



Writing College Admissions Essays: An International Student's Guide

Not long ago I received this email:

“Dear Mrs. Epstein, I am an international student, so the admission process has been quite a challenge to me. As a student outside of the United States, I am a little lost about what to write.”

I was quick to reassure the student that everyone can write a great college essay - you just need to understand how to approach it.

Tell a story: The word “essay” is misleading, because a college admission essay isn’t really an essay - it’s a story. In it, you’ll need a main character (you), a setting (describe it with details), conflict (either external, which is a struggle between you and outside forces, like climbing a mountain; or internal, which is a struggle within yourself), and a resolution.

What should the story be about? It’s up to you, as long as it illustrates some of your positive qualities, shows a growth experience and, above all, is meaningful to you. Never choose a topic that might offend your reader.

Include what you’ve learned. This is essential. Schools want to see how you’ve grown or what you’ve learned from your experience. Your essay will be incomplete without it.

Make it unique. I always say that if 50 other people can write your essay, then it isn’t unique enough to you.

How do you make your essay unique? Include details, such as what you heard, felt, tasted, or even smelled.

Take the reader through your thought process - why you struggled, or how you came to a decision.

Avoid common topics, like getting an A in class or winning athletic events. Instead, write from a different angle, such as the relationship you had with your teacher, coach or teammates.

Don’t bore your reader. Start your essay in an interesting way. Here are three techniques you can use: Ask a question, make an intriguing statement, or begin in the middle of your action.

cont’d

Don't write in your native language and then translate to English. Sometimes translations can be awkward or might not make sense.

Consider the cultural divide. If you're an international student, it's important to remember that a U.S. reader may not be familiar with your customs or culture. In that case, take the time to explain.

For example, a Vietnamese student wrote that she was from "a coastal area." She could have aided the reader by giving the name of the town and details to help visualize it.

A student in the UK wrote that *The Guardian* had published his article. He needed to explain that *The Guardian* was a major UK newspaper so that the reader understood it was an important accomplishment.

"Big" isn't always better. You don't need to have experienced a big event, like an earthquake or a death in the family, to write a great essay. International students aren't expected to write about world issues or their "global perspectives," either. Just write about what has meaning for you.

A student in Ulaanbaatar, for instance, wrote about greeting her mother at the airport. It was effective, not because it was "big," but because during her mother's absence the student had learned resilience, independence, and how to think for herself.

Proofread. Always ask a teacher or adult you trust to proofread your essay, especially if English is not your native language.

For both American and international students, the goal of the college admission essay is the same: Tell your story, so that colleges will know what makes you special and how you've grown. The process can be challenging, but no matter where you live, you can always write a great essay.



Sharon Epstein

Sharon Epstein earned a Master of Science degree from Boston University's College of Communication and a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Cornell University. During her 20 year career in television, Sharon received a Writers Guild Award for *All My Children* and two Emmy® Award nominations for writing and now teaches college essay writing, resume writing and interview skills. Her business is **First Impressions College Consulting** and she blogs about college admissions at **ApplyingToCollege.org**. Sharon can be reached through her website or at Sharon@firstimpressionscollegeconsulting.com.