



# How Not to Start a College Essay

By Kevin McMullin, Collegewise Founder and President

College essays need to start strong. They're competing for an admissions officer's attention, and you don't want to lose your reader before your story ever really gets going. So here are five opening approaches you should probably avoid. I'm not suggesting that some students haven't pulled them off in some way. But let's just say they're more likely to lose your reader's interest than they are to generate it.

## 1. An introduction to your story

Imagine you were telling a friend a story about life as a pitcher on the baseball team. You wouldn't start with, "Often in life, we face difficult situations that ultimately benefit us. While we may not see it at the time..." You'd lose the person's interest before you ever get to the good stuff. College essays work the same way. They're stories, and stories need a beginning, not an introduction. Instead of writing a general introduction to warm the reader up to your topic, just start like this: "A pitcher's mound can be the loneliest place in the world when you're on it and things aren't going well."

## 2. A famous quote

An essay that begins, "John F. Kennedy once said..." is already on the wrong track. Unless the quote was actually directed at you, your reader cares a lot more about what you have to say than they do about any famous person's pithy words. The one exception? Quotes can be effective when they're actually part of the story, like, "I never should have taken the bait when my cousin said, 'I'll bet you can't ride down that hill on your bike without using your hands.'" Otherwise, use your own words.

## 3. A definition

Opening with a definition, like "Persistence is defined as..." will probably not be a strong start. Your reader doesn't need you to define words, they need you to tell a story that will help them learn all about you. If your essay is about persistence, explain how you personified that trait. Use your available space to give the necessary details. And leave the definitions to Google.

## 4. What the heck?

Some students try so hard to be creative, or to entice the reader with a sense of intrigue, that they sacrifice clarity. If your reader is one paragraph in and thinking, “I don’t have a clue what this student is talking about,” you’ve moved from arousing interest to creating confusion. It’s certainly possible and often effective to begin your essay with a description that piques interest without necessarily revealing exactly what the description is about. But while enticing and intriguing are good, bewildering and unintelligible are not.

### **Anything that would show up on Google**

You might think you’ve read or heard the perfect opening someplace else—a book of sample essays, a speech, a line in your favorite movie, etc. But pirating someone else’s writing is plagiarism, and every college I can think of would frown on an applicant who steals other people’s work without crediting the source. There’s always that chance that your reader could recognize what you’re sharing. And if they have even the slightest suspicion, the answer will always be just a Google search away.

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