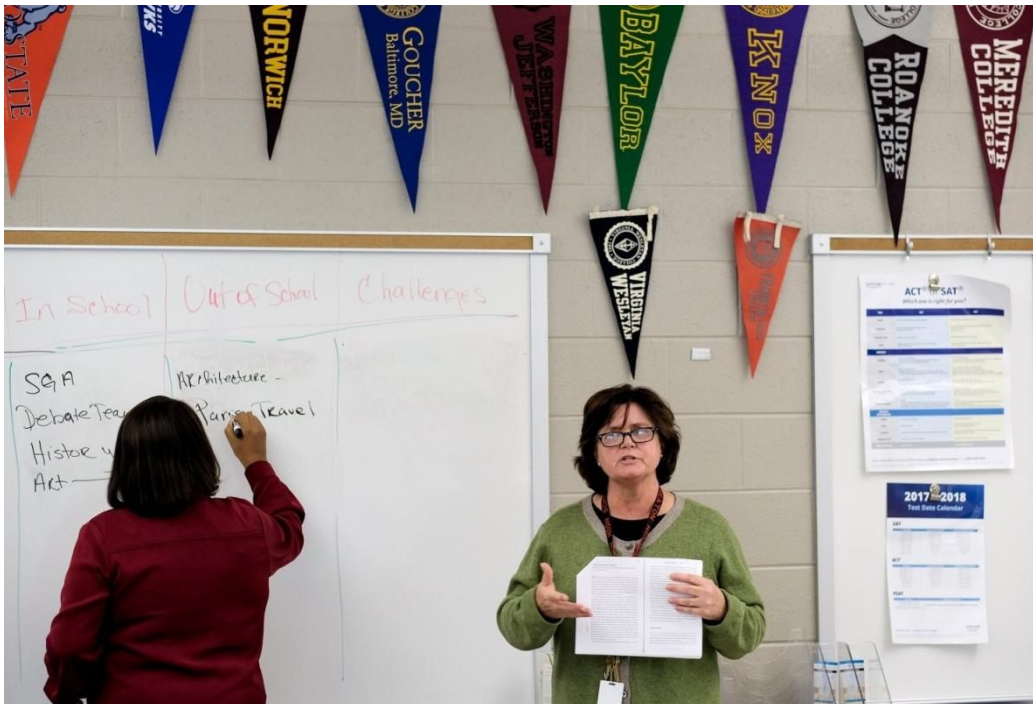


# ‘Read me!’: Students race to craft forceful college essays as deadlines near

By [Nick Anderson](#) October 28



Leslie Atkin leads a college essay workshop at Wheaton High School in Maryland on Oct. 17. (Bonnie Jo Mount/Washington Post)

Find a telling anecdote about your 17 years on this planet. Examine your values, goals, achievements and perhaps even failures to gain insight into the essential you. Then weave it together in a punchy essay of 650 or fewer words that showcases your authentic teenage voice — not your mother’s or father’s — and helps you stand out among hordes of applicants to selective colleges.

That’s not necessarily all. Be prepared to produce even more zippy prose for supplemental essays about your intellectual pursuits, personality quirks or compelling interest in a particular college that would be, without doubt, a perfect academic match.

Many high school seniors find essay writing the most agonizing step on the road to college, more stressful even than [SAT](#) or [ACT](#) testing. Pressure to excel in the verbal endgame of the college application process has intensified in recent years as students perceive that it’s tougher than ever to get into prestigious schools. Some well-off families, hungry for any edge, are willing to pay as much as \$16,000 for essay-writing guidance in what one consultant pitches as a four-day “application boot camp.”

But most students are far more likely to rely on parents, teachers or counselors for free advice as hundreds of thousands nationwide race to meet a key deadline for college applications on Wednesday.

[\[College admissions edge for the wealthy: Early decision\]](#)



Malcolm Carter at a college essay

workshop at Wheaton High. (Bonnie Jo Mount/Washington Post)

Malcolm Carter, 17, a senior who attended an essay workshop this month at Wheaton High School in Montgomery County, Md., said the process took him by surprise because it differs so much from analytical techniques learned over years as a student. The college essay, he learned, is nothing like the standard five-paragraph English class essay that analyzes a text.

“I thought I was a good writer at first,” Carter said. “I thought, ‘I got this.’ But it’s just not the same type of writing.”

Carter, who is thinking about engineering schools, said he started one draft but aborted it. “Didn’t think it was my best.” Then he got 200 words into another. “Deleted the whole thing.” Then he produced 500 words about a time when his father returned from a tour of Army duty in Iraq.

Will the latest draft stand? “I hope so,” he said with a grin.

Admission deans want applicants to do their best and make sure they get a second set of eyes on their words. But they also urge them to relax.

“Sometimes, the fear or the stress out there is that the student thinks the essay is passed around a table of imposing figures, and they read that essay and put it down and take a yea or nay vote, and that determines the student’s outcome,” said Tim Wolfe, associate provost for enrollment and dean of admission at the College of William & Mary. “That is not at all the case.”

Wolfe called the essay one more way to learn something about an applicant. “I’ve seen rough essays that still powerfully convey a student’s personality and experiences,” he said. “And on the flip side, I’ve seen pristine, polished essays that don’t communicate much about the students and are forgotten a minute or two after reading them.”

William & Mary, like many schools, assigns at least two readers for each application. Sometimes, essays get another look when an admissions committee is deliberating.

Most experts say a great essay cannot compensate for a mediocre academic record. But it can play a significant role in shaping perceptions of an applicant and might tip the balance in a borderline case.

*[\[Top colleges put thousands of applicants in wait-list limbo\]](#)*

Essays and essay excerpts from students who have won admission circulate widely on the Internet, but it’s impossible to know how much weight those words carried in the final decision. One student took a [daring approach to a Stanford University essay](#) this year. He wrote, simply, “#BlackLivesMatter” 100 times. And he got in.

Advice about essays abounds, some of it obvious: Show, don't tell. Don't rehash your résumé. Avoid clichés and pretentious words. Proofread. "That means actually having a living, breathing person — not just a spell-checker — actually read your essay," Wolfe said.

But make sure that person doesn't cross the line between useful feedback and meddling revision, or worse. (Looking at you, moms and dads.)

"It's very obvious to us when an essay has been written by a 40-year-old and not a 17-year-old," said Angel B. Pérez, vice president of enrollment and student success at Trinity College. "I'm not looking for a Pulitzer Prize-winning piece. And I get pretty skeptical when I see it."

Some affluent parents buy help for their children from consultants who market their services through such brands as College Essay Guy, Essay Hell and Your Best College Essay.

Michele Hernández, co-founder of Top Tier Admissions, based in Vermont and Massachusetts, said her team charges \$16,000 for a four-day boot camp in August to help clients develop all pieces of their applications, from essays to extracurricular activity lists. Or a family can pay \$2,500 for five hours of one-on-one essay tutoring. Like other consultants, Hernández said she does pro-bono work. But she acknowledged there are troubling questions about the influence of wealth in college admissions.

"The equity problem is serious," Hernández said. "College consultants are not the problem. It starts way lower down" — at kindergarten or earlier, she added.

Christopher Hunt, with a business in Colorado called College Essay Mentor, charges \$3,000 for an "all-college-all-essays package" with as much guidance as clients want or need, from brainstorming to final drafts. He said the industry is growing because of a cycle rooted in anxiety. As the volume of applications grows, now topping 40,000 a year at Stanford and [100,000 at the University of California at Los Angeles](#), admission rates fall. That, in turn, fuels worries of prospective applicants from around the world.

*[Stanford dean: Ultra-low admit rate not something to boast about]*

"Most of my inquiries come from students," Hunt said. "They are at ground zero of the college craze, aware of the competition, and know what they need to compete."

At Wheaton High, it cost nothing for students to drop in on a college essay workshop offered during the lunch hour a couple of weeks before the Nov. 1 early application deadline. Cynthia Hammond Davis, the college and career information coordinator, provided pizza, and Leslie Atkin, an English composition assistant, provided tips in a room bedecked with college pennants.

Her first piece of advice: Don't bore the reader. "It should be as much fun as telling your best friend a story," she said. "You're going to be animated about it." Atkin also sketched a four-step framework for writing: Depict an event, discuss how that anecdote illuminates key character traits, define a pivotal moment and reflect on the outcome. "Wrap it up with a nice package and a bow," she said. "They don't have to be razzle-dazzle. But they need to say, 'Read me!'"

As an example, Hammond Davis distributed an essay written by a 2017 Wheaton High graduate now at Rice University. In it, Anene "Daniel" Uwanamodo likened himself to a trampoline — a student leader who helps serve as a launchpad for others. "Regardless of race, gender or background, trampolines will offer their uplifting influence to any who request it," he wrote.

Soaking this in were students aiming for the University of Maryland at College Park, Towson, Howard and Johns Hopkins universities, Virginia Tech, the University of Chicago and a special scholars program at Montgomery College. One planned to write about a terrifying car accident, another about her mother's death and a third about how varsity basketball shaped him.

Sahil Sahni, 17, said his main essay responds to a prompt on the Common Application, an online portal to apply to hundreds of colleges: "Discuss an accomplishment, event or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others."

Sahni showed The Washington Post two drafts — his initial version in July, and his latest after feedback from Hammond Davis. (It's probably best not to quote the essay before admission officers read it.) During the writing, he

said, he often jotted phrases on sticky notes when inspiration occurred. If no notepads were handy, he would ink a keyword on his arm “to stimulate the ideas.”

Sahni summarized the essay as a meditation on the consequences of lost keys, “how the unknown is okay, and how you can overcome it.” He said composing three or four high-stakes essays also had a consequence: “Every day you learn something new about yourself.”



Senior Sahil Sahni with Cynthia Hammond Davis, the college and career information coordinator, at Wheaton High’s college essay workshop. (Bonnie Jo Mount/Washington Post)



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