
Whose Essay is it Anyway?

Embracing the Admissions Essay as an Exercise in Teen Independence, Self-Actualization, and Self-Efficacy

A guided discussion with Libby Udelson

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Aka “I read a bunch of parenting books during the pandemic so you won’t have to”

A guided discussion with Libby Udelson



Welcome!

Goals for Today:

- **Spark** conversation and reflection with some food for thought
- **Quell** parents' anxiety about their role in the admissions process
- **Distinguish** between essay support and essay intrusion
- **Empower** students to develop life skills by taking control of their admissions process





Agenda

1. The Admissions Essay and College-Readiness
2. What “Support” Looks Like
3. Editing or Rewriting?
4. Too Many Cooks
5. When to Enlist Help

About Me



Libby Udelson is a longtime ACT/SAT tutor approaching 12 years working with teenagers. She owns and runs Udelson Tutoring, which specializes in test prep and academic tutoring for high schoolers. She is based out of Santa Monica, CA.

The Admissions Essay & College Readiness

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Yes, *and....*

Every student is different, and
there are many different metrics
of “college readiness.”

The Admissions Essay & College Readiness

Let's define our terms.

College Readiness refers to a student's preparedness to succeed in a college environment. Let's break it down into a few categories:

Knowledge Readiness

Behavior Readiness (better known as "maturity")

Skills Readiness

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Skills Readiness:

4 Major Skills Necessary for the Admissions Essay

And for college!

Libby's 3 favorite skills (who was paying attention during the first webinar?) + one more we didn't discuss

The Admissions Essay & College Readiness

Libby's 3 favorite skills (who was paying attention during the first webinar?) + one more we didn't discuss

1. Self-Advocacy
2. Self-Awareness
3. Self-Care
4. Executive Functioning

Bonus Q: What do the first three have in common?

The Admissions Essay & College Readiness

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If your student lacks in any of the above, the admissions process will help ...if you let it!

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What does self-advocacy entail?

- Speaking up for yourself, asking for help
- Making life decisions for yourself
- Learning how to get information so that you can understand things that are of interest to you

Sources for this slide:



Becoming a Stronger Self-Advocate

Self-Advocacy requires (some)
Self-Awareness.

In the last chat, we referred to **self-awareness** in terms of *metacognition*.

For the admissions essay, we can additionally frame **self-awareness** in terms of *self-reflection*.

Becoming a Stronger Self-Advocate

Self-Advocacy also requires a sense of **competence.**

Encouraging our kids to have autonomy (and stepping back so they can do so) over their admissions process will help them construct that sense of competence.

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Becoming a Stronger Self-Advocate

Self-Advocacy also requires
self-efficacy.

Self-Efficacy

Self-efficacy is "the belief in one's capabilities to organize and execute the courses of action required to manage prospective situations." (Bandura 1977)



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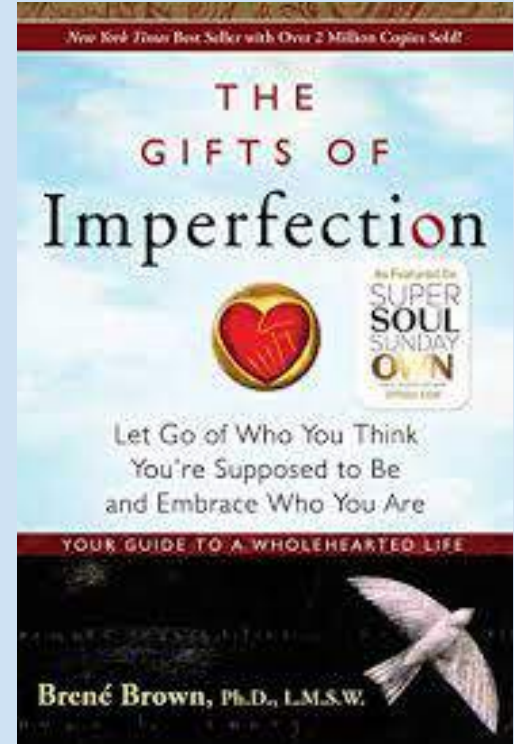
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“Understanding the difference between **healthy striving** and **perfectionism** is critical to laying down the shield and picking up your life.

Research shows that perfectionism hampers success. In fact, it's often the path to depression, anxiety, addiction, and life paralysis.”

— Brené Brown, *The Gifts of Imperfection*



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- 4. Executive Functioning**

Executive Functioning

Executive function and self-regulation skills are the mental processes that enable us to

- Plan
- Focus attention
- Remember instructions
- Juggle multiple tasks successfully



Center on the Developing Child
HARVARD UNIVERSITY

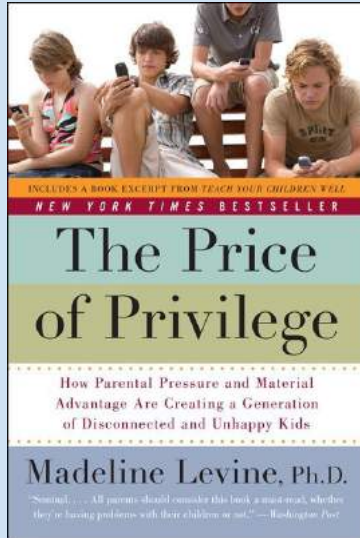
Executive Functioning

- Not every kid is developmentally in the same place! (so don't compare apples to oranges)
- This means each student will require different levels of ***support*** on their admissions process
- Sometimes a **nudge** is helpful, necessary, and appropriate.
- A **shove**, however, rarely helps.

What “Support” Looks Like

“Support is about the needs of the child...

...intrusion is about the needs of the parent.”



- From Dr. Madeline Levine's *The Price of Privilege*

Defining roles:
CEO & Executive Assistant metaphor?

What are the pros and cons of the CEO/Exec Assistant metaphor?



— Q: What's wrong with this picture?
(Real quotes by parents)

- “That’s our dream school.”
- “We need to get started on these applications.”
- “After all that time and energy we put in!”

- A: the collective pronouns “we/us/our”

- “That’s **our** dream school.”
- “**We** need to get started on these applications.”
- “After all that time and energy **we** put in!”

— Admissions Process Dos and You-Will-Help-Your-Student-If-You-Don'ts

Do!	You will <i>help</i> your student if you <i>don't</i>
Check in with your student about deadlines, and <i>if they have agreed to it beforehand</i> , bug them about looming deadlines.*	Contact any admissions offices, the ACT, the College Board, or the high school college counseling office about missed deadlines.

We might also call these the “support” (left) and “intrusion” (right) piles.

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Do!	You will <i>help</i> your student if you <i>don't</i>
Discuss essay topics with your child, provided that they <i>want</i> to discuss them with you.	Push a topic on your child. Remember, this is <i>their</i> story and <i>their</i> voice that they want to convey.

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Do!	You will <i>help</i> your student if you <i>don't</i>
<p>Edit for grammar/mechanics and fact-checking (i.e. You were a camp counselor 2019, not 2018)</p> <p>... but please, ONLY if you know your grammar! And use the “suggestions” feature on Docs!</p>	<p>Rewrite <i>ANYTHING</i>. If you're concerned about word choice or flow, those edits can come in the form of a “suggestion.” Remember, this is <i>their</i> story and <i>their</i> voice that they want to convey, and it is up to your child to accept your “suggestions.”</p>

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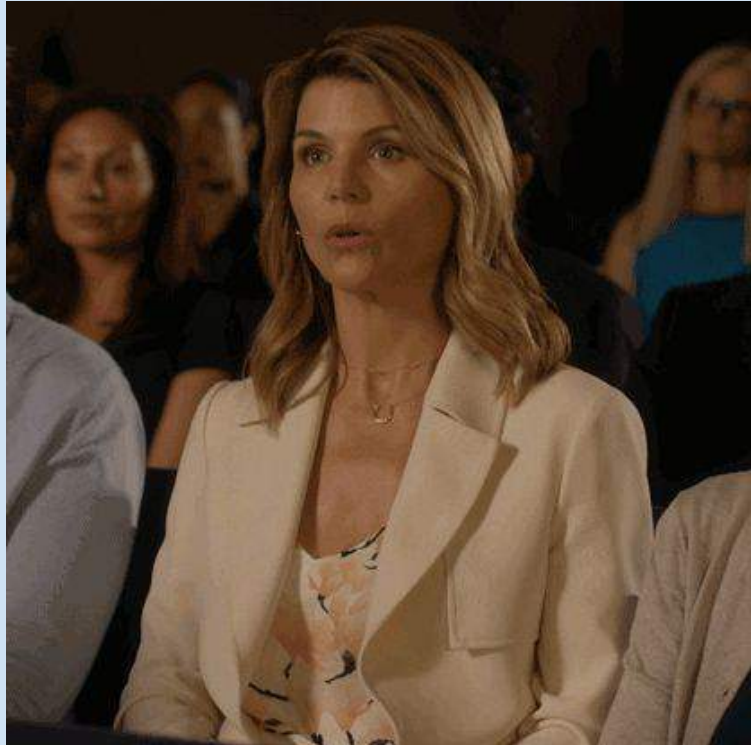
Side note: while we're discussing rewriting...

Rewriting (more commonly viewed as “over-editing”) your child’s essay is **harmful**.

So is having an essay consultant, older sibling, or family friend who is on the board do it.



Consequences of over-editing your child's essay (apart from the obvious)



— Consequence of over-editing your child's essay #1

If the process of writing their admissions essay encourages self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-advocacy, and sharpens their executive functioning/self-regulation skills...

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Consequence of over-editing your child's essay #1

If the process of writing their admissions essay encourages self-reflection, self-awareness, and self-advocacy, and sharpens their executive functioning/self-regulation skills...

...taking the keyboard away from them denies them that **very valuable opportunity.**

Consequence of over-editing your child's essay #2

It can lead to their **dissociation** from the whole process: “I’m just doing this ‘cuz my mom wants me to” or “I dunno, ask dad” or “fine, then *you* do it!”



Consequence of over-editing your child's essay #3



When a student (hopefully) pours their voice into their essay, knowing it will be heard and evaluated and have an impact on someone's decision, they are learning that ***their voice matters***.

Consequence of over-editing your child's essay #4

In the inevitable *and healthy* event of rejection:

- Acceptance, "I know I did my best"
- Learn a valuable lesson
- Not "not my problem" or "I bet they knew you guys wrote that part!"



Consequence of over-editing your child's essay #5



When your child gets accepted:

- Well-deserved pride (“I did this all on my own, and my hard work paid off!”)

- Not “I’m a fake”

**this can reinforce notions of “I can’t do this on my own; I need someone to fix this for me” in future life challenges

— Admissions Process Dos and You-Will-Help-Your-Student-If-You-Don'ts

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— Admissions Process Dos and You-Will-Help-Your-Student-If-You-Don'ts

Do!	You will <i>help</i> your student if you <i>don't</i>
Respect your child's privacy, if they ask for it.	Pry into their essay topic if they're less than enthusiastic about sharing their work with you.

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From a Parenting Blog...

“You are supposed to keep your mouth shut at college admissions information sessions, read her essays noting only typos and grammar mistakes and let her take control of the ‘process.’ Well, the people doling out this advice do not know how naive your kid can be, or that she could compete, nationally, in any procrastination competition. They do not know that she is confused, overwhelmed, overtired and, despite standing at the crossroads of her life, just wants to crawl in bed and take a nap.”

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Parents, what would you do?

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- A very well-meaning and empathetic, but at-risk of being intrusive, parent

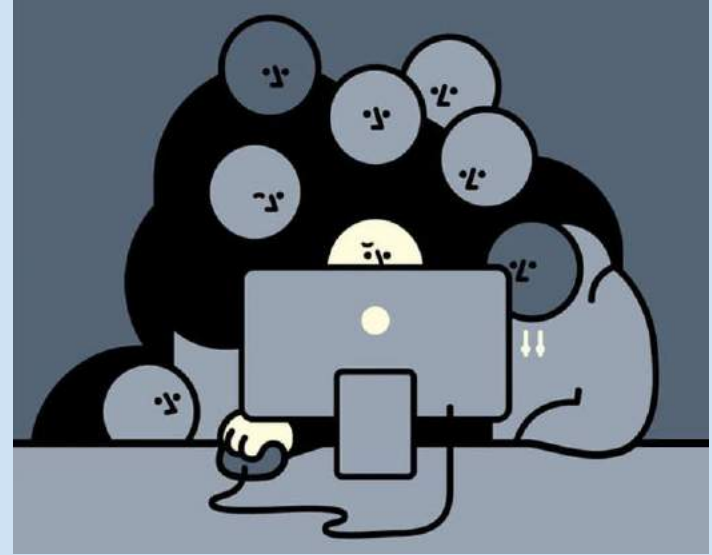
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Too many cooks in the kitchen?

- To simplify things, break the essay process into phases, and be clear about who can get involved in each step.
- Then students can pick *one* person to help out with each step, and the student should make **clear** to that person that they are only to interfere with that one step.



Have your student define clear roles to avoid stress

Sample plan:

- Brainstorming topics: me & essay consultant
- First draft: me
- Checking for impact of first draft*: essay consultant & dad
- Second draft: me
- Checking for impact of second draft*: essay consultant & mom
- Final grammar edit: our journalist friend

When to enlist professional help

- Soon.
- If and only if your student wants professional help **and** understands what the role of the essay consultant will be (which is *not writing a thing!*)
- Student should work with someone they trust and feel comfortable *really* opening up to and being vulnerable with.
- This person needs to have gone through the college admissions process themselves and should have experience reading many successful (and unsuccessful) admissions essays
- *Not* as a last resort

Some final thoughts...



How you handle the admissions process will set the tone for how your child will respond to it.

Show them you believe they can do it, and they will believe in themselves!

“Colleges are not asking 17 year olds to do anything that 17 year olds are not capable of doing” - Alice Kleeman, former college advisor at Menlo-Atherton

They can do it!

