**10 Great Opening Lines from Stanford Admissions Essays**

When you're writing your college [admissions essay](http://moneywatch.bnet.com/spending/blog/college-solution/6-college-essay-tips-from-a-top-pro/2306/), do not be boring!
A bland [admission essay](http://www.virginia.edu/undergradadmission/writingtheessay.html) can put an overworked college rep to sleep. I attended a conference once where an administrator at [Yale University](http://www.yale.edu) mentioned that 20 staffers at his Ivy League school read 50 [college admission essays](http://www.usnews.com/education/blogs/the-college-solution/2010/06/29/need-help-with-your-college-application-essays-ask-the-experts) a day, six days a week during the application season. That's a lot of papers to slog through.

Now that it's summer, you've got time to write a great college essay. And to get your college [admissions essay](http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/05/20/tipsheetgelb/) off to the right start, begin with a captivating opening line.

Want examples? Here are samples from winning [college essays](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/) courtesy of [Stanford University](http://www.stanford.edu). These are opening lines of admissions essays that the Stanford admission reps especially liked. All of the essay writers were accepted as members of the class of 2012. You can find even more opening lines of [sample admission essays](http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/) in the *Stanford Magazine*.

**10 Opening Lines from Stanford Admission Essays**

1. I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.
2. When I was in the eighth grade I couldn't read.
3. While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?
4. I have old hands.
5. I was paralyzed from the waist down. I would try to move my leg or even shift an ankle but I never got a response. This was the first time thoughts of death ever cross my mind.
6. I almost didn't live through September 11th, 2001.
7. The spaghetti burbled and slushed around the pan, and as I stirred it, the noises it gave off began to sound increasingly like bodily functions.
8. I have been surfing Lake Michigan since I was 3 years old.
9. I stand on the riverbank surveying this rippled range like some riparian cowboy -instead of chaps, I wear vinyl, thigh-high waders and a lasso of measuring tape and twine is slung over my arm.
10. I had never seen anyone get so excited about mitochondria.

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[8 great first lines from Stanford application essays](http://new.testmagic.com/admissions/8-great-first-lines-stanford-essays/)

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Imagine this view every day on your way to class at Stanford University. A dream come true?

It’s college admissions season and high school seniors all over the country are struggling to perfectly capture the essence of who they are in fewer than 1,001 characters, no easy task for anyone, let alone an overworked high school student.

Parents and university-hopefuls frequently tell us that they are unsure of what to write in their personal statements. While the standard advice is easy to give (*Find something interesting and unique about you, and tell it in a compelling way*), it is often painfully difficult to follow through on. Easier said than done, for sure.

We’ve all heard English teachers say that the introduction can be the most important part of an essay, as it focuses the reader, sets expectations, and grabs the reader’s attention. We often search for a hook, one that is at once unique and free of gimmicks. It is a tricky balancing act, and is certainly culturally influenced as well. Worse, we writers often lack the objectivity to effectively assess our our own writing (especially when we’ve labored over a single paragraph for hours or days), so we may not be able to tell whether our writing works or conveys the message we want.

Not helping matters at all is the conflicting advice we receive from the dozen or so English teachers we’ve had over the years. One teacher marks off for using second-person (e.g., *You may not know how lucky you are until you’ve lost everything you once had*), favoring the more stilted third-person (*One may not know how lucky she is until she’s lost everything she once had*). Another teacher may encourage you to eschew formality and find an “authentic” voice. Complicating matters is the fact that College Board has officially okayed the use of first-person (e.g., “I”) in the SAT essay, which for many students represents the definitive answer to the question of what is or is not acceptable in writing. (Folks, for the record, there are different levels of formality and myriad different styles of writing. There is truly no right or wrong in essays. My best advice to you, if you have any doubt at all, is to first learn what your particular teacher or test wants, and conform to those expectations or guidelines.)

So, what are the admissions committees looking for in writing? If you ask any of them, they will invariably tell you just to be yourself, to let your true voice come out. But… What does that mean? I could write a chapter on this topic, but for now I’ll just say that I think that that advice isn’t as helpful as it sounds. (What would happen if you were just being yourself and wrote *I hecka want to go to Stanford! I mean, who wouldn’t? Dude, it’s an awesome school! You ever see those posers wearing Stanford hoodies, but you just know they didn’t go there? Yeah! I could wear a Stanford hoodie honestly, and then all my relatives would shut up about me never succeeding at anything. In yo face!* )

Well, here’s some great news. Stanford [published 22 opening lines of essays](http://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=31010) they liked, the writers of which were offered a place in the graduating class of 2012. Here are eight of those 22, chosen for their variety and uniqueness:

1. On a hot Hollywood evening, I sat on a bike, sweltering in a winter coat and furry boots.
2. While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?
3. Cancer tried to defeat me, and it failed.
4. Flying over enemy territory, I took in Beirut’s beautiful skyline and wondered if under different circumstances I would have hopped on a bus and come here for my vacation. Instead, I saw the city from the window of a helicopter, in military uniform, my face camouflaged, on my way to a special operation deep behind enemy lines.
5. I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.
6. I was paralyzed from the waist down. I would try to move my leg or even shift an ankle but I never got a response. This was the first time thoughts of death ever crossed my mind.
7. As an Indian-American, I am forever bound to the hyphen.
8. Unlike many mathematicians, I live in an irrational world; I feel that my life is defined by a certain amount of irrationalities that bloom too frequently, such as my brief foray in front of 400 people without my pants.

Be sure to take a look at the rest of the [opening sentences](http://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=31010), as they offer a rare and invaluable peek inside the admissions office.

I hope those opening lines will give you some ideas of what to write and of what the admissions committees like. Remember, they are human, just like you. If you, your friends, or your family like something you’ve written, there’s a good chance others will too. And good luck with your admissions!

# Let Me Introduce Myself

First lines from the application essays of Stanford's newest class.

It is a truth universally acknowledged that a high school student in possession of a good résumé must still be in want of a personal essay. In the best of times and the worst of times, first impressions matter. Any student who hopes to be the hero of his own life will strive to write a great opening line.

Picture the dark and stormy nights and the rosy-fingered dawns during which college applicants for the Class of '12 took pen in hand. What would work best—a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream? A screaming comes across the sky as lines are written, then abandoned. The rewriting and editing seems to last till the clocks strike thirteen.

But at last their personal statements for the Common App are crafted. The undergraduate admissions staff, while evaluating students on their total merit, take notice of the first lines that make essay-reading a particular pleasure. We asked them to share some of their favorite openers from those students who, starting in September, can write, Call me Cardinal.

Unlike many mathematicians, I live in an irrational world; I feel that my life is defined by a certain amount of irrationalities that bloom too frequently, such as my brief foray in front of 400 people without my pants.

Sitting cross-legged on the floor of a Bhimanagar slum dwelling in Bangalore, I ran my fingers across a fresh cut on my forehead.

I almost didn't live through September 11th, 2001.

When I was 8 years old, I shocked my family and a local archaeologist by discovering artifacts dating back almost 3,500 years.

When I was in eighth grade I couldn't read.

While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?

The spaghetti burbled and slushed around the pan, and as I stirred it, the noises it gave off began to sound increasingly like bodily functions.

I had never seen anyone get so excited about mitochondria.

Cancer tried to defeat me, and it failed.

I stand on the riverbank surveying this rippled range like some riparian cowboy—instead of chaps, I wear vinyl, thigh-high waders and a lasso of measuring tape and twine is slung over my arm.

I have old hands.

Flying over enemy territory, I took in Beirut's beautiful skyline and wondered if under different circumstances I would have hopped on a bus and come here for my vacation. Instead, I saw the city from the window of a helicopter, in military uniform, my face camouflaged, on my way to a special operation deep behind enemy lines.

My younger sister, Jessica, arrived home one day reeling about the shirt that her friend had worn to school. It had simply read, “Genocide, Homicide, Suicide, Riverside.”

I'll never forget the day when my childhood nightmares about fighting gigantic trolls in the Lord of the Rings series became a reality. Sword in hand and clad in medieval samurai armor, I dragged myself into the battleground as I faced my opponent, a warmongering giant.

Good Grief! You never would have guessed that an unassuming meek lovable loser like Charlie Brown would have an influence on anyone; but indeed he has.

Some fathers might disapprove of their children handling noxious chemicals in the garage.

I was paralyzed from the waist down. I would try to move my leg or even shift an ankle but I never got a response. This was the first time thoughts of death ever crossed my mind.

As an Indian-American, I am forever bound to the hyphen.

Journey to Gulu's outskirts and you will uncover the scene where education was raped 11 years ago; some Ugandan teens also lost their innocence in exchange for their lives.

I have been surfing Lake Michigan since I was 3 years old.

On a hot Hollywood evening, I sat on a bike, sweltering in a winter coat and furry boots.

I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.