



AVOID THESE FIVE PITFALLS IN YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY





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What is SOAR?

SOAR is the premier college and scholarship consultancy that offers:

- 1-on-1 consulting for college admissions
- Expert guidance for all application components (essays, resumes, letters of recommendation, and waitlist letters)
- Interview prep
- Free resources – admissions guides, articles and webinar
- Sample essays
- SOAR blog



Personal Statement Pitfall #1: Lack of Substance

Writing about nothing will bore your readers. If your personal statement or supplemental essay lacks substance, you'll lose your audience very quickly. It's that simple. And you may never get them back.

Pique your readers' attention and then maintain their interest with an essay that contains:

1. Substantive self-reflection
2. Use of specifics, examples, and anecdotes
3. Revelations of your thought processes and feelings

1. Substantive self-reflection

You need to start your writing process with self-knowledge. You don't have to search the internet or a large library to fulfill this introspective step. Start by thinking about your experiences and your dreams. Search your head and your heart. That is where the substance of a good personal statement is stored.

2. Use of specifics, examples, and anecdotes

Once you've collected your thoughts, use anecdotes, specifics, and examples to show that your dreams are grounded in experience. Good examples can bring your essays to life and engage the reader. Which is more vivid and engaging: stating that you worked in a soup kitchen over the summer, or describing how you felt standing behind the buffet table ladling out soup to mothers and children at your local women's shelter in 90+ degree weather?

3. Revelations of your thought processes and feelings

At the same time, recognize that essays containing only examples and anecdotes won't necessarily reveal your thought processes and motivations. Limiting yourself like that may also come off as superficial. Make sure you balance your stories with insight and analysis. To return to our women's shelter example above, which would be better – saying that you built relationships by talking to some of the women, or describing a particular conversation you had, and then elaborating on how it affected you? Motivated you? Changed you?

Avoid Pitfall #1: Engage your readers by constructing your essays (personal statements and supplemental) on a foundation of self-reflection and with a structure consisting of an astute use of examples balanced by analysis.



Personal Statement Pitfall #2: Failure to Answer the Question

College applicants often ask, "What does the admissions reader want?" They want you to answer their question. It sounds simple enough, but too frequently, applicants don't fulfill this simple request.

If the question asks you to discuss a failure, somewhere in that essay you must discuss a time when you really blew it. Follow the moment you would prefer to forget with lessons learned, and if appropriate, add in a nice dose of how you successfully handled a similar subsequent situation. But the starting point must be an answer to the question posed.

If the question asks why you want to attend a specific school, you need to provide specifics about how that program relates to your interests and goals. Don't respond with an answer that could apply to all schools. That is a non-answer, non-starter, and probable ding. Don't tell them why you are more qualified than anyone else to attend their program. Just answer the question.

What if it's an open-ended question with general instructions? Simple – just follow the general instructions and enjoy the luxury of writing about what interests you and best presents your qualifications.

Avoid Pitfall #2: Keep your application alive and answer the question.



Personal Statement Pitfall #3: Clichéd Writing

Don't hide your lucid answers to essay questions behind meaningless verbiage and abused clichés.

Take a look at this:

"When I was shadowing a physician, I wanted to exceed patient expectations and let them know that I was taking their health to the next level, so first and foremost by thinking outside the box, I helped draw conclusions across multiple disciplines and immersed myself in the healthcare administrative vertical as well. When I was focused on the administrative element in the hospital office space, I would spend a ton of time building and updating scalable systems, from knowledge management to invoicing and payroll."

What? Yikes! It looks like this guy used his grand thesaurus of buzzwords and crammed as much jargon into his short paragraph as possible. Write directly and clearly so people can understand you. Can the buzz! Perhaps a translation would be:

"When I was shadowing a physician, I wanted to impress our patients with outstanding performance. I personally and creatively drew from my experience on the hospital floor and as an administrative assistant to improve some administrative tasks, ensuring that all systems from personnel to invoicing supported the hospital staff."

Avoid Pitfall #3: Write pointed and direct answers to the questions. Can the buzz!



Personal Statement Pitfall #4: One-Dimensional

When you write one dimensional you tend to blend into the great mass of applicants who, are on a superficial level, are very much like you. They may have the same goal (or similar, since you're all applying to school). They have similar education and industry backgrounds. They have done about the same type of prep you've done to gain acceptance.

But blending in is exactly what you don't want to do.

How can you distinguish yourself?

Use specifics to tell your unique story and portray yourself distinctively. Avoid umbrella words that have broad definitions and that cover any number of desirable qualities in the admissions process. For example, take the term "leadership": Yes, you want to demonstrate leadership, but you don't want to do so by blabbing on and on about your "leadership abilities." Instead, you want to provide an example that shows you in a leadership role and breaks down your role into more specific subcategories of leadership that were key to your success.

Some specific, more unique components of leadership that you can focus on include:

1. Listening
2. Initiating
3. Mentoring
4. Teaching
5. Persuading
6. Organizing
7. Establishing a goal or vision
8. Motivating
9. Managing
10. Obtaining buy-in

And this is just a sample. Not all leaders can claim these qualities, and only a handful can write about the specific example you will provide. So remember:

- Avoid umbrella words.
- Use specific examples. And banish superficiality from your college and supplemental essays.

Avoid Pitfall #4: Use specific examples to distinguish yourself.



Personal Statement Pitfall #5: Confused Thinking

You've done your self-reflection, made sure you answered the question, avoided clichés, and used details and specifics, but somehow your essay isn't working. It seems all over the place. Unfocused and hard to follow. Even if you have a clear goal or sense of direction, you have to structure your essay so that your reader can easily follow your thought process. Here are a few tips to ensure that logical structure and coherent presentation.

1. A core idea or theme

Every essay should have a single message you are trying to convey and you should be able to boil that theme down to one, or at most two, sentences. Everything in your essay should support that theme.

2. A logical structure

You may have multiple examples in your personal statement or simply different subtopics to prove your main point. That's fine. But you need to organize them either chronologically or thematically. Either one will work, but there needs to be a structure, and you need to stick to it.

3. Transitions

Use transition to help your reader move from one subtopic to the next and see the connections or contrast between these subtopics. Transitions are like signposts guiding your reader along the path of your essay.

Before you start writing your personal statement or supplemental, think about what you want to say clearly and critically. As I said in "Lack of Substance" (Pitfall #1), you need to examine your head and your heart. Just make sure your head is in good working order when it listens to your heart and that your essay is structured so the reader sees that both these organs are working just fine.

Avoid Pitfall #5: Write so that the reader can follow your thought-process, and make sure that your essay is a coherent whole



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