

Editor Experience Sharing -Keith H

If I've learned one thing from over a decade of advising students on their college application essays, it's that the life experience of any person, regardless of who he or she is, has the potential to be an endless source of insight and interest to others. I've also learned that most high school students, surprisingly or not, find themselves to be rather uninteresting. Unfortunately, in order to write effective college essays, students must believe that the way their mind works and the way their heart is moved can inspire and inform other people. For that reason, helping students appreciate what makes each of them unique is my most important challenge as a writing coach.

Many people ask me how one finds an essay topic that is unique. Luckily, you don't need to have climbed Mt. Everest or to have saved a drowning child in order to write a memorable essay. Some of the best essays involve simple topics—a conflict with a peer, a summer job at a movie theater. One of our students entered Harvard with an essay about fixing a leaky toilet. What is important is that your essay read as if you and only you could have written it. You must write with enough honesty and sincerity that you reveal something significant about yourself as a human being—your values, your attitudes, your personality.

Writing with honesty is not easy, however, and an experienced advisor can help you mine your experience for crucial details and concepts. I remember helping one student write about a summer internship at USC, where he spent weeks in a lab preparing nanotubes. Except for the sexy word “nanotubes,” he insisted nothing about the experience would interest readers. He also claimed the experience revealed nothing about who he was: every day, he said, as he sat in the lab all alone, he simply did what he was told, repeating the same actions over and over. However, as I questioned him about this experience, we discovered much more: it turned out that he thought of the nanochips as his “babies”; that he often went six hours without lunch because he was so lost in his work; that he opened the furnace “with anxious hands” as “a blazing orange glow rolled off the quartz”; and that, one day, after hours of arduous preparation, he accidentally damaged a large batch of nanotubes—after which he merely “silently picked up my tweezers to begin again from scratch.” In other words, through a weeks-long dialogue between he and I, he was able to write an essay about not only his internship, but also his qualities of conscientiousness and what his “friends called my immense capacity for patience.”

Meanwhile, the student had also begun a process of self-discovery, as he learned to better understand himself and his experience. No part of my work is more gratifying than when my students are becoming both better writers and wiser individuals.

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