

The Art of Selling Yourself

By Vicky Hallett

College applications aren't just a litany of boring questions, although they can seem that way. They're your opportunity to tell your story--and it's your job to make sure that story stands out. Sure, it can help to have medaled in the Olympics or published a novel (although not a plagiarized one). But you don't need a mind-blowing accomplishment to get colleges to notice your fabulousity. You just need to prove you have made valuable contributions inside the classroom and out--and will continue to do so if accepted.

Why your transcript rules. A big part of your story is grades. So while your transcript may seem like a list of A's, B's, and C's (and you hope not too many D's), to people like Jess Lord, dean of admission and financial aid at Haverford College, it's the way to find out who you are. "It's not just grades but increased rigor of classes and growth in a certain area," he notes. Just how important is it? "On a scale from 1 to 10, the transcript is a 10," says Jim Miller, Brown University's dean of admissions.

Colleges look to see that you've pushed yourself by making the most of what your high school has to offer. "If they're not planning to be science majors but stuck with it at a high level, even if they're not getting the best grade, that's impressive," adds Case Western Reserve's director of undergraduate admission, Liz Woyczynski.

All teacher recs are not the same. The plot doesn't end with that piece of paper. Teacher recommendations provide context for those choices and grades. So selecting your recommenders carefully is critical. Find teachers who understand your learning style and know what you can handle academically. In larger schools, where teachers are loaded down with writing stacks of recommendations, make a "brag sheet," suggests Eliot Applestein, an independent college counselor. This is not a chance to remind your teachers of your score on that tough test--they have that in their grade books--but an opportunity to jog their memories about the way you tutored that struggling classmate in chemistry or that kick-butt presentation on Sri Lanka you gave in social studies. But check with your teachers first--they may prefer to write the letter without your input.

Filling in the blanks. At this point, admissions committees are deep into your story, and they think they have a sense of who you are--but maybe they're off a bit. Take a look at your own transcript to see what kind of info admissions officers might infer from it. Is there a semester where your grades plummeted? Is there an AP class you should have taken but didn't? Do you have an unusually high number of absences? These things may raise red flags, even if they happened for understandable reasons: a problem in the family, a spat with a teacher, a scheduling conflict. Guidance counselors should be aware of these issues and explain them in their recommendation letters to schools, but you can't always count on that. "If there's more to say, throw in an extra piece of paper. Students should never feel like we don't want that information," says Lord. But usually a short paragraph will do. There's no reason to write a dissertation on how your school offered AP French and AP Biology the same period.

Extra-currics. But enough about grades. Another big chunk of your tale comes from the activity section of the application, on which you list each of your commitments, along with how many hours a week you do them and positions held. The common applications give you only seven slots for seven passions--the buzz word du jour for activities that you've embraced, body and soul. Only in rare situations should that be a problem. "If kids say they've done 10 million things, colleges are going to think they're padding their resume," Applestein says. "Colleges aren't looking for a smorgasbord." Two or three significant activities are much more impressive than casual membership in a dozen.

Community service resonates particularly well with colleges. It's not so much what you do, though, but how passionate you are about it--an indicator for the kind of energy you'll devote to extracurricular pursuits at college. Every high school student knows classmates who've picked up an activity (or instrument or sport) to look good for college applications. But it's quickly apparent in an interview or essay if the interest is genuine.

Letters from adults associated with your activities can give colleges a better sense of what kind of effort was involved in your pursuits. The politician whose campaign you slaved for, the adviser for your environmental club, your boss at the rape crisis center, these are people who can take that one line of information you've provided and make it come to life.

Ace the essay. Up until now, you've let lists and adults tell your story. With the essay comes your chance to speak for yourself. Sarah McGinty, author of *The College Application Essay*, says, "Put a lot of time into thinking and chewing before you start writing. Make a list of what your application already says about you. If you did well on the SATs, your scores show that. If you know big words, your English grades show that. If you've played soccer for years, your coach's letter will say that. Augment what's in the folder."

Narrowing in on the right topic can drive a kid bonkers, but McGinty says there's no reason to think you can't do this well: "If you ask the average high school student to pick a scene from *The Great Gatsby* and show how that illustrates Gatsby's character, it's easy for them. Writing your essay is no different, except you don't have to read a novel. You look through your life and illuminate a moment." The tricky part is being reflective. McGinty suggests finding a time your opinion changed. That kind of situation lends itself to explaining how you think.

While you want to catch the eye of admissions boards, don't be gimmicky. "Someone once wrote their essay in blood. No one wanted to pick it up," Miller recalls. "We asked for 500 words, not 2 pints."

Essays can be effective even when they pinpoint something that might seem insignificant in the grand scheme. Bev Taylor, a New York-based independent counselor known as the Ivy Coach, worked with a young woman who discarded several failed ideas before writing about her lucky rubber-band ball and how it connected her to her family and friends. Her admissions letter from Williams College included a rubber band for her collection. One of Applestein's students with average grades and scores wrote his essay about a day a classmate wrote a derogatory statement about their Chinese teacher on the blackboard while the teacher was out of the room. "He got up and told them how stupid that was and erased it. "He alienated himself from some of his classmates, but it showed he stood for something," Applestein says. "I was amazed at some of the schools he got into, but this is the kind of person schools want." Still, Miller cautions, an essay isn't going to erase every shortcoming: "Essays can heal the sick, but they can't raise the dead."

The business of professional essay editing--and disturbingly, also essay buying--has grown tremendously in the past few years. That's why Emory College Dean of Admission Daniel Walls says, "The voice should be of a 17- or 18-year-old student, not a 40-year-old parent." Asking for some editing and proofing help is expected, but don't let mom and dad, counselors, or anyone else do the work for you. Michael Mills, associate provost for university enrollment at Northwestern University, says that for all of the complaints people may have about the new writing portion of the SAT, it allows them to see an unedited sample of students' work. "Everyone has to stand and deliver," he says. This year, in a few cases, they peeked to check the writing section when there was a disconnect between the essay and grades and scores. This will probably become more common.

Interview. Interviews are weighted differently from school to school. Some are mainly informative rather

than evaluative. But you can't underestimate the power of face time with an admissions officer or another representative. "What I look for is what they have to say about what they do," says Lord. "It's great to see someone get excited."

"Passion" is again the key--although as Miller jokes, "the only thing 18-year-olds have passion for is each other." Demonstrating energy and enthusiasm for your academics and extracurriculars indicates to interviewers that you'll take that pep with you to campus.

The interview can be a good chance to explain any blips in your record, and it can prove you're the kind of person they'd want other students to strike up a conversation with in the dining hall. It's also a chance to share bits about yourself that didn't fit anywhere else in the application, like your hobby of reading Russian literature in your spare time. Taylor, who tells her teens to train for the interviews by answering her list of questions into a tape recorder, instructs them to bring an activity sheet ("I don't like to call them resumes when you're 17") to help break the ice.

No college is expecting everyone to be an extrovert, but if you clam up in front of adults or can't articulate your interests, the interview might not be such a good idea, Taylor advises. "Some kids I tell don't ask for it--don't answer the phone," she says. "One kid, I referred to him as the blob. He just sat there. He ended up doing very well, but he could not interview."

That avoidance approach could backfire, though, even if interviews are optional. "A student from the suburbs of Philly, we'd be upset if they don't do it," explains Lord, whose Haverford campus is outside Philadelphia. "If a student from California can't come, our interpretation of that is different." The same can be true of alumni interviews or local receptions--if you're not making that effort, you can appear unenthusiastic about the school.

Say it as if you mean it. It may seem small, but that slip-up could keep you from getting in. In this era of huge applicant pools and students who apply to more than 20 schools, demonstrating your desire to go to a particular one is key. Every year, Emory has a handful of applicants who write that they're excited about the school of engineering, Walls says. What's the problem? They don't have one. "This is a student who hasn't done the research we expect. The feeling is this student has other schools in mind," he explains. Laura Miller, college counselor at the North Shore Hebrew Academy in Long Island, asked the University of Pennsylvania admissions office why a student of hers who got into Yale didn't make the cut at Penn's school of engineering. "In the short essay on why do you want to go to Penn, he didn't mention engineering in his answer," she was told.

Brown's Miller, however, would like to inform all students that they should not under any circumstances copy what Seth Cohen did on *The O.C.* last season. After Brown rejected him, he personally accosted the admissions director. As on the show, that won't get you into a college no matter how much you love it.

Do your homework. Your application is your story up to year 18, and colleges would like to see that you've planned the next chapters with them, so do your research. Tracy Brooks, associate director of admissions at the College of Wooster, checks if prospective students know about the school's senior independent study project. "It matters," she says. Obviously, finding a school that's a good fit for you is in your best interest. When you dig, you may realize that the college with the dorm where everyone speaks Esperanto and grows medicinal herbs is the only place you can imagine yourself. Or, you may stumble across the work of a trailblazing classics professor you'd love to study with. When explaining to a school why you want to go, you can say it as if you mean it when you have reasons beyond liking the color of the bumper sticker.

And that's the way to a happy ending in the Book of You.