

## Admissions Officers Like Storytellers

### **Making Your College Essay Come Alive**

Virtually all colleges will ask you to write at least one essay as part of your application package. After poring over hundreds of class ranks, SAT scores, transcripts, and teacher recommendations, admissions officers want to read something that will make you stand out from the masses. They see the essay as a little window into your personality, and they also see it as evidence of how well you write. The essay is the only place where they can hear your voice, just as you want it, and really get a sense of who you are.

You are after the most natural style and tone possible - if read aloud, your essay should sound like a good conversation. Write about something you really care about. Keep in mind who your audience is, and choose a topic you want to write about - not one that you think you ought to write about.

A personal anecdote can be used in your essay in various ways:

- As the introduction and take-off point for the whole essay
- As a final note, a story that sums up or crystallizes what you have been saying and leaves the reader with the tone of the whole
- As a detail in the body of the essay
- As a big story that runs throughout the essay and shapes the whole

One key factor to prevent your story from becoming a sweeping generalization is the ability to utilize detail. Write to help admissions officers see what you saw, hear what you heard, taste what you tasted. Rather than tell what you learned from photography, show what it looks and feels and even sounds like in a darkroom as your picture emerges - the smell of the chemicals, the red bulb glowing in the darkness. Rather than describe how disciplined you have become as a result of your music lessons, talk about your violin, the texture and feel of it, the smell of the wood - no one ever thinks of the sense of smell in connection with a violin - details that take your reader through your practice routine with you. Use sight, sound, smell, touch, taste - in other words, show what you know.

A creative metaphor can also be used to make your essay come alive. Writers continually see one thing in terms of something else; the result is metaphor, the language of comparison. Sometimes the sheer wit and power of metaphors can carry a piece of writing and make it entertaining and fresh. Learning to think "metaphorically" is perhaps the most fun part of writing. Metaphors are all around you, but through time and use, some of them have lost their ability to startle: leg of a chair, face of a clock, eye of a needle. Still others are on their way to the metaphor graveyard, but are not quite buried yet. Using them is not the sign of a dead metaphor but of a dead mind: white as snow, big as a mountain, high as a kite,

smooth as glass. To be an entertaining writer you must hammer out your own metaphor from materials you know and understand. A good rule of thumb, suggested by writer George Orwell, is never to use a comparison you have heard before.