**By Glenn C. Altschuler, Cornell University Dean**

*I yearn for the admissions essay in which sports are not a metaphor, the race is not always to the swift, and life is just a bit confusing.*

Consultants charge up to $300 an hour to help prepare and polish it, and $60 for a quick appraisal. Prep schools offer a weekly class throughout the fall to conceive, draft, rewrite, revise and edit it. Parents ghostwrite it and get secretaries to type the final version, spell-checked and grammatically correct, on 24-pound bond paper. Students who write it without assistance experience what William Hiss, the former dean of admissions at Bated College, calls myopic paranoia: "I don't know why they are asking that question, but I know they are out to get me."

Why does the personal-essay portion of the application to college cause so much angst and expense? Because a lot is at stake. Since many institutions have eliminated the personal interview, the essay is now the one opportunity for students to exercise control and provide a glimpse of how they think and write, and to convey what is important to them. In the most competitive colleges, where there are more applicants with glorious grade-point averages and terrific test scores than there are spaces in the freshman class, selection committees often turn to the personal essay to indulge their subjective instincts in deciding who gets in, who doesn't and who must languish in higher education's torture chamber, the wait list.

To separate the sheep from the goats, a few institutions provide specific topics for applicants to address. In its list of possible essay subjects, Bennington college has asked aspiring students to design and describe "an experiment that attempts to determine whether toads can hear." In the tradition of the "school of improvisation and its offshoot, the Second City comedy troupe," the University of Chicago is currently looking for, among other possibilities, a television pilot set on a college campus. It is to include Enrico Fermi's personal trainer, a starving investment banker, Godot or an evil clown as a character, and must have as a prominent prop Cliff Notes on "Finnegans Wake," van Gogh's ear, a proton accelerator or Muddy Waters's guitar.

Better to "err on the side of intellectual pretension than on the side of pure silliness," the admissions staff advises in the directions to the applicant.

Perhaps anticipating that the courts will ban such assignments as cruel and unusual punishment, most colleges now invite applicants to write about a personal, local or international issue that is meaningful to them; a book that has changed their understanding of the world, other people or themselves; or anything else that interests them. Vague or open-ended questions, of course, provide their own kind of terror: "What topic will light up my application and impress the inquisitionally inclined panel of experts?"

Like pornography, good essays are easier to recognize than define. In 10 years of serving on admissions committees at Cornell University, I almost never disagreed with my colleagues in evaluating essays. A good one catches the applicant in the act of thinking; it establishes and maintains a distinctive voice, personality and perspective. With these characteristics in mind, then, and in a modest attempt to put the consultants out of business, here is some advice about for the applicant on what you should write about and how you can make the personal essay enhance you application:

* Essays about national, global and cosmic issues seem as if they have been written be Applicant Anonymous. If what you know about the crisis in East Timor comes from Time magazine or from Tom Brokaw, you will probably conclude, as have thousands of other applicants who have written on the same topic, that ethnic and religious repression are reprehensible and peace desirable. And you'll sound like a teen-ager trying to sound like and adult.
* Write about your world and your experiences. Seventeen-year-olds inhabit a foreign country, and adults who work in colleges and universities are curious about what it's like to live within its borders. Essays about a friendship that was forged or one that failed, buying a pair of sneakers, an afternoon working at Dunkin' Donuts, the first trip to the museum without Mom or Dad, or getting robbed on the subway can provide glimpses of your ideas, values and passions.
* Describe. Don't characterize. Eliminate all adjectives and adverbs. "The Coach Who Changed My Life" may be healthy, wealthy and wise, but these qualities can best be conveyed in a narrative of what he actually said and did. In "Ode to Dad," a Cornell applicant explained her father's values by describing his hands, encrusted with dirt from a career as a truck farmer. It worked.
* Resist the temptation to let others speak for you. A quotation from a philosopher, poet or politician may appear to be the perfect opportunity to parade your erudition. More often than not, you will impress no one while you hijack the personal essay to a place you have never been. This year, a young woman concluded an essay about he embarrassment over her parents' Old World values and foreign accents, her desire for the approval of her peers and a tear-filled confrontation with her father by invoking Ralph Waldo Emerson. We never got a glimpse of the aftermath of "The Conversation That Changed My Life."
* Academics tend to see through a glass darkly. They value ambiguity, uncertainty and irony. For these reasons, and not because they have and antireligious agenda, selection committees invariably prefer "How I Lost MY Faith" to "God Is the Center of My Life." But above all, writers should establish distance from their subjects, including themselves. Distance discourages essayists from drawing the cliched moral. Every semester I yearn for the applicant who will declare that organized sports are not a metaphor for life, that coaches are often wrong or a little crazy, that the race is not always to the swift, nor the battle to the strong. Years ago we admitted a student whose essay, "Riding the Pine," found that no enduring truths came from sitting on the bench for an entire baseball season. It's O.K. to be just a bit confused, to find the meaning of life elusive.
* Selection committee members are pretty savvy. They have learned to look for authenticity, not profundity. But knowing yourself, on paper, takes imagination reflection and time. Start early, let parents and friends read it, and then revise: the voice you find may be your own.

*Glenn C. Altschuler is dean of the School of Continuing Education and Summer Sessions and the Thomas and Dorothy Litwin Professor of American Studies at Cornell University.*