“Five Things to Know About Writing a Great College Essay”

By Lee Bierer

As I read student essay after student essay this fall, I often find myself asking, in not such a polite tone, “What were they thinking?” Grammar and usage mistakes are rampant, and many students are clueless when it comes to writing a non-academic paper.

Here are some of the worst offenders:

**Incorrect Grammar**: People are referred to as *who* or *whom*; only things are *that.* I see a lot of “She was the teacher that meant the most to me.” When it should be, “She was the teacher *who* meant the most to me.”

**Weak words to avoid**: These are the words that don’t help advance your thoughts. My vote for the most overused word in college essays is *interesting* – unfortunately, it is not interesting at all. I consider the word to be the same as “um,” “like,” and “you know,” in a conversation. They are meaningless fillers that don’t help advance the writing or the conversation. Equally, wasteful words include *unique, truly, partake, and really.* Words and phrases that should only be used sparingly include: *being that, that said, it, this, these, and those.*

**Passive Voice:** It is much more pleasing to read, “Dr. Jekyll mentored me” versus “I was mentored by Dr. Jekyll.”

**Active verbs are your friends:** Think creatively and use your own senses when describing things. Think about how much more powerful it is to say, “The line snaked around the corner” versus “we waited in line forever.” Try to create some imagery with your writing and you’re likely to keep your reader more engaged.

**Avoid clichés:** I find clichés to be the worst offender of all. Clichés are common phrases or idioms that are so overused that they’ve become worthless and indicative of a lazy writer.

**Please don’t use the following:** “outside my comfort zone,” “broaden my horizons,” “every cloud has a silver lining,” “I’m a people person,” “I’m a jack-of-all-trades,” “thinking outside the box,” “at the end of the day,” “take it to the next level,” “bursting your bubble,” “in the nick of time,” “you win some, you lose some,” “good things come to those who wait.”

And the biggest offender in college essay would be. . . “I learned more from them than they learned from me.” Please don’t say that.

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