

## College Application Essay Tips for Foreign Service Kids

By Francesca Kelly

- 1. You can and should write your essay before the start of senior year.**  
Even if your chosen colleges don't have their applications available yet, you can still write your essay. That's because most colleges, and the Common Application, give you a choice of several essay topics, including, "Write on a topic of your choice," or "Write about an experience that changed you." Although you may have to fine-tune your essay later, or craft additional essays for certain colleges, you should write at least a rough draft the summer before senior year.
- 2. The most important thing you can do in writing your essay is to show, not tell.** Do not write statements such as, "I am a very creative person." Your reader will not trust you. But describing your experience painting a landscape in southern Greece, for example, where you evoke sounds, sights, smells, the sun filtering through the fields and the feel of the brush in your hand will demonstrate how creative you are without ever using the adjective, "creative."
- 3. You can take any anecdote, even something mundane, and turn it into something compelling — if you take the time to write descriptively, deeply and with purpose.** For example, a simple tale of raking leaves with your dad could be a metaphor for your changing relationship with your father, a story of reunion after an unaccompanied tour or wonderment at a simple task that others take for granted, but is a new experience for you after years spent in urban overseas apartments.
- 4. Do allude to your overseas background. But it doesn't have to be the main theme.**  
You can always write about your Foreign Service background and how it has affected you as a person. Or you can choose another topic and use your overseas experiences as a subtheme. A typical opening from this sort of essay would be something like, "In all the countries we'd lived in — El Salvador, Cameroon and South Africa, 'football' meant 'soccer.' And at 225 pounds, I was a pretty terrible soccer player. Then, when I was 16, we moved to Naples, where the American high school had a football team. And I knew this was my chance to play the sport I was born to play."
- 5. Try to grab the reader's attention in the first sentence or two.** The typical admissions reader is overwhelmed by dozens, even hundreds of applications. Does your essay tell an interesting story? Does it talk about a dilemma that you faced, or a beautiful day you experienced, or a person who made you think? One student I knew who dug ditches on a service project in rainy Romania started her essay with the sentence, "Mud. Mud. Mud." Of course the reader wanted to find out more!
- 6. Try to write about something that is not on the application already.** One of the best essays I ever read was about a friendship that meant a lot to the writer, the way it ended and why, and how that changed him. This told the college so much more about him than was in his resume.
- 7. You do want someone to look over your essay, but you don't want someone to change your voice.** This is your chance to show colleges who you are. Kids — and parents — often forget that the application process is not just about making them want you; it's also about going to the right school for you. Your essay's "voice" should not sound like anyone else's but yours.