

Know Thyself: Ask these five questions before you submit your college essays

First a fun fact, to begin with, not many people know that Harvard University is older than the Taj Mahal. While Harvard University started in 1636, the Taj Mahal opened in 1648. Why does it matter? Because Time is the biggest test of relevance and excellence. If a university can survive and continues to be a place of excellence for almost 400 years and still going strong, then it's worth learning the reason behind its longevity.

The American higher education system is probably the best in the world. Their admission process is cumbersome and demanding. Americans take pride in calling it a holistic approach. The three main components of this education system are: a) Academic performance and standardized test scores. They test students' ability to withstand academic rigor; b) Extracurricular activities to assess the students' world outside the confines of the classrooms. The world is unpredictable and complex. To succeed, one needs to have a safety valve to ease the pressure. Interests in the world outside the classroom, whether sports, arts or community, can take some load off and make you a well-rounded individual and c) Essays and LORS represent who you are and the way the world around you perceives you. It is an exciting feature of their admission process. Moreover, this is not well-understood in our culture, and that's what I will talk about it in this note.

Culturally, East and West are poles apart. In the Asian culture (Indian, Chinese), age is bestowed with wisdom. It is sacrilegious to argue with elders and question conventional wisdom. However, in the West, the Renaissance period from the 14th to the 17th century introduced a new cultural norm—the Greek philosopher Protagoras' contention, 'Man is the Measure of things'. The Renaissance brought a change after a lot of bloodshed and sacrifice, so that it was acceptable to question Church, God, and the King. It altered the landscape of human societies. Anybody could employ logic, observation, and reason to challenge conventional thinking. Authority (by position or power) was no longer the custodian of right and wrong. It forced an individual to look within and ask 'who am I'?

Most of the essay requirements for the top American universities are designed to make students reflect on their journey. However, since many cultures don't share the same conventions, it becomes a challenging exercise.

We have looked at many young students and their struggle with this particular aspect of the admission process. This post is to help give students and families a quick snapshot of a mental framework while they write their essays.

The most hackneyed advice that you will come across while writing essays is to 'be authentic'. However, what exactly does this mean for an eighteen-year-old who is changing her mind or interest every day? Ask these five questions to know your authentic self:

a) Does your essay show who you are? By design, the essay is not your CV. It is expected that you have already listed your achievements at an appropriate place in the Application Form. Most of the essays are reflective in nature. Make an honest assessment of who you are: your motivation, interests, likes, aspirations, etc. It will help a great deal to pause at this critical juncture of life (just before the start of college life) to ask who am I?

b) Does it represent you? It would help if you asked yourself whether your essay represents the world you inhabit. The admission officers have read countless essays from your age group. They are armed with an understanding of the world of teenagers. Don't try to put out a world that is not yours. If social work doesn't interest you, then don't do it because your cousin got into Yale on the basis of her work in an NGO.

c) Does it use your language? This suggestion is more for the parents: Tiger moms and ambitious fathers. There will be about a 40 years gap between parents and teenagers. Language has morphed into a very different beast (parents' perspective??). Don't impose your language (your world) on your children.

d) Is it interesting? We have seen many youngsters who haven't faced any traumatic event in their growing years. They have a normal childhood; no life-threatening accident; no divorce in the family; no bullying at school. The admission officer is keen to know your life. She is not looking for a thrill or an adventure journey in your essay. At the same time, all of us have an interesting side. That's why we make friends. Our friends bond with us because we compliment them. If you are still confused, ask your friends and dig deeper about what you add to the friendship. Your discovery may surprise you.

e) Do you care? No university wants to hire a careless student. Does your essay have spelling mistakes; or is it a compilation of a few random thoughts thrown together in the last-minute slapdash manner. If you have not taken the application process seriously, then don't expect the university to be concerned about your candidature.

Most of the stress occurs because students have a hectic calendar and they start writing essays at the last minute. Chess grandmasters struggle with ticking clocks. Take one step at a time. Do justice to one essay at one time and allot some quiet moments for it. This is going to be an enjoyable journey and somewhere along the way, Socrates' message, 'Know Thyself', will find an echo with you.