

College applications can be too good

Admissions officers wary of slick essays

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Sometimes it is the choice 10-cent word or two, a spot-on sublime or consummate, that is the giveaway. Maybe it is a series of suspiciously skilled turns of phrase, syntax the envy of Strunk and White, or some pitch-perfect metaphors that raise the red flags.

As college admissions officers sift through thousands of application essays penned by eager-to-please high school seniors, they increasingly encounter writing that sparkles a bit too brightly or shows a poise and polish beyond the years of a typical teenager.

With the scramble to get into elite colleges at a fever pitch and with a rising number of educational consultants and college essay specialists ready to give students a competitive edge, admissions officers are keeping a sharp lookout for essays that might have had an undue adult influence. In some admissions offices, such submissions receive the dubious distinction DDI, short for "Daddy Did It."

Colleges are now cross-referencing student essays against the SAT writing sample, and, if doubts linger, will ask for a graded writing sample or raise their concern with the student's high school guidance counselor. Harvard even passes along suspiciously strong essays to professors for a scholarly opinion.

"There's an awful lot of talk in the admissions profession about this," said William R. Fitzsimmons, Harvard's dean of admissions and financial aid. "It's very difficult to know how much of it is the student's own work. It's just very hard to spot."

The concern over heavy-handed adult involvement is mounting as the admissions essay has become a pivotal part of the application, a key way for students to stand out from the throngs of applicants with top grades and SAT scores. In the past five years, the percentage of colleges attributing "considerable importance" to the college essay has risen from 19 to 28, behind grades, strength of classes, and standardized test scores, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

Admissions officers say they would almost never deny admission solely over a suspicious essay, unless they could prove it was plagiarized. There are many talented writers, and it would be a

shame to misjudge them, they say. But at competitive schools that reject the vast majority of students, a hint of doubt can tilt the balance.

"The essay has over time become more important to the admission decisions, and that's trickling down to students," said Melissa E. Clinedinst, assistant director of research for the National Association for College Admission Counseling.

College administrators say that intense pressure to gain acceptance to selective schools has compelled parents to turn to high-priced essay editors and coaches.

"The euphemism we use is polished," said Parke Muth, an admissions dean at the University of Virginia. "If you're paying someone that much money, there shouldn't be fingerprints. But some essays have that sheen, that lemony-fresh smell that makes you wonder."

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Outright plagiarism usually sticks out like a sore thumb, and suspicions can often be confirmed with a Google search. But detecting the helpful hand of a parent, guidance counselor, or writing coach, even for admissions officers who have read thousands of personal essays, takes a keen eye. "We definitely encounter essays that seem too good to be true," said Eric J. Kaplan, interim dean of admissions of the University of Pennsylvania. "Highly sophisticated cadence and tone, perfectly polished prose, revelations that are almost profound, even for the most brilliant 17-year-old."

When an essay raises eyebrows, the first step is to judge it against the rest of the application, administrators say. A shimmering essay from a so-so English student, for example, clashes like "red stilettos and sweats," said Sarah M. McGinty, a Boston admissions consultant and author of "The College Application Essay."

"The application is a bit of an outfit, and mismatches raise questions," she said. "Good writers leave a trail of crumbs behind."

McGinty said that while she advises students on essay topics and edits their drafts, she is careful to let students write in their own voice.

In that vein, some colleges require essays on different topics and compare them, which can expose glaring discrepancies.

"Sometimes the difference in quality is remarkable," Kaplan said. "In the shorter essays, there will be no subject-verb agreement. Then the main one would be something a magazine would be eager to print."

Admissions officers say that there is nothing wrong with students receiving some outside help with their essays, such as suggestions on what to write about and emphasize, and that the vast majority of essays are the students' own. For that reason, admissions officials will only investigate when they believe adults are essentially ghostwriting the essays.

"There's a little bit of a disconnect sometimes," said Gil J. Villanueva, dean of admissions at Brandeis University. "We expect people to write like 17- and 18-year-olds, and sometimes it comes across like it could be in a book."

Admissions officers admit there is a fine line between a vigorous edit and wholesale reworking.

"We focus on the topic that will help personalize the student and help them stand out," said Larry Dannenberg, a college consultant in Framingham. "We are very, very careful to make sure that we're not writing the essay."

Admissions officers are not so sure, and some students protest that essay services can go too far. Rachel Merkin, a freshman from Wellesley at Ithaca College, said she rejected some of her coach's suggested editing, which she thought made the essay sound too mature and writerly.

"The editor definitely made my words sound good, I'll admit that," she said. "She made every word count. But I made sure I kept my voice in the essay."

Merkin's instincts were right, admissions officers say. Heavily edited essays often come across as scripted, sanitized. Essays with some rough edges are not only authentic, they are better reads.

Applicants are better off expressing themselves in their own words, admissions officers say.

"Almost the worst thing is for students to write to what they think we are looking for," said Stu Schmill, interim admissions director at MIT. "The best thing they can do is write from the heart."

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