

## 4. HOW TO TELL THE GOOD FROM THE BAD

We have marked the relative strengths and weaknesses of actual essays to be explicitly clear about how we draw distinctions between essays of different quality.

### Less Competitive Essays

The following three essays missed the mark for the reasons indicated, and those reasons apply whether the essays were written for the Common App, a specific institution or scholarship, or both.

#### Example 1:

#### *A Good Teacher*

*A person who has had a significant influence on me would have to be my Social Studies teacher Mrs. Espinosa. As a sophomore she taught me the basics of World History. She made this a very exciting yet informative class through all the projects and book work we did. Then — As a junior, I enrolled in two different classes that she taught. The first one being Civics. Her knowledge and creativity again made this class very exciting. Then, I took Intro to American History. As a senior I am following that up with AP American History and the class is still very enjoyable. I would have to say that Mrs. Espinosa has influenced me in several ways. He has taught me how to work hard and not settle for anything less than my best. At the same time she has shown me that Social Studies can be very fun and exciting if you a willing to do the work. All of these things have definitely influenced what I want to do for a living, which will probably be in politics or government.*

Random capitalization shows a lack of attention..

Like what?

Why/how? So far we have a list of courses (already detailed on the transcript) and some vague adjectives, but no specific images or anecdotes, or insight into what the student likes in particular.

How? Remember: the compelling story lies in the specificity and detail.

Unnecessary filler words, just like the opening sentence of this essay.

She?

Repetitive without additional detail or example. Also, "You ARE?" Again, these types of errors will catch the attention of review committees — and not in a good way. This also suggests there's more to the story that would also tell us something about the student. How/why did she realize that the subject took work and then was rewarding?

We're sure you have identified many pitfalls this essay illustrates that you should avoid. For example:

- First and foremost, this essay gives us no insight into the student.
  - We don't know how the teacher was knowledgeable, interesting and creative, **OR what effect this had on the student.**

- o It would be more helpful – and interesting – if the student wrote that she or he admired the teacher because she did in-depth research on original texts written on animal skins...or because she put herself through graduate school while raising her brother's children after the brother died in a car accident. Do you see how either – or any other specific example – would tell us more about the teacher and therefore the student?
- The essay is one long paragraph, which makes it a bit of work to get through.
- It “tells” us the teacher and courses were interesting, but never why or how. It would be more compelling if the student had told us a story of one particularly interesting or creative lesson the teacher had taught, allowing us to see both the teacher and student in action.
- The essay also wastes valuable space listing individual courses rather than focusing on the teacher and why the student chose to write about her.
- Finally, the essay, though short, has many grammatical errors that distract from what the student is trying to say and indicate either a lack of academic ability or a certain level of carelessness. If proofreading isn't your strong suit, find a friend, family member or teacher to look over your essay for you.

*The title is not actually what this essay is about, as the student never mentions medical marijuana, but rather merely legalization and recreational use. ALSO NOTE: while all of the essay examples we're discussing here happen to have titles, this is not necessary, nor even a preference. If we had to guess we'd say about half do and half don't, and the choice doesn't matter. What counts is that the essay accomplishes its purpose, as our annotations point out.*

**Example 2:**

*We don't need to be told what the essay is about. Just jump into the topic to make the best use of your limited space and to capture the reader's attention.*

*The Unchecked Expansion of Medical Marijuana*

*This essay has to do with the issue of the spread of marijuana across the U.S. and its potential legalization. I believe that allowing marijuana to continue its spread throughout states such as Washington and Colorado would be harmful to the United States. By letting marijuana continue throughout the states, the government is saying that rules do not matter.*

*There's a fundamental flaw with this reasoning: If the rules are changed in a democratic way, the continued legalization of marijuana wouldn't be in opposition to "the rules."*

*Again, if it were legalized, they wouldn't be breaking the law.*

*If marijuana were to be legalized it would give a bad impression to the citizens of the United States. Many people would think that if you do not like or agree with a law, then all you have to do is break it and the law will be changed. Many people do not agree with marijuana being illegal and they continue to misuse the drug. By just letting people get away with it, the government is saying that people do not need to be punished for breaking laws.*

*This repeats the last sentence of the first paragraph. It would be more interesting – and tell us something about the student – if he told us why it's important to follow laws and have consequences if they're broken or what about the legalization of marijuana goes against his values. Why was this topic of such personal importance to him?*

Since this is essentially an academic paper or position, it's worth mentioning that this claim is not supported by any data, which has the effect of it reading like hearsay.

It's interesting to note that none of the potential benefits presented by proponents have been acknowledged, much less refuted (even the one in the student's own title).

*Another issue with the spreading and legalization of marijuana is that it would send the wrong message to the youth of the United States. The youth are the future of this country; their beliefs will become what this country is based on. I believe that this country has worked too hard to create a drug-free mentality in the youth to just give up.*

*Marijuana is seen as one of the safer illegal drugs out there. While many people start with marijuana, they rarely end with this drug. Marijuana is a gateway drug, allowing people to make contact with more deadly drugs. By making marijuana easier to access, you also make worse drugs easier to access.*

*By making marijuana legal, no problems would be solved. It would make it seem as though any laws could be changed if they are broken. There would be nothing positive for this country that would result in the legalization of marijuana.*

It's nice to see what the student believes here, but we're not told why he believes it, nor are we really given details as to what he means in this statement. Why is legalizing marijuana "giving up" in the student's opinion? Why is a drug-free mentality worth cultivating and what would be the consequences of discontinuing its cultivation?

The primary detriment of this essay as an application essay is that it tells us very little about the student, since it appears to be an academic paper used as a substitute for writing an application essay (and it's a poor academic paper at that, because it is full of circular reasoning).

Remember: the purpose of the application essay is to give reviewers insight into who the student is as a person. It's possible for this to be done by taking on an issue of local or national significance, but only if the student shares his or her beliefs and values. An effective essay about an issue would clearly indicate why the student cares about the issue and was motivated to get involved with it – and to choose it as the topic of the essay.

More than whether the student is for or against a particular issue, reviewers want to know why. Filling the essay with his self would lead this student's essay to stand out regardless of how many other applicants chose the same issue. This student's essay, however, could easily be confused with anyone else's as the reasons cited are general, not personal or specific.

**Example 3:**

Opening is vague and a bit overblown.

**Shock**

*Shock. When one's world suddenly crashes around him, the pain is not felt to avoid a complete obliteration. "You will not be able to play again." The words were potent despite the monotonous speech in which my doctor delivered them. Although my life has been riddled with various obstacles, the most life-changing one was the torn meniscus suffered in 2012.*

*Lacrosse has always been my love and now I would not be able to play for the rest of the season. I never saw the opponent coming, but they stole the ball and they stole my ability to play.*

"The opponent" and "they" don't agree. Should be he or she.

You don't have enough space and reviewers don't have enough time to read empty sentences like this.

*Health is the single greatest opportunity that we have in our lives. It is also one of the most overlooked opportunities. Before this, I wouldn't have considered myself a person who takes his health for granted. In fact, ever since my dad was diagnosed (and survived) a rare form of cancer, I have thanked the Lord every day for my health and strength. This trait resulted in a bitterness inside of me. I couldn't figure out why something for which I was grateful could be stripped away from me. It was devastating.*

The student tells us he had a bitterness but doesn't show us how he overcame it.

*People say that struggle creates empathy. This is true for me. This event created in me an empathy for all people who have a health issue that has separated them from doing something that they love. None of us gets out of this life untouched, as I learned on that fateful day.*

Again, this tells us something about the student rather than showing us the student in action and letting us decide he is empathetic.

What was that change? The essay doesn't show us the student before the accident, nor does it illustrate the hard-won transformation.

*Tearing my meniscus is a significant personal experience due to the immense change that it inspired within me and my life. Today, the remembrance of that shock encourages me to pursue its opposite.*

*I'm now much stronger for having lived to tell this tale. — How?*

The melodramatic tone of this essay manages to reveal a lack of empathy while asserting the opposite. Comparing the student's inability to complete the lacrosse season to his father's rare cancer and others' injuries or disabilities that keep them from "doing something that they love" (much less from living autonomous lives or living to their full life expectancy) demonstrates immaturity and lack of awareness.

Students don't need to have experienced struggle beyond a torn meniscus (or losing the Student Council election or debate final), but their discussion of that struggle should illustrate a certain degree of understanding and perspective that is lacking in this piece.

## Competitive Essays

The following two essays are solid examples of what we typically see in competitive applications. They, combined with the other application components, gave students a strong chance of securing college admission and scholarships.

### Example 1:

#### *The Culmination of a Dream*

*After a year of preparation, the moment of truth had come. I was at the Distributive Education Clubs of America (DECA) State Leadership Conference. The conference was coming to a close and the students who would become the new state officers for the upcoming school year were about to be named. These students would lead the 4,000+ members of DECA in our state into the future. I had invested countless hours of work in preparation of this moment. The process was by no means a popularity contest, but rather, a daunting two-day test in front of a panel of students and teachers where only the 12 best candidates would emerge as state officers. A speech in front of the entire panel and multiple interviews were just a part of this process.*

*I watched as a current state officer walked to the microphone. For a moment, the crowd became silent in anticipation of the results. At least, it became silent in my mind. The letter was slowly opened and after what seemed like an eternity, the names were read. I heard my name announced, indicating that I was elected as state president. I felt a great sense of accomplishment. What had begun as a dream, became a reality.*

*This experience was significant to me because I had failed to reach this goal the previous year. Prior to this year, I worked hard toward this goal, but had come up short. At first, it felt like all the speeches, all the interviews and all the hours spent creating flyers had been wasted.*

*But in reflection, I came to an understanding: what I lacked was experience. I realized that my time had not been wasted, but had established a great foundational experience. It gave me a year to mature and to perfect all the skills that I would need to become an effective state officer. It allowed me to hone my speaking ability and*

*A lot of students shy away from using "I" and "my" in essays. And we get it: English teachers edit for this. But this doesn't hold for application essays, as their primary purpose is to reveal more about the student as a person. Similar rules for academic essays don't apply, as this is a personal essay by definition — or should be.*

*Nice opening. Starts with description of the conference winding down, then into the hours of preparation that build the importance, and therefore the suspense of the upcoming speech. Piques interest and engages the reader.*

*This is authentic and honest — owns the initial frustration and also shows perseverance, increased motivation to prepare that much more, and a willingness to make herself vulnerable (again) by running a second time.*

Provides concrete examples of this student's optimism, a key component of Emotional Intelligence, which is one indicator of future accomplishment, as well as a factor in resilience, both of which speak to the student's character and potential for future accomplishment.

*to perfect my interview strategies. It gave me experience. This maturation period allowed my leadership skills to flourish. I returned the next year extremely motivated and confident in pursuing my goal.*

*The initial experience I had gained was a pivotal reason as to why I was elected the following year. I had to work hard and overcome failure in order to achieve my goal, creating in me a great respect for my position.*

*This experience allowed me to achieve a goal because it forced me to reevaluate how to approach success and failure. I am thankful for the experience I gained the previous year because I earned the experience of a lifetime the following year. The skills I acquired did not just make me a better candidate, but a better leader as well. I intend to use these skills as I lead the state DECA, as I progress into college, and in my future career.*

What strikes us most about this essay is the honest discussion of failure, as well as the concrete examples of what the student proactively tackled in order to improve and to do better in seizing her chance at a second attempt. That she took that chance shows both courage and strength of character. Review committees are not expecting applicants to be fully-formed and have it all figured out, just to illustrate reflection and growth.

Attempting to overstate your development or presenting your current state as an end point could have negative consequences. We've read essays in which students have overconfidently stated their vast learning or asserted answers to complex social, economic or political problems and therefore inadvertently come across as naïve, immature, ill-informed or egotistical.

In contrast, this student shares one specific experience and her subsequent realization of the benefits of a setback that initially frustrated her. She could do better at tying the issue strongly to her particular ongoing path of personal development, which would give us both a clearer sense that she understands she's still learning and growing and also provide key insight into her individual values and motivations. In other words, why she, personally, wants to be a state DECA officer and how she's different than other students who want to be a state DECA officer. Yet still, this is a solidly competitive application essay.

## Example 2:

### *A Man of Influence*

*At first glance, Malik Anderson is just another high school teacher. With his curly hair left natural, wearing a school T-shirt and jeans, he does not look like an extraordinary person, but he is the most amazing person I have ever met. Mr. Anderson is the director of my music department and over the past four years of my life he has helped me to find the person that I am today.*

*Mr. Anderson has a different approach to learning than most other teachers. He greatly believes that trial and error is the only way a student will ever learn how to succeed. Our music department is completely student-run, only advised by Mr. Anderson. This means that every student has the chance to work in a similar way to how professional companies have their technicians and musicians work. By allowing students to create for themselves, Mr. Anderson builds an environment for experimentation.*

*This paragraph drills down deeper than the last, telling us how the above has impacted this student personally.*

*Without this environment I would not have discovered that I want to be a professional musician. Every time I had a question without a straight-forward answer, Mr. Anderson would make me figure it out, pointing me in the right direction, then letting me think about the possibilities. Mr. Anderson has kindled my creativity and allowed me to find my place in the world.*

*This sentence basically reiterates "second father," but because it's more specific than the first sentence, we'd recommend cutting "second father," which is a bit of a cliché.*

*Many teachers do not spend more time with you than their families, but Mr. Anderson has managed to become a second father to those of us in the department. Due to the fact that we spend most of our evenings and weekends in rehearsal, he watched over us as if we were his own kids. One of the great lessons that Mr. Anderson taught me is to always respect the space you are working in and the people you are working with. Many people spend their time in the auditorium and if we do not respect it, it will be ruined and we will not be able to perform there anymore. Also if we do not respect those we work with, we will be stuck together for a year, and the process will be very painful. Mr. Anderson is always there if I need help and is always pushing me to do my best.*

*The first sentence highlighted here is a necessary explanation for those not familiar – and given quickly so that the focus of the essay remains on the teacher and student.*

*The 2nd sentence then tells us why the above is meaningful. Without this sentence (which most students would leave out), the essay becomes nothing but facts about the teacher and department.*

*This slips into generalizing a bit, but still provides some examples.*

*Not necessary—  
essay has already  
sufficiently ended,  
and how would  
the student really  
return the favor  
to Mr. Anderson,  
anyway?*

*Four years might not seem like a long time to get to know someone, but in this time I have watched in awe as Mr. Anderson handled moody teenagers, cared for his aging parents and was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis (MS). I would not trade any of the time I have spent with Mr. Anderson. His perseverance and guidance have molded me into who I am. He inspires me to be the best I can be and I strive to be as influential as him one day. I will never forget what Mr. Anderson has done for me, — and I hope one day to return the favor.*

Despite its shortcomings, this essay illustrates how to talk effectively about someone important to you while also revealing more about yourself. The entire third paragraph takes the general meaning of the teacher's actions and makes it personal, thereby providing more insight into the student.

Another student in Mr. Anderson's music department could have experienced the same things but appreciated them for different reasons — or not appreciated them at all. This personal discussion is what will distinguish this student's application from others in her school — and others in the applicant pool.

One shortcoming worth additional discussion is the brief mention of Mr. Anderson's illness at the end of the essay. It seems like his battling MS while remaining a committed teacher would have influenced the student more than his having taught her to respect the auditorium as a physical space. Sharing a story of how Mr. Anderson remained focused on his students during his illness and how that affected her would be more effective than discussing respecting space if it's true that this was more exceptional and therefore more meaningful to her. If not, then we wouldn't even mention the illness, since it becomes distracting to just drop it in and not discuss it.

### **Highly Competitive Essays**

The following two pieces are exceptional application essays for the reasons indicated below. They also provide an example of how two essays on the "same topic" (the students' time with their fathers) are both completely different and also compelling because of the particular details that distinguish one student's unique experience from the other's (for a third example of this, see Chapter IV, section three where we've included a straightforward/factual essay that a student wrote about her father's illness inspiring her motivation).



**Example 1:**

*Holding my cheeks with his hands firmly while gazing into my eyes; my father said, "Take care of your mother and sister and please promise me that you will study very hard, your education will be our way out of poverty." His moist eyes revealed tears fighting to be held back. He whispered to me, "Son, I love you, and I'm making this decision to provide you a better future. He kissed my forehead and quickly looked away as tears had begun flowing down his cheeks. I ran back to hug my mother and sister, and together we gazed at my father through the big windows of the airport.*

*Imagery – Puts us there in the airport with him, in the moment. Allows us to see what's happening to this student and to sympathize with him while it's happening. This immediacy gives a face – and a voice – to the story many of us have only heard about in less personal summaries.*

*Objective telling of his situation keeps the essay from slipping into sentimentality or trying to manipulate the reader's emotions (which can sometimes back-fire).*

*I grew up in one of the worst neighborhoods in Mexico City, Mexico. I vividly remember my surroundings at a young age and the struggle of living in deep poverty. I have a crystal clear memory of when my mother would take us to have dinner with the neighbors because she couldn't afford to place food on our table that night. I can recall the fear that my sister and I had to share every time my mother left home for work. Shootings and crime were very prominent and widespread throughout the neighborhood.*

*These details – again, shared in a neutral, objective way – personalize the essay and allow readers insight into the student's experience.*

*Again, these specific, personal details help us begin to know the student and the environment from which he's come.*

*Life brightened when my father brought us to the United States after four endless years. Luckily, we no longer had to beg for food or sell my clothes to get a warm meal.*

*Because of my upbringing, I feel that I was pre-destined to fail. This likelihood regarding my future made me shiver but it also filled me with passion to prove that I could overcome adversity, and that I could convert my struggles into a reason to succeed, rather than an excuse to fail.*

*Speaks to the student's character and initiative that he chose to work that much harder.*

*One late afternoon, I persistently attempted to wake my father up so that together we could complete my third-grade homework assignment. Using an old English-Spanish dictionary, my father and I used to lie down on the carpet to translate my entire homework assignment word by word. We sure missed Google-Translator. But that night my father did not wake up due to his fever. "Son, try it on your own, I'll be there in a few."*

*Speaks to the relative ease that we now have through software... and that many have through studying in their native language. In addition, the quick, well placed joke lets us know this student has kept his sense of humor despite the challenges he's faced, which tells us a lot about his personality and resilience.*

This description backs up the picture of a third grader on his own that the last paragraph has set up for us. It also reveals character and personality, as the student is courageous enough to honestly describe the emotions he was experiencing.

I became shocked; panic rushed through my bloodstream and my body's temperature dropped. Never before had I completed a homework assignment on my own. Feeling frightened and isolated, I opened the cover page of the dictionary with a bit of anxiety.

That day marks a pivotal point towards my interest for learning, my love for understanding, and my passion for discovering. Although it may have taken me four hours to complete a twenty-minute assignment, I, for the first time, felt accomplished; I felt success and I felt instant pride which captivated me completely.

To see my mother and father release tears of joy for what they called "my bravery" was my first taste of success. They were proud, but not more proud than I was.

His gentle mocking of his third-grade accomplishment shows us that he doesn't take himself too seriously, while also demonstrating that he understands the very real impact of this milestone moment. Discusses intellectual curiosity, drive and resilience while still remaining humble.

This student's emotional honesty and specific details make us feel like he's inviting us to know more about his intimate thoughts and motivations. He admits and takes responsibility for the potentially negative emotions as much as he shares the positives of his situation, which rings true. Many essays that just tell us what people think we want to hear focus fully on the positive aspects, which has the effect of being forced and false. This student seems more focused on trying to share his experience than on spinning it. He also describes it in detail so we're there with him, which allows us to interpret the events rather than having him interpret them for us. At the same time, he responds to selection criteria. While discussing a momentous experience and being humorous and personal, his essay also illustrates academic achievement (and motivation), overcoming adversity and strong character.

## Example 2:

Establishes the continuity of what we're about to hear. This is a normal, recurring activity for this student.

### Sunday Best

Subverts expectations in calling work clothes "Sunday best." This engages the reader from the outset.

It is a typical evening in July. I have on my Sunday best, a shirt with a fraying collar and a pair of my dad's faded Levi's. My shoes are still caked in mud from last weekend's venture, a two-day endeavor laying stone pavers in the backyard.

Out of the Subaru, I pull a worn, mustard-yellow dolly with wheels crudely secured by mismatched nuts and bolts while my dad loads the

Great detail that allows us to see the action.

Implies this is an accomplishment of his dad's that this student is proud of, and also connects to his own long-held goal, as we see later.

cabinet we assembled yesterday. Office projects have become customary for my dad and me. I think back to the late nights spent painting, installing equipment, making renovations always listening to the usual: my dad's favorite, *The Eagles*.

This phrasing establishes the projects as a meaningful shared experience between father and son. "Customary" activities are traditions, "thinking back" suggests nostalgia, and calling up *The Eagles* engages our senses further so we, too, can experience the atmosphere of nostalgia for these project days.

Parallelism links this student to his dad, indicating the impact his father has had on his life and goals. The specific detail again allows us to picture the scene but also calls to mind the endearing boy who wrote it and clearly loved his dad so much — not to mention the father who hung it proudly.

As we enter my dad's office, an LED sign greets us: *Welcome to Kimura Orthodontics*, the realization of a goal he had since seventh grade. Similarly, in his private office hangs a sign of my own, a picture I drew in kindergarten that reads: "When I grow up, I want to be a detes (dentist). I want to roc (work) with Dad. I want to tech cis (teach kids) how to besh ther teth (brush their teeth)." To me, becoming an orthodontist is one of my goals, a means of bringing a smile to people's faces both literally and figuratively.

This student's choice to share this story about how he learned from his dad is much more effective than just telling us "I learned a lot from him" or "He taught me so much." Specificity and imagery are compelling skills to employ.

This Sunday we are putting up a 60-pound cabinet. We start taking measurements, drawing pencil lines on the clean walls. As he usually does, my dad reminds me to measure twice and drill once. I appreciate his advice. During our first father-son project, my dad cautioned me to not touch the drill. However, being a curious five-year-old, I disregarded his guidance and quickly found out that you should not handle a drill bit that has just been used.

Vivid image that indicates he, too, is older. Elegant way to indicate the passing of time.

Today, we still have the Craftsman drill, which now dons a suit of duct-tape armor. My dad pulls it out and begins slowing punching into the drywall. Realizing that our toggle bolts are too large for the holes, my dad switches to a larger countersinking bit. When it comes time to mount the cabinet, we run into difficulty holding it up on the wall.

Again draws from his dad's example, while also illustrating his humility.

Trying to employ my dad's effortless problem solving, I notice some storage boxes on the floor and stack them on a desk to support the cabinet. My dad lets me screw the cabinet into the wall using an electric screwdriver that has long since run out of batteries.

We FEEL this because we already know how meaningful this day has been to the student. We are there with him.

As we leave the office, late as always, the hallway is empty. All the suites are dark inside with only the hall sconces giving off light. My dad slaps me on the back and with a firm grip on my shoulder and tells me good job. My small contribution of stacking the storage boxes did not go unnoticed. As the elevator doors open, my dad in his understated, sincere tone tells me, "One day, you will be the orthodontist patients will come to see at Kimura Orthodontics." Inside, I smile, wondering when our next office project will be.

Even more, his dad believes in his chosen career path and ability to succeed.

This student essay tells us a moving story about his relationship with his father, while also giving us honest (not superficial or heavy-handed) insight into his intellectual motivation and goals, as well as conveying atmosphere, imagery and character. His is an example of how to write effectively about another person because he related his relationship with and respect for his father to his own life, goals and aspirations. If he hadn't provided some information as to why he chose to write about his dad, the essay could easily have become a biography of his father without any insight into why this student found him compelling or admirable.

Instead, reviewers could tell the difference between this student's essay about his dad and hundreds of other students' essays about their dads (including the previous examples) because he spent focused time discussing why his father was important to him in his distinct, specifically descriptive essay. Similarly, the fact that he shared such details as the picture he drew that hangs in his father's office helps us to visualize the picture and therefore him, both of which lead him to stand out in our memories.