

The most important essay you will write for your college applications

By Elizabeth LaScala, PhD

After the personal essay is done many students think the hardest part of their application is behind them. In my view, the personal essay is the easier part. In many ways and for many reasons, it is simpler to write about yourself than it is to write about a college and why you want to apply. In part because it is tough to write, the "Why Our College?" essay (and its many variations) is one of the most popular supplemental questions colleges ask. Colleges want to see how you handle this important question.

I implore my students to consider this type of question when they are selecting schools to apply to. I ask them to take careful notes as they research colleges, as well as take photos and make notes after they visit campuses. Then I ask them to make a document with two columns—one heading is "What I Want" and the other is "What the College Has." And complete this task for each school they plan to send an application. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, students often neglect this important task. But it lies in wait, appearing as students are working on their applications.

And the work still must be done before submission.

So, exactly what are schools looking for when they ask this prompt? First, let's look at what they don't want. They don't want to read about how the school's size, location, ranking and weather appeal to you. Why? Because most students write about those factors and so the admission readers are tired of reading about those things. Another reason is that colleges make the (not entirely absurd) assumption that a student plans to attend college for an education. Since colleges are in the business of delivering an education in the form of a bachelor's degree, it stands to reason that a strong Why Our College essay would emphasize academics and the campus community that supports it rather than the weather or size, at least as a top priority. Some colleges even go the extra mile and spell out for you exactly what they want you to write about. Want an example? Sure thing—here is Northwestern University's prompt this cycle:

"In 300 words or less, help us understand how you might engage specific resources, opportunities, and/or communities here. We are curious about *what* these specifics are, as well as *how* they may enrich your time at Northwestern and

beyond."

Notice the italicized words along with the twice used word 'specifics' and they even ask you to elaborate on how these specifics will enrich your time at Northwestern and beyond (meaning after graduation). Wow! You must pack a lot of punch into 300 words!

Next in line for what you should avoid doing is using overly emotional language. How many times have I read "I have wanted to attend MIT since I was in kindergarten, and it is my dream college."? Now I am not making fun of this type of response—I believe it is from the heart. But it is not going to get you into MIT.

Another important don't is making errors about the college's colors, mascot, and teams. And don't misspell the names of important people associated with the college or use the wrong names for libraries, departments, and research facilities. You may not think using the word 'department' instead of the word 'division' is important, but to those who are reading your application, errors like this are a red flag that show you didn't do your homework.

So, what should you write about? As I mentioned above, academics make a good first start. But be careful—you should not try to lift what you

write about one college's academic programs and opportunities and insert it into another college's essay. That would be another red flag and show the admission folks that you have not done sufficient research. Schools are unique in their offerings, and you need to show them you understand the ways in which they are unique. That will make them feel special! And don't we all love feeling special?

Another set of factors to research and write about are specific classes, professors, clubs and activities that you would be truly excited to be part of. And show how the academics and these activities are a perfect match to your needs and interests. I recently read an essay that included a reference to the student's excitement about a photo journalism contest at Stanford. And it just so happens that the student is an amateur photographer as well as senior staff writer for her high school's newspaper. Pure genius to tie the two together!

So when you tackle these kinds of prompts, try putting yourself in the place of the admission reader and think what would they want to read about? It's very easy for a college reader to determine which students have put in the

effort on this kind of essay. So it is worth taking the time to perfect it.



Doing College and Beyond College and Graduate School Admissions Services
970 Dewing Avenue, Suite 202, Lafayette
925.385.0562 (office)
925.330.8801 (mobile)
www.doingcollege.com
Elizabeth@doingcollege.com
Elizabeth LaScala, PhD, brings decades of admissions expertise to personally guide each student through applying to well-matched colleges, making each step more manageable and less stressful. She has placed hundreds of students in the most prestigious colleges and universities in the US. Elizabeth attends conferences, visits campuses and makes personal contacts with admissions networks to stay current on the evolving nature of college admissions. She and her professional team offer resume development, test preparation, academic tutoring, value analysis, merit and need-based scholarship search and more.

'Take It or Leave It,' an accurate and tender look at fatherhood and male identity



Photo provided

By Sophie Braccini

Estonia, next to Russia on the Baltic sea, is two hours by ferry away from its richer Finnish neighbor. In the movie "Take it or Leave it (Võta või jäta)" Erik is one of these Estonian workers who live and work in Finland and go back to Estonia as often as possible. The young man works hard, but he is full of unmanaged anger that expresses itself in bouts of violence. One day he gets a note from his former girlfriend. Unbeknownst to him, she has had his baby and, unable to cope, she is now ready to abandon the child. How Erik will cope, what he will decide, and how his life will change is the not-so-linear plot of this endearing movie.

For her first film, female director Liina Triškina-Vanhatalo explores different aspects of motherhood and fatherhood. What makes us decide to become parents, the anguish of those who cannot become parents despite their wishes, and foremost she wonders what is the moment a person becomes a parent and what it means to them.

It will take a lot to transform Erik, the violent young man always ready to start a fight to become a father. When he does, what will he do with his new-found ethos?

Feelings in this movie are not openly expressed. The people in Erik's family or in the family of Moonika, the mother of the baby, are not gifted at expressing and sharing feelings and thoughts. Therefore, year after year, generation after generation, guilt and shame are carried over and impact the younger people. Triškina-Vanhatalo also explores what makes, and destroys, families, and what are their subtle dynamics.

It is because she is interested in social changes that the director is exploring here what it is like to be a single father.

She said in an interview with CineEuropa that there are three ways to be a father: through biology, society, or psychological attachment. She believes that ideally the three aspects are united in the same person, but that when it cannot be the case, the psychological father, the one who is there in good and bad times, is the most important.

Reimo Sagor who plays Erik brings a lot of humanity to this character of a somewhat crude young man who will manage to add a completely new dimension to his persona. The way the film crew worked with a 2-month-old baby is pretty remarkable. Sagor spent time with the baby's real family before production started, carrying her, feeding her, changing her, and learning to do everything with one hand! Triškina-Vanhatalo explained that the film crew worked around the baby's schedule, her feeding and nap time, and was ready to adapt should her mood change.

For non-Nordic Europeans there is also an interesting social documentary aspect to this movie. Work conditions for the Estonians who work in Finland are shown as pretty rough. The men who are expatriates during the week share non-glamorous quarters, and are looked down by some natives. What they want to do during their days off is take the ferry and party back in Estonia. The film offers an often unknown perspective on Estonia where Finland, Norway and Sweden are presented as lands of economic riches that attract some, but at the cost of their Estonian identity.

This engaging movie was selected as the Estonian entry for the Best Foreign Language Film at the 91st Academy Awards. It has received several international accolades. The film will open at the Orinda Theatre on Oct. 14 for at least one week. This is a Bay Area premiere and exclusive presentation.

Not to be missed

ART

Art Embraces Words – Oct. 29, 2 to 3:30 p.m. – Costume Event. Writers paint images with words. Artists tell stories with color. Together they enrich our community. The Lamorinda Arts Council invites you to show up as your favorite literary or artistic character at its free program in the Lafayette Library. Emerging writers read from their work surrounded by artwork from local artists. In this way art literally "embraces" the spoken word. The final 2022 program will be a Webinar hosted by AEW alumni Denise Nomura and Natalie Samuels Wheeler in November; date TBD. Visit <https://lamorindaarts.org/art-embraces-words/> for more information. This program is made possible by a generous grant from the Lafayette Community Foundation.

Art show at Orinda Books. October features the paintings of

Sussana Griswold and the woodturnings of Steve Griswold. Sussana's award-winning oil and pastel work focuses on portraits, both human and animal, which are her favorite subjects. For Steve, wood has always been a source of wonder: "Within the ordinary trees we walk by every day, there are miracles waiting to be discovered, and through turning wood on a lathe I try to reveal those miracles." Visit the Artist of the Month at www.orindabooks.com. Orinda Books is located at 276 Village Square, Orinda, (925) 254-7606.

Bedford Gallery presents: The Harmon & Harriet Kelley Collection of African American Art: Works on Paper. Now through Dec. 18, from noon to 5 p.m., Wednesday through Sunday at Bedford Gallery in the Leshar Center for the Arts, 1601 Civic Dr., Walnut Creek. For more information or to purchase tickets (\$5, free for children under 13 and Bedford Gallery members), visit

Not to be missed

www.bedfordgallery.com.

Free open house at the Moraga Art Gallery. Oct. 15, 5 to 7 p.m. 432 Center Street in Moraga's Rheem Shopping Center. Come to meet the artists and to view the gallery's current exhibit, "Unique Expressions," a treasure trove of over 500 pieces of art by a score of local artists.

Music

Pacific Chamber Orchestra presents "Glorious" – Treat yourself to the everlasting joy of Handel's Messiah as presented by Pacific Chamber Orchestra, Conductor Lawrence Kohl, the PCO Chorus and Soloists- Halleluyah! Tickets at <https://pacificchamberorchestra.org/tickets>. Location: St Stephens Episcopal Church in Orinda on Saturday, Nov. 26 at 7:30 p.m. (doors open at 6:30 p.m.) Adult ticket price is \$48; Student ticket price is \$20.

... continued on Page B5

SPOOKTACULAR SAVINGS! SAVE UP TO

\$50 OFF

FOR 3 MONTHS. ON SELECT UNITS
OFFER ENDS 10.31.2022

UNITS UNDER \$100 WILL HAVE A \$25 DISCOUNT

Hours of operation
Mon-Sat 9am -6pm
Office and Yard.
Or call for an appointment.

455 Moraga Rd. Ste. F
(925) 643-2026
www.5Aspace.com