



# Competitive application enhancers: compelling essays and powerful recommendations

How an essay that pops up the page  
and  
strong recommendations  
can win you admissions

Mihaela Arsene  
Fulbright Commission Romania



## What to expect

- I'll try to emphasize:
  - undergrad essay role: admissions and applicant perspective
  - recipe for success
  - essay critique
  - grad recommendations: tips for success
  - recommendation critique

# Admissions perspective

## Good match:

### the key words that help

- Univ. of Pittsburgh: “The University seeks to enroll a **diverse** student body, full of **talented** and **interesting** individuals.”
- College of William and Mary: “We are looking for leaders, for people with unique talents and the passion to pursue them, for people willing to stand up and be heard, for people who are creative, funny, interesting, and above all, interested in the world around them.”



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# Good match

## University of California:

- “We seek students who not only have demonstrated high levels of academic achievement, but who have sought out challenges and excelled, and who bring a diversity of talents, skills, viewpoints and experiences to the University.”



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# Good match

College admissions officer:

- “The essay may articulate a better fit for the university.” *Better than what?*
- “Self-knowledge is crucial to the matching process and lies at the heart of a successful college search.”



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# Grades and test scores

Great grades and test scores:

- don't guarantee admission;
- are just pre-requisites for admission.

Holistic evaluation = quantitative and qualitative elements



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# Student perspective

- Hard to write about yourself;
- Hard to do it powerfully within 500 words;
- Hard to admit that a one page essay can weight more than years of work (transcript, test scores, etc.)



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

# Recipe for success: 5 steps to a powerful essay

1. introspection
2. training: essay writing workshop organized by EducationUSA center; plus sample successful essays
3. honing writing skills
4. peer review
5. review by EducationUSA center



# 1. Introspection: who are you?

- a. 5 words/phrases that capture your personality;
- b. your most interesting feature that sets you apart from everyone else in the room;
- c. your most significant accomplishment;
- d. one experience that has shaped you and which you feel is fairly unique to you;
- e. three features that you like about yourself;
- f. specific situations that document the three qualities above;
- g. a characteristic feature of the Romanian culture that you appreciate and would like to share with US students.



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

## 2. Training

- essay writing workshop organized by EduUSA center
- aim at a cumulative effect, not a repetitive one
- a window on the applicant's personality
- a substitute for an interview
- “the essay can make or break your application”



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

## 2. Training (cntd.)

### Sample successful essays

- the anatomy of a successful essay; inductive approach: participant views and adviser guidance/re-enforcement
- powerful opening paragraph
- specific detail, clear message
- no earth-shattering events but interesting approach
- strong ending
- **memorable!**
- free insights [www.essayedge.com](http://www.essayedge.com)



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# 3. Writing skills

- Write multiple drafts;
- Polish, polish, polish!
- Allow enough time.



# 4. Peer review

- does the essay answer the question?
- is the intro engaging?
- does it provide concrete experiences as supporting details?
- any sections that aren't clear?
- does it reflect the writer's personality? **Etc.**



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education  
[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# 5. Review by EducationUSA center

FEAC experience in Bucharest:

- team of evaluators provides comprehensive feedback on students' **top** essays;
- “criticism as an act of love”;
- a trusted free service in much demand.



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# Essay critique

- 5 minutes to read the essay: can you hear the student's voice? Does it carry the theme through? Etc.
- as a group discuss the essay;
- “5% of essays are terrible, 90% are average (some good stuff, some bad stuff), 5% are excellent”
- where does it fit?
- will you remember it?
- share 3 thoughts on the essay.



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

---

# Advisers' perspective: Playing essay evaluators

- “Life should be stereo”: what makes this essay successful?
- “The Unicorn”: the essay that turns an average applicant into a star;
- “Why this school?” A Hamilton love affair: applicant’s and admissions’ perspective
- The good essays that are not good enough



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

# Tips for successful recommendations

- Culture-bound or universal strategies?
- Help the referee highlight the best in the applicant
- The good recommendation writer
- Cultivating the referees
- How to help busy referees meet deadlines?



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)

“Brevity is the soul of wit”

The short recommendation letter that says it all!



Your Official Source on U.S. Higher Education  

---

[EducationUSA.state.gov](http://EducationUSA.state.gov)