

January 11, 2012, 7:30 pm

Tips on American College Admissions Essays, From a Veteran Dean

By [SETH ALLEN](#)

Higher Education

[The Choice on India Ink](#)



Guidance on American college applications for readers in India from The Times's admissions blog

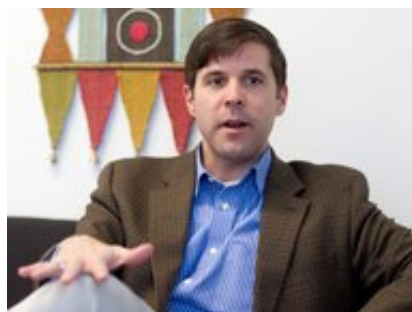
- [Visit The Choice Blog »](#)
- [Like The Choice on Facebook »](#)

Seth Allen is vice president and dean of admissions and financial aid at [Pomona College](#) in California, a liberal arts college. He was previously dean of admission and financial aid at [Grinnell College](#) in Iowa. This is the second post in [a regular series on India Ink](#) providing advice to prospective Indian applicants to American colleges and universities.

The essay just may be the most important aspect of your application to a United States college or university.

While your standardized test scores and grades can assure you are a competitive applicant, they won't make you stand out in a strong applicant pool. Extracurricular activities and recommendations help inform admission committees what you do in and out of class, but rarely serve to significantly differentiate applicants unless they speak to unusual talents or characteristics.

The essay is often a deciding factor, conveying information to the admissions committee about your personality, values, creativity or other intangible qualities sought after in students.



Stephen Mally for The New York Times
Seth Allen, dean of admissions at Pomona College in California

It's also the one component of your application where you have full control over the outcome (if you had full control over the other aspects you would have a 2400 SAT score, straight A+ grades and exams, and been to the moon and back by the time you were 12). While a great essay won't make up for poor academic preparation or other deficiencies in an application, it can mean the difference between admission and rejection.

That said, here are seven suggestions to help you write a compelling essay:

1. **Let your credentials speak for themselves.** There's no need to write an essay conveying how serious an academic you are. Your transcript and recommendations will do that. Similarly, your extracurricular activities will speak volumes about how engaged you are.
2. **This is all about you.** Decide there's something interesting or original about you that you want to convey instead of writing about a piece of history or a book you recently read. Even if the essay prompt asks you to write about someone else or an important event, remember the underlying aim is for the admissions committee to learn about you.
3. **Demonstrate, don't tell.** Your actions and behavior can do the talking for you. Claiming that "after participating in Model United Nations I have a much greater appreciation for other cultures" is not as compelling as writing "defending the position of other countries has convinced me that there is no single correct approach to international policy. I now make it a point to take in world news everyday so that I am better informed about why other countries pursue policies, even if I don't agree with those policies."
4. **Be memorable.** The answer to the question of "what's the shortest distance between two points?" may be "a straight line," but that doesn't make it an interesting answer. Surprise the reader in some way. Perhaps acknowledge that you fit a certain profile (studious student or accomplished cricket player), but you also lead a secret life as an acrobat. Or give the reader the pleasure of discovering something completely new about you that may not have fit neatly in your extracurricular pursuits but offers an exciting glimpse into who you are or what motivates you. I once knew a student who had amassed the single largest private antique bottle collection in his home state and lent the collection to local museums.
5. **Don't make more of something than is warranted.** Even if it's true, it may not be credible, and you should avoid turning seemingly trivial events into profound insights or action. Such as realizing the true value of education after failing a quiz or resolving to work towards world equality after participating in community service for one afternoon.
6. **The admissions committee wants to hear from you.** It may be tempting to think there's a right way to write the essay and rely heavily on feedback from teachers, peers or parents to "improve" your essay. It's fine to gauge what others think of your approach but you'd be wrong to assume that others know more about crafting the perfect essay about you than you! Using too much feedback to write your essay runs the risk of muddying your own voice – that distinctive perspective and personality which admissions committees are eager to get to know. It's O.K. if it's not what an adult would write. After all, you are just 17 years old and if you were already perfect, there would be no need for you to go to college.
7. **Think how you can leverage your native culture, traditions and experiences in your essay.** When applying to schools in the United States, don't try to "Americanize" your application by focusing on your trip to the United States or even your participation in out of class activities prevalent in the United States. It won't help differentiate you and may make your candidacy less appealing. A more general mistake in essays is for the writer to try to fit into the mainstream at the school. Writing about how interested you are in pursuing political science at a college renowned for its political science program doesn't differentiate you from others.

What do prospective applicants make of Mr. Allen's suggestions here? Is his take on the essay — from