



2005

IWU Admissions Reviews Common Application Essay Mistakes

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Recommended Citation

Welzenbach, Rebecca, "IWU Admissions Reviews Common Application Essay Mistakes" (2005). *News and Events*. Paper 27.

<http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/news/27>

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June 14, 2005

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – In the competitive world of college admissions, the application essay plays an important supporting role in determining whether students are accepted to the school of their choice.

Although grades in college prep courses and standardized test scores remain the most important factors in the decision-making process, as the number of college applicants rises, the essay helps school officials make decisions among academically similar students. According to the 2004-05 State of College Admission Report, compiled by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, in 2004, for the first time, the essay was ranked equal in importance to class rank in the admissions process.

In an effort to help high school students as they apply to college this fall, admissions counselors at Illinois Wesleyan have identified several common application essay mistakes. Although some of the following errors seem self-evident, according to the counselors, they recur frequently and can hurt a student's chances of admission.

Common Mistakes:

- Failure to read or follow directions. If the application asks for a two-page essay, five pages will frustrate, not impress, admissions counselors who read hundreds of essays each year.
- Errors in grammar or spelling, especially in the name of the school. Such mistakes suggest to the admissions staff that the applicant is careless or indifferent to the application.
- Impersonal or trite essay content. The goal of the admissions essay is to give the school a sense of the applicant as an individual and how he or she is different from the competition.

- Attempts to make an impression with graphic or offensive language. While an inventive essay will work in the applicant's favor, one that is shocking for its own sake is less likely to do so.
- Re-use of the same essay for applications to several schools. Admissions counselors take into account the interest and effort a student shows by selecting a school-specific essay topic.
- Plagiarism. Avoid at all costs, as the admissions staff has the resources to find essays that are stolen or purchased online.