They truly helped to set these students apart in our applicant pool. They compelled, magnetized, and fascinated us. They demonstrated creativity and illuminated curiosity.

We hope that these works will inspire you to find your unique voice as you craft your words and stories in the months to come.

- Admissions Officers

Another Special Warning: Essays from the Internet...
Don't Even Think About It

College admissions offices are not naïve. They are aware that you can pay someone to write your essay and that essays are floating around for sale on the Internet. Don't fool yourself; you certainly won't fool anybody else. The admissions process has checks and balances, and the essay is part of that system.

If there are inconsistencies in your application, if what you say in your essay doesn't jibe with a recommendation or another part of your application, if the writing is perfect but you're a B English student, red flags will fly. Write your own essay
As you reflect on life thus far, what has someone said, written, or expressed in some fashion that is especially meaningful to you. Why?

According to Mother Teresa, “If you judge someone, you have no time to love them.” I first saw this quote when it was posted on my sixth-grade classroom wall, and I hated it. Rather, I hated Mother Teresa’s intention, but I knew that the quote’s veracity was inarguable. I felt that it was better to judge people so as not to have to love them, because some people don’t deserve a chance. Judgments are shields, and mine was impenetrable.

Laura was my dad’s first girlfriend after my parents’ divorce. The first three years of our relationship were characterized solely by my hatred toward her, manifested in my hurting her, each moment hurting myself twice as much. From the moment I laid eyes on her, she was the object of my unabated hatred, not because of anything she had ever done, but because of everything she represented. I judged her to be a heartless, soulless, two-dimensional figure: she was a representation of my loneliness and pain. I left whenever she entered a room, I slammed car doors in her face. Over those three years, I took pride in the fact that I had not spoken a word to her or made eye contact with her. I treated Laura with such resentment and anger because my hate was my protection, my shield. I, accustomed to viewing her as the embodiment of my pain, was afraid to let go of the anger and hate, afraid to love the person who allowed me to hold onto my anger, afraid that if I gave her a chance, I might love her.

For those three years, Laura didn’t hate me; she understood me. She understood my anger and my confusion, and Laura put her faith in me, although she had every reason not to. To her, I was essentially a good person, just confused and scared; trying to do her best, but just not able to get a hold of herself. She saw me as I wished I could see myself.

None of this became clear to me overnight. Instead, over the next two years, the one-dimensional image of her in my mind began to take the shape of a person. As I let go of my hatred, I gave her a chance. She became a woman who, like me, loves Ally McBeal and drinks a lot of coffee; who, unlike me, buys things advertised on infomercials.

Three weeks ago, I saw that same Mother Teresa quote again, but this time I smiled. Laura never gave up on me, and the chance she gave me to like her was a chance that changed my life. Because of this, I know the value of a chance, of having faith in a person, of seeing others as they wish they could see themselves. I’m glad I have a lot of time left, because I definitely have a lot of chances left to give, a lot of people left to love.
I feel sick. I’m nervous and my stomach’s turning. The room is lined with neat rows of desks, each one occupied by another kid my age. We’re all about to take the SATs. The proctor has instructed us to fill out section four: “race.”

I cannot be placed neatly into a single racial category, although I’m sure that people walking down the street don’t hesitate to label me “caucasian.” Never in my life has a stranger not been surprised when I told them I was half black.

Having light skin, eyes, and hair, but being black and white often leaves me misperceived. Do I wish that my skin were darker so that when I tell people I’m black they won’t laugh at me? No, I accept and value who I am. To me, being black is more than having brown skin; it’s having ancestors who were enslaved, a grandfather who managed one of the nation’s oldest black newspapers, the Chicago Daily Defender, and a family who is as proud of their heritage as I am. I prove that one cannot always discern another’s race by his or her appearance.

I often find myself frustrated when explaining my racial background, because I am almost always proving my “blackness” and left neglecting my Irish-American side. People have told me that “one drop of black blood determines your race,” but I opt not to follow this rule. In this country a century ago, most mixed-race children were products of rape or other relationships of power imbalance, but I am not. I am a child in the twenty-first century who is a product of a loving relationship. I choose the label biracial and identify with my black and Irish sides equally. I am proud to say that my paternal great-grandparents immigrated to this country from Ireland and that I have found their names on the wall at Ellis Island, but people are rarely interested in that. They can’t get over the idea that this girl, who according to their definition looks white, is not.

Last year, at my school’s “Sexual Awareness Day,” a guest lecturer spoke about the stereotypical portrayal of different types of people on MTV’s The Real World. He pointed out that the white, blond-haired girls are always depicted as completely ditsy and asked me how it felt to fit that description. I wasn’t surprised that he assumed I was white, but I did correct his mistake. I told him that I thought the show’s portrayal of white girls with blond hair was unfair. I went on to say that we should also be careful not to make assumptions about people based on their physical appearance. “For example,” I told him, “I’m not white.” It was interesting that the lecturer, whose goal was to teach students not to judge or make assumptions about people based on their sexual orientation, had himself made a racial assumption about me.

I often find myself wishing that racial labels didn’t exist so that people wouldn’t rely on race alone to understand a person’s thoughts, actions, habits, and personality. One’s race does not reveal the content of their character. When someone finds out that I am biracial, do I become a different person in his or her eyes? Am I suddenly “deeper,” because I’m not just the “plain white girl” they assumed I was? Am I more complex? Can they suddenly relate to me more (or less)? No, my race alone doesn’t reveal who I am. If one’s race cannot be determined simply by looking at a person, then how can it be possible to look at a person and determine her inner qualities? Through census forms, racial questionnaires on the SATs, and other devices, our society tries to draw conclusions about people based on appearance. It is a quick and easy way to categorize people without taking the time to get to know them, but it simply cannot be done.