

“Countdown to College: Essay topics to avoid” by Lee Bierer

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What do colleges want to know about you? That’s a good place to start when you’re brainstorming your college essay.

You know colleges don’t want you to tell your life story in 500 words. But, you keep pestering yourself wondering “what should I tell them?” Think about things you’ve done in high school, activities you’ve participated in, experiences you’ve had and maybe how you see yourself as just a little different than your peers.

As an independent college counselor who has read thousands of essays and researched bad essay choices, my vote for the two biggest essay offenders goes to: the “last minute sports victory” and the “mission trip epiphany.” These two topics tend to be among the worst subjects for essays because unless a student has a particularly inspiring, amusing or heartfelt story, colleges have seen it, heard it and read it all thousands of times.

While winning a sports championship may be the pinnacle of your high school career, it is very difficult to get anyone else nearly as excited. Unless a student personalizes the sports essay with a meaningful anecdote, it is likely to focus on the importance of team work and sound cliché.

When it comes to mission trips, admissions staff are often quick to suggest that it is quite challenging to set yourself apart. I am not saying mission trips aren’t a great experience and an opportunity for teens to be exposed to new things, but be cautious about using it as a college essay topic. The problem is that the realizations that students choose to share, such as “while on the outside we may look different, I realized after this trip, that on the inside, we are really all the same” often unwittingly demonstrate how sheltered their existence has been and perhaps how privileged a life they’ve led.

Here are a two other topics that I suggest you avoid:

**The confessional** – many students choose to use Common Application ([www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)) Prompt # 2 – “A time you failed” to dredge up their past misdeeds. Students will over-share to provide background information and present themselves in a negative light and then not have enough space to share how they’ve changed.

**The resume** – don’t waste your precious essay words to share information about yourself that you are providing in another part of the application. Most college applications have an area where you describe your extracurricular activities, your work experience, etc. Focusing on this information in your essay is repetitive and doesn’t share any new insights about who you are or how you’ll contribute to their college community.