

Don't make these applications mistakes

By Lee Shulman Bierer, College Admissions Strategies

November 1, an important college application deadline, is almost upon us and the stress in many homes with high school seniors is almost palpable.

Here are some tips to make the last part of the application process run a little more smoothly:

1. Don't procrastinate. November 1 is the most common deadline for colleges and universities that offer Early Decision (binding) and Early Action (non-binding) admissions programs. Procrastinators need to be aware that in the last few days before the deadline many college computer servers will be on overload and have been known to shut down entirely. This could mean that if you wait until the last minute to submit your application that it won't get in on time. I have heard ridiculous statistics that range from 60-80 percent of students wait until the last two days to file their applications. Think about what that means when you're a college or university with a large applicant pool, such as UCLA which receives over 110,000 applications. That is not a typo. According to the "2021 Princeton Review, The Best 386 Colleges," UCLA received 111,322 applications. If that server doesn't go down, you know it's going to be running slowly.

You should also note that colleges are aware of the date and time you file your application; so some may construe your procrastination as being either lazy or disinterested.

2. Don't be generic. Use your essays to set yourself apart from the masses. Don't tell the college admissions office what you think they want to hear (how prestigious their school is, how beautiful the campus is, etc.) demonstrate that you've done your homework and share why each college is a good fit for you academically and socially. You should specifically address the courses are you looking forward to taking and how you see yourself getting involved in campus life (clubs, activities, etc.).

3. Don't rush at the end. Oftentimes students are so eager to hit "submit" that they fail to proof their essays and the activities sufficiently. Submitting an activity list that says you are a "Candy Stripper" instead of a "Candy Striper" may cause some good-natured teasing at one college, but the failure to proofread may doom your application at another school. Since you don't know exactly who is reading your application, you just don't know how they'll react.

4. Don't be a stealth applicant. Colleges are engaged in social media. If you are interested in a college or university, you should let them know; "like" their Facebook page and follow them on Twitter and Instagram. Make sure you let them know if you visit their campus, if an admissions representative comes to your school or if you meet them at a college fair. **It's also important to note that some colleges are looking at students' social media pages as well, so clean them up.**

The Two Phrases That Kill a College Application

by Patrick O'Connor, Ph.D.

I'm really a hard worker.

This phrase is turning up in college essays and counselor meetings at a level that has never been seen before. It's likely showing up so much because students think it shows some level of commitment—school means a lot to me, so I work hard at it. This is also suggesting the student using the phrase is expecting some kind of payoff. Americans are raised to believe that, with a little hard work, they can do anything. OK—so, if you're a hard worker, it's time for you to win your prize in the form of an acceptance from your dream school.

Unfortunately, this phrase just doesn't do much for college admissions officers, or college in general. One admissions officer told me the phrase is a turnoff to him, since it could mean the student has to work incredibly hard just to keep up with their classes in high school. It's easy to see that as a limitation rather than a good quality. If you're working at full capacity in high school, what does that say about your ability to do harder work at college?

The other use of the phrase is just as bad. If you see college as a payoff for working so hard in high school, what does that say about your interest in making the most out of the opportunities college will bring you? Now that the prize is won, will you just sit back and rest on your laurels, treating college like a four-year hiatus from reality, where you do just enough to get a degree, party like mad the rest of the time, and then head off to the world of work? Colleges tend to have loftier expectations from their students, and if your language suggests you might not share them, it's likely you won't be studying anything at that particular school.

I really want to go there.

The use of this phrase in a college application is nothing short of a mystery. It tends to be used by students whose grades or test scores are under the averages for admitted students. The apparent hope is, the fervent desire to attend that college is more than enough to make up a few points in GPA or test scores. It's either that, or the student is hoping the admissions office has just read another application where the student said "To be honest, I don't care if you take me or not." If that's the case, your enthusiasm may make the difference you hope it will—but that doesn't happen too often.

Most of the time, this phrase rings pretty hollow, a classic example of what colleges mean when they say they want the student to show them, not tell them. You really want to come here? Great. Why? What do you know about our school that makes it more special than others? What have you done to show this high level of devotion—did you attend an online information session? Send your questions about the school to an admissions officer? Look at the college website past the first screen? It's great to want something, but it's even better to put that hope into action. That's what separates the doers from the dreamers.