



Finding Your Voice in Your College Application Essay

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“We are looking for students who write coherent, thoughtful, carefully organized, mechanically sound, and hopefully imaginative prose. Sometimes that’s flashy and creative, and sometimes it is not.... We try and find some way to say to young people, ‘Write in your own voice.’”

– The Dean of Admissions at Bates College, in *Essays that Worked for College Applications*

What is your writing voice? Your voice is a natural part of you. It’s different from everyone else’s. It’s in the words you choose and the way you arrange them into sentences and paragraphs to express who you are inside. Are you exuberant and exploring? Are you deep and directed? Do you have a photographic memory? Are you the “underdog” who won’t stop trying until you succeed?

You can’t hide those qualities from emerging in your writing voice, any more than you can hide the sound of sadness in your speaking voice when you’ve just heard bad news. Your writing voice in a great college essay will sound very similar to your speaking voice when you’re feeling your most passionate and engaged and thoughtful—without, of course, the fill-in words we all use when we speak: “um” “like,” “you know.”

How do you find your essay voice? Here are four easy techniques:

- 1) Write Fast, Don’t Judge: Write some initial thoughts quickly. Turning down the pressure on yourself to write your best paradoxically helps fresh, vivid thoughts to flow onto paper. “Feel free to write the worst junk in America,” says master writing teacher and author Natalie Goldberg.
- 2) Show, Don’t Tell: Be detailed. If you’re telling a ski story, help us see the blinding powdery flakes of snow and feel the stinging cold on your wrists when you fall and your sense of relief as your father picks you up and sends you down the slope again.
- 3) Write Your Passion: Write about what you care about and how you’ve taken the initiative to explore your passion.
- 4) Write About What’s Happening Inside of You and Outside of You: Balance descriptions of your experiences with your thoughts and feelings. Reflect on your experiences.

Here are some examples of different ways you can say the same thing:

| A sample essay line | Comments on using this line |
|--|---|
| 1. I am confident. | Even if you are confident, just saying that you are isn't a good idea. It's your own self-judgment. You need information to back it up. It's better to let a reader surmise you're confident from your story. Show, don't tell. |
| 2. I smile at people. | This is better, because it says something about your behavior. But the smile is still not in context.... When do you smile, and why? |
| 3. I smile at people when I pass them in the hallways. | This is better than 2 because it provides a memorable image. Just this one sentence pinpoints this student as unique—how many students do you know who smile at people in the hall when they're busy passing between classes? |
| 4. I smile at people when I pass them in the hallways. Sometimes they even smile back, and I wonder, "Will we become friends?" Because that's how it starts. | This is the best alternative. The student is drawing a strong image for the reader. There's a connection between an experience and your thoughts reflecting on the experience. You are showing your inner strength because your smile is not dependent on others' reactions. Readers of these sentences may read between the lines and see the writer as confident, friendly, risk-taking for a positive goal (not afraid to get shot down by unrequited smiles), self-aware (knowing why she does what she does), and as a person with vision: all characteristics of leaders. |

Here are some thoughts from one author about your writing voice. The quotation is from Donald Murray, a professor of English at the University of New Hampshire and a writer and writing coach for the Boston Globe. He collected and culled his favorite quotations from writers to write *Shoptalk, Learning to Write with Writers*. Chapter 4, "Write for Yourself—Then Others," begins with these words:

"Writers talk here of finding themselves on the page. I wonder if they wanted to find themselves. I didn't. I wanted to go into space, track a moose in the north woods, take June Allyson to a Vermont inn for the weekend. But there I was, writing of what I saw, thought, felt, imagined in my language and my voice. I didn't write like Robert Louis Stevenson, Sir Walker Scott, Kenneth Roberts, A. E. Houseman; I wrote like that weird kid from North Quincy, the gawky one with the glasses, the cowlick, and the huge hands he didn't know where to put, that skinny one standing in the corner. Alone. Watching.

"I am still a bit uncomfortable writing this way, revealing myself in these chapter introductions, not being academic but autobiographic, self-centered, self-revealing. But that is all I've got. My world as I know it, my voice as I can tune it."

– Donald Murray