

COLLEGEKEN

FREE GUIDE

The 7 Deadly College Admissions Essay Sins

The mistakes that quietly destroy otherwise strong applications.

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Introduction

Most college applicants are qualified. That's not the problem.

The problem is that thousands of highly intelligent, high-achieving students write essays that sound almost exactly the same.

Not because they're bad writers. Because they unknowingly fall into the same predictable traps.

Admissions officers read thousands of essays every year. After a while, certain patterns become painfully familiar:

- essays that try too hard
- essays that explain instead of reveal
- essays that confuse trauma with depth
- essays that say a lot without actually saying anything

And the result? Perfectly capable students end up with essays that drift into what I call the "*penultimate pile*": not rejected immediately... but never truly remembered.

This guide covers the seven most common essay mistakes I see every year — including from students applying to highly selective colleges.

Avoiding these sins won't magically get you into Harvard, but they *will* dramatically improve your odds of writing an essay that sounds:

- clearer
- more authentic
- more confident
- more memorable

Writing About Other People

One of the most common mistakes students make is writing an essay where *they* aren't actually the main character.

The essay becomes:

- a tribute to a grandparent
- a biography of a coach
- a story about a struggling friend
- an explanation of someone else's hardship

And somewhere along the way, the student disappears.

Admissions officers are not evaluating your grandmother. They are evaluating:

- you
- your thinking
- your perspective
- your emotional insight
- your decision-making
- your personality

Other people can absolutely appear in your essay. But they should function like supporting characters — not the star of the movie.

If someone else is more emotionally vivid than you are in your own essay, that's a problem.

QUICK FIX

After every paragraph, ask: *"What does this reveal about me?"*

If the answer is "not much," cut it or redirect it.

Trying Too Hard

Students often believe their essay needs to sound:

- profound
- intellectual
- poetic
- philosophical
- life-changing

So they force depth instead of revealing truth. That usually creates essays that feel:

- artificial
- overwritten
- emotionally inflated

The student sounds less authentic because they're performing instead of communicating — and admissions officers feel it instantly.

Ironically, students become *more impressive* when they stop trying so hard to sound impressive. Confidence is usually quieter.

WEAK

"Through the intricate tapestry of adversity, I discovered the indomitable resilience of the human spirit."

BETTER

"I realized I hated failing more than I loved winning."

The second sentence sounds human. Human wins.

QUICK FIX

Delete:

- unnecessary metaphors
- inflated vocabulary
- dramatic declarations
- anything that sounds like it belongs on a motivational poster

Clear beats fancy almost every time.

Repetitive, Redundant, and Repetitive

Most essays are too long. Not because students lack discipline. Because they repeat the same point in slightly different ways.

Admissions officers notice this immediately.

Students often think they're:

- reinforcing an idea
- adding emphasis
- creating depth

But what they're actually doing is slowing the essay down.

A sentence should either:

- advance the story
- deepen insight
- reveal personality
- create movement

If it doesn't, it's probably filler. And filler quietly weakens confidence.

QUICK FIX

After drafting, ask: *"Have I already made this point?"*

If yes:

- condense it
- sharpen it
- or cut it completely

Strong essays are usually tighter than students expect.

Tearing Yourself Down

Many students think vulnerability means self-destruction. So the essay becomes:

- self-critical
- apologetic
- emotionally heavy
- filled with insecurity

They spend 500 words explaining why they weren't good enough.

That is not vulnerability. That is positioning. And positioning matters.

Admissions officers are building a class. Your essay should create reasons to believe:

"This student would contribute positively here."

That doesn't mean pretending to be perfect. It means showing:

- growth
- self-awareness
- resilience
- perspective

without turning yourself into a cautionary tale.

QUICK FIX

Your essay should leave the reader interested in you — not worried about you.

Focusing on the Problem Instead of the Response

A difficult experience is not automatically a strong essay.

Students often spend:

- 80% of the essay on the problem
- 20% on themselves

That ratio is backwards.

The most important part of the essay is not *what happened to you*. It's *how you responded to what happened*.

Admissions officers care less about the obstacle itself than:

- your reaction
- your thinking
- your adaptation
- your emotional maturity

QUICK FIX

Cut down the setup. Get to:

- your response
- your reflection
- your decisions
- your growth

faster.

The essay is not about the storm. It's about who you became while walking through it.

"Kill Me Now" Essays

Some essays are technically fine, but they feel painfully familiar. Admissions officers read them and think:

"Please... not this again."

Common examples:

- sports injury essays
- mission trip awakenings
- winning-the-big-game essays
- "moving schools made me stronger"
- "hard class taught me perseverance"

These topics are not automatically fatal. The problem is that students usually write them the same exact way.

Predictable topic + predictable insight = forgettable essay.

QUICK FIX

Don't ask: *"Is this topic allowed?"*

Ask: *"Can I reveal something genuinely distinctive through this topic?"*

The topic matters less than:

- the perspective
- the specificity
- the thinking
- the voice

A common topic with uncommon insight can still work. But the insight has to be real.

Using the Full Word Count

This one surprises students. They assume:

"If the limit is 650, I should use 650."

Not necessarily.

Many essays become weaker because students force ideas past their natural endpoint. The result:

- repetition
- filler
- overwritten conclusions
- unnecessary backstory
- diluted impact

Sometimes students mistake length for depth. But strong writing often feels efficient.

In many cases, a sharp 500-word essay is stronger than a bloated 650-word essay.

QUICK FIX

When the essay feels finished, stop. Don't keep talking because the text box still has space left.

Clarity creates confidence. And confidence is memorable.

Final Thoughts

Most students are trying to write an essay that sounds impressive. The strongest essays usually do something different.

They sound:

- clear
- self-aware
- emotionally honest
- confident without trying too hard

Admissions officers are not looking for perfection. They are looking for signal.

They are trying to answer a simple question:

|"Who is this student?"

The clearer and more distinctive that answer becomes, the stronger your application becomes. That's what matters.

Ready for the Next Step?

Avoiding mistakes is important. But strong applications are not built by accident.

The most successful essays don't just avoid the "deadly sins." They create a clear, memorable picture of:

- who you are
- how you think
- what matters to you
- why you do what you do

That's the difference between an essay that gets forgotten... and one that helps move your application into the final conversation.

Get the step-by-step system.

A more cohesive, high-signal application starts here:

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*Or explore the full **EssaySecrets™** course — the admissions strategy most high-achieving students never learn.*

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