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Use These Two Words On Your College Essay To Get Into Harvard

AdmitSee crunched the data in 15,000 essays from the admissions files of successful college applicants. The findings are fascinating.



[Source Photos: Flickr users [Mxttg](#), and [Guillén Pérez](#)]

Getting into an elite college has never been more cutthroat. Last year, Harvard's admissions rate dipped to a record low, with only 5.3% of applicants getting an acceptance letter. Stanford's rate was even lower, at 5.05%.

These days, it takes more than impressive grades, a full roster of extracurriculars, and a deep commitment to community service to get into a well-ranked school. Experts say that a stellar essay is the linchpin that will win the admissions department over. But what is less well known is that different colleges favor particular topics and even specific words used in essays.

This is a key finding from AdmitSee, a startup that invites verified college students to share their application materials with potential applicants. High school students can pay to access AdmitSee's repository of successful college essays, while college students who share their materials receive a small payment every time someone accesses their data. "The biggest differentiator for our site is that college

students who share their information are compensated for their time," Stephanie Shyu, cofounder of AdmitSee, tells *Fast Company*. "This allows them to monetize materials that they have sitting around. They can upload their file and when they check back in a few months later, they might have made several hundred dollars."



Lydia Pierce Fayal, and Stephanie Shyu, cofounders of AdmitSee
Photo: courtesy of AdmitSee

Shyu says that this model has allowed AdmitSee to collect a lot of data very rapidly. The company is only a year old and just landed \$1.5 million in seed funding from investors such as [asFounder.org](#) and [The Social + Capital Partnership](#).

But in this short time, AdmitSee has already gathered 15,000 college essays in their system. Many are from people who got into well-ranked colleges, since they targeted these students first. The vast majority of these essays come from current college students who were admitted within the last two or three years.

AdmitSee has a team that analyzes all of these materials, gathering both qualitative and

quantitative findings. And they've found some juicy insights about what different elite colleges are looking for in essays. One of the most striking differences was between successful Harvard and Stanford essays. (AdmitSee had 539 essays from Stanford and 393 from Harvard at the time of this interview, but more trickle in every day.) High-achieving high schoolers frequently apply to both schools—often with the very same essay—but there are stark differences between what their respective admissions departments seem to want.

WHAT DO YOU CALL YOUR PARENTS?

The terms "father" and "mother" appeared more frequently in successful Harvard essays, while the term "mom" and "dad" appeared more frequently in successful Stanford essays.

HARVARD LIKES DOWNER ESSAYS

AdmitSee found that negative words tended to show up more on essays accepted to Harvard than essays accepted to Stanford. For example, Shyu says that "cancer," "difficult," "hard," and "tough" appeared more frequently on Harvard essays, while "happy," "passion," "better," and "improve" appeared more frequently in Stanford essays.

This also had to do with the content of the

essays. At Harvard, admitted students tended to write about challenges they had overcome in their life or academic career, while Stanford

tended to prefer creative personal stories, or essays about family background or issues that the student cares about. "Extrapolating from this qualitative data, it seems like Stanford is more interested in the student's personality, while Harvard appears to be more interested in the student's track record of accomplishment," Shyu says.

Students who take risks with the content and the structure of their college essays tend to be more successful across the board.

With further linguistic analysis, AdmitSee found that the most common words on Harvard essays were "experience," "society," "world," "success," "opportunity." At Stanford, they were "research," "community," "knowledge," "future" and "skill."

WHAT THE OTHER IVIES CARE ABOUT

It turns out, Brown favors essays about volunteer and public interest work, while these topics rank low among successful Yale essays. In addition to Harvard, successful Princeton essays often tackle experiences with failure. Meanwhile, Cornell and the University of Pennsylvania tend to accept students who write

about their career aspirations. Essays about diversity—race, ethnicity, or sexual orientation—tend to be more popular at Stanford, Yale, and Brown.

Based on the AdmitSee's data, Dartmouth and Columbia don't appear to have strong biases toward particular essay topics. This means that essays on many subjects were seen favorably by the admissions departments at those schools. However, Shyu says that writing about a moment that changed the student's life showed up frequently in essays of successful applicants to those schools.

RISK-TAKING PAYS OFF

One general insight is that students who take risks with the content and the structure of their college essays tend to be more successful across the board. One student who was admitted to several top colleges wrote about his father's addiction to pornography and another wrote about a grandparent who was incarcerated, forcing her mother to get food stamps illegally. Weird formats also tend to do well. One successful student wrote an essay tracking how his credit card was stolen, making each point of the credit card's journey a separate section on the essay and analyzing what each transaction

meant. Another's essay was a list of her favorite books and focused on where each book was purchased.

"One of the big questions our users have is whether they should take a risk with their essay, writing about something that reveals very intimate details about themselves or that takes an unconventional format," Shyu says.

"What we're finding is that successful essays are not ones that talk about an accomplishment or regurgitate that student's résumé. The most compelling essays are those that touch on surprising personal topics."

Of course, one caveat here is that taking a risk only makes sense if the essay is well-executed. Shyu says that the content and structure of the story must make a larger point about the applicant, otherwise it does not serve a purpose. And it goes without saying that the essay must be well-written, with careful attention paid to flow and style.

Shyu says that there are two major takeaways that can be taken from the company's data. The first is that it is very valuable for applicants to tailor their essays for different schools, rather than perfecting one essay and using it to apply to every single school. The second is that these essays can offer insight into the culture of the school. "The essays of admitted students are also a reflection of the community at these

institutions," Shyu says. "It can provide insight into whether or not the school is a good fit for that student."

A final tip? If you want to go to Harvard and write about your parents, make sure to address them as "mother" and "father."