



BOETTCHER
FOUNDATION

Tips for Exceptional Application Essays

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Here is a list of thoughts expressed by Boettcher Foundation staff and members of our selection committee, addressing the common concern of how to help students improve application essays.

A Great Essay Will:

- Provide insight into who the student is and what he/she values
- Be personal
- Have a certain depth of purpose
- Engage the reader – what's at stake?
- Speak to the scholarship's selection criteria (in our case, academic ability/curiosity, service, initiative/leadership and character)
- Be PROOFREAD!
- Follow instructions and respond to the essay prompt
- Make a reading committee want to meet the student in person

Some General Tips:

Length – Students should ensure that the essay is an appropriate length (one paragraph is way too short for a question that requests a 1-page response). At the same time, they should not exceed the maximum page or word allowance.

Topic – Ensure that the essay topic is creative and relevant, that it speaks to the question and is of personal importance to the student. Students should seek out a topic that they can speak about in an original, meaningful way.

Tone – Students should read their essays aloud to ensure that the tone they desire comes across in the final product. This can help them determine if their sarcasm or humor has inadvertently come across as whiney or immature, if their emphasis is unintentionally melodramatic, if their sincerity rings true, etc.

Format – Remember paragraphs! An essay that is one long paragraph instead of being broken up into different points is a bit of work to get through – readers may very well get lost. Follow instructions regarding point-size, font, etc. Not doing so is a sign of carelessness.

Some Specific Tips:

Mountain Essays – We tend to get a bazillion mountain climbing essays every year. ☹ Unfortunately, most come off as trite and give us little insight into the applicant. Mountain essays can work, but need to provide us with some substance - perhaps an analogy of how their personal journey relates metaphorically to climbing the mountain.

Essays About Other People – If writing about a special person (from the student's own life or a famous or historical figure), the student should relate this person to his/her own life, goals or aspirations. If the student doesn't provide some information as to why he/she chose this person to write about, the essay becomes a biography of someone else without any insight into why the student finds his/her subject compelling or admirable.

Essays About Challenges – These are best done when they provide some insight into the student – by illustrating the challenge and why it was important to the student to attempt to overcome the challenge, describing the actions taken to work at something for a desired result, and then telling us what the student learned from the experience or how the experience changed him/her.

Some Brainstorming Tips:

One of the biggest challenges in writing an application essay is getting started. How do you choose that topic? How do you conquer that blank page? There's no sure-fire cure for writer's block, but these tips for students should help.

There's Nothing To It But To Do It. Just get started! Worrying that our writing won't be good enough often keeps us from beginning at all. Author Anne Lamott discusses this in an entire chapter of her book on writing, *Bird by Bird*. She and other authors agree that the best way to overcome the first – and one of the biggest – hurdles to writing is to **accept the “rough-ness” of your first draft.**

One way to do this is through a “free write.” This means to write continuously for about 10 minutes free of all expectations and self-criticism. Just keep your pen, pencil or typing fingers moving, even if you have to resort to writing your name over and over until you stumble upon a new topic. If you worry that you have nothing to say or that your writing isn't any good, remember that your goal is to write a very rough, crummy first draft. And you can do that, right? **So set a timer, pick a prompt from the list below and get cracking!**

Before you know it, your page won't be blank and you will have succeeded in writing a crummy first draft. Congratulations! Within this draft you may then find a sentence or two – or a general topic – that you really like, something that is meaningful to you, that would make an interesting story to share with your family, that gives insight into who you are or that you would just like to explore a little more. If that's the case, put the part you like at the top of a new page, set your timer and begin again. If you don't find something that you like in your first, crummy first draft, grab another prompt and give it another shot, remembering that **if you find it interesting, if you are honest and specific in discussing something meaningful to you, then readers will be likewise engaged.**

- Describe the time when you were the most scared/exhilarated/ apprehensive/happy in the last year/four years.
- Describe a significant event from your childhood or one of your favorite childhood memories. Why did this time come to mind, and what meaning does it hold for you now?
- Describe the first time you realized that your favorite subject/sport/activity was something about which you were passionate. What clued you in to your really liking it? What's happened since then to build upon that initial affinity? Dig Deep! Don't just cite a resume item that's elsewhere in the application – focus on providing insight into you and your personality.
- Describe what it is that makes you feel most alive.
- Describe a particular failure in your past and what you learned from it. How have you grown since and what would you do differently if you could? Dig deep and be honest and specific!
- Describe a seemingly small success that meant a lot to you personally.
- Describe your first job. What did you and didn't you know about it? What surprised you once you first showed up to work? After you'd been there a week/month/year?
- Describe the most significant thing that's happened to you in the last four years. Put down the sights, sounds and smells of that event – plus what you took from it and how you apply that lesson or how you reflect on it now. Why was it significant and how has it shaped you?
- Describe an event that changed the direction of your life. This could be a large push or a small nudge – even the smallest stones, when tossed in a lake can produce the large ripples.

Notice that each of these prompts begins with the word “describe.” Describe means to portray, depict, illustrate, show, reveal or render. All of these words suggest visual imagery because your job in an application essay is to paint with words. Through your writing, you want the reader to be able to picture the situation, the circumstance, the subject that you're writing about. Most important, **you want them to be able to picture you.** To see what formed you into the person you are now, to see who you are and will be on your college campus. You have the power to create pictures in your reader's mind by telling a specific story. You apply shading to that picture by including personal reflection, context, meaning and detail.

Now go forth and get down some crummy first drafts! Onward!!