

Problematic Messages

Step 1: Pay Attention

You may mean well when you tell students to avoid clichés. They make the student sound generic. But did you know that starting with a cliché can help a student stand out? It's all about how you handle it. Watch out for the most common misused phrases, step back, and think about what you MEAN when by them.

For at least two weeks, review all of your handouts and presentation materials. Listen carefully to yourself when you are with students. Note when you use these problematic phrases and suggestions:

- Don't
- Avoid Clichés
- Don't Write about Sports (or service trips or ...)
- Show Your Passion (or leadership ... or commitment...)
- Let Me Hear Your Voice
- Tell a Story Only You Can Tell
- Use This Essay as an Example

Step 2: Consider What You Mean

Create a chart like the one below to reflect on what you mean by each of the problematic phrases, then consider activities that can help you draw out what you are really looking for. Rather than telling students WHAT to do (or not to do), focus on teaching them HOW to get there.

Problematic Phrase/Suggestion	What Do I Mean?	How Can I Accomplish This in Another Way?	What Support Do I Need?

Step 3: Reflect on Your Review Process

Are you spending too much time “fixing” essays? If so, your students may be hearing this message from you: *I'm the expert. Lean on me, and I'll show you exactly what to do.* While you ARE the expert in many areas, the essay is different. You should be the expert in the process of writing the essay, not the final authority on which words show up on the page. That's the student's job. Be a reviewer, not an editor.

The Best College Essays Begin with a Cliché

By Kim Lifton, President

Some of Wow's best college essays have started with a cliché. Why? Most of us experience the same life lessons. Our stories are different, but we learn the same lessons from them.

An independent educational consultant from Atlanta recently asked me what advice to give a student who wants to show colleges through his application essay that he "gives 110% to everything he does." It's a cliché. So many students use clichés, she said.

Phrases like *I give 110%* and *I'm a hard-worker* are clichés, but consultants, school counselors, teachers and parents can use them as starting points for brainstorming activities. This will help the student write a meaningful essay with a powerful personal message.

Our advice: Gently encourage young writers, engage them in conversation, and keep asking questions. What does *give 110%* mean to you? *Why is it important to try so hard? What if you didn't give it your all?*

You don't know where the story is going. Listen. Follow the student's lead, and let the story emerge.

Last year, a student came to me with a typical topic in mind: she realized how fortunate she was after visiting a poor village in Costa Rica during a mission trip. Rather than telling her that the story was boring, common or potentially condescending, I guided the discussion and asked her about the trip in general and why the lesson was important.

What did she learn about herself on that journey? Did she see any big, furry spiders? Were there bats? Snakes? What was fun about the trip?

Her cliché evolved into a compelling application essay about conquering a fear of heights by jumping off a 30-foot waterfall during the trip. The jump was scary – and fun. The essay demonstrated personal growth through a specific tale. She got into her first-choice college, as well as a few others. Because we started where she felt comfortable, she was able to move away from the cliché. In fact, some of Wow's best college essays have started with a cliché. Why? Most of us experience the same life lessons. Our stories are different, but we learn the same lessons from them.

Brainstorming Tips

✓ **Listen and observe**

Ask your student about something relevant, and then listen to the answer. If she is all dressed up, ask where she is going, and why. If she just feels good when she gets dressed up and does it all the time, get her talking. Probe. Observe. Engage her. You never know when a story will emerge. Follow-up questions are critical for brainstorming!

✓ **Be a coach**

Help your students come up with their own ideas by offering encouraging words to guide the conversation. Positive language is important. Try using words and phrases like:

Wow, that is interesting.

There's a story in there.

Keep going. I am intrigued.

I hear something interesting.

You tell a story well.

Let's see where this goes.

I like where this is going.

That's a great story.

I want to know more.

✓ **Follow the student's lead**

If your student says he does not know where to start, ask what he ate for breakfast, if he worked out, or the name of his favorite band. Follow his lead. Find out what he wants the college to know about him. No matter the answer, use it as a starting point. If you get a cliché (I always give 110%, I never give up, I learn from my mistakes), that is okay. It is enough to get the student started. Ask why he works so hard. Perhaps he has a story to illustrate his point. Ask for examples and details. You can give the student a piece of paper and a pen and ask for 10 examples that show his hard work ethic.

✓ **Don't tell your student what to write.**

Guide your students through the process of discovery so they can find – and be comfortable with – their own ideas. Do not tell students what to write. A football coach does not suit up and tackle a player from the opposing team. A swim coach does not anchor the relay. A business coach does not write a client's marketing plan. Colleges do not care what you think about your student, what Mom or Dad thinks of the student, or what anyone other than the student thinks the story is; they want to know what your student thinks of herself.

✓ **Never say no**

Telling your student no or saying that an idea sounds like a cliché or that colleges don't like a certain type of story can shut down your student and impede his ability to brainstorm effectively. It can hurt his self esteem as well. Even if a student comes to you excited about a service trip or beating the best robotics team at the state competition, it is important to let that student talk about the trip or the victory. Each experience is a good starting place. Did he try something new? What did he learn? How did it change him? Replace "no" with "why." You don't know where the story is going, so listen and pay attention. Even a cliché can turn into a good story. Help the student reflect to find out why it matters.

✓ **Don't pick the essay question**

We've read quite a few blogs telling students which question is best to answer. This confuses students. They are used to having adults tell them what to do, so they will ask you what to do. But you don't have to answer. Tell them that no question is better than another, and college admissions teams don't have preferences. Any question will do. A student can tell a story to illustrate any trait she feels is important, using any prompt.