

# Short Answer Mistakes

## Admissions Officers See These 5 Short Answer Mistakes All Too Frequently

By [Allen Grove](#), About.com Guide

The short answer section of a college application carries less weight than the personal essay, but it still matters. To make sure your short answer shines, steer clear of these five common problems.

### 1. Vagueness

Unfortunately, it's easy to write 150 words that don't actually say anything. College applicants often answer the short answer in broad, unfocused terms. "Swimming has made me a better person." "I have taken more of a leadership role in my life because of theater." "Orchestra has impacted me in many positive ways." Phrases such as these really don't say much. How are you a better person? How are you a leader? How exactly has orchestra impacted you? When you discuss the importance of an activity, do so in concrete and specific terms.

### 2. Repetition

The short answer on the Common Application needs to be 150 words or fewer, so there's no room to say the same thing twice. Surprisingly, however, many college applicants do just that. Check out Gwen's short answer below to see an example of repetition that weakens the response.

The short answer essay prompt on the Common Application states, "Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences in the space below or on an attached sheet (150 words or fewer)."

In this sample short answer response, Gwen writes about her passion for soccer:

*Simply put, I love soccer. I love being part of a team of girls who go out there and give their all, heart and soul, in every game. We truly are a family in our team. I love being a part of that family and taking a leadership role, both on and off the field. Soccer has also helped me be a better leader in student organizations and class work, where I take a proactive role. Whether it is a good defensive block or scoring the winning goal, soccer is an empowering part of my life, and I would not be the person I am today without it.*

### Critique of Gwen's Short Answer Response

Gwen's short answer response is not terrible -- the language is easy to read and Gwen's love of soccer comes across forcefully.

However, Gwen's response does have several problems:

- The language is repetitive. Gwen says "I love" three times, and she repeats the ideas of family and leadership twice.
- The language is vague. What does Gwen mean when she says she takes "a proactive role"? What is her "leadership role"? What exactly does she mean when she says soccer made her "the person I am today"?
- Some language is cliché. Phrases like "heart and soul" and "scoring the winning goal" appear in far too many essays about sports.
- The response is short and doesn't say much. 150 words isn't much space in which to elaborate on an activity, yet Gwen's response is just 108 words (and, as noted, those words are repetitive and vague). Gwen hasn't used the short answer to her advantage.

Gwen does sound like a perfectly pleasant and enthusiastic student who works well with a team, but her response could be so much stronger. We finish her short answer response without a clear sense of the type of leader she is or what leadership roles she has assumed. There's nothing concrete here to illustrate *how* soccer has made her a stronger person and better student.

### 3. Clichés and Predictable Language

A short answer will sound tired and recycled if it begins to talk about the thrill of making the winning goal, the heart and soul that go into an activity, or the joy of giving rather than receiving. If you can picture thousands of other college applicants using the same phrases and ideas, you need to sharpen your approach to your topic.

#### **4. Thesaurus Abuse**

If you have a huge vocabulary, demonstrate your skill with your SAT verbal score. The best short answers employ language that is simple, clear and engaging. Don't test the patience of your reader by bogging down your short answer with excessive and unnecessary multi-syllabic words.

#### **5. Egotism**

When elaborating on an extracurricular activity, it's tempting to talk about how important you were to the group or team. Be careful. It's easy to sound like a braggart or egotist if you paint yourself as the hero who saved the team from defeat or solved all the personnel problems in the school play. The college admissions officers will be much more impressed with humility than hubris. See Doug's essay below for an example of how ego can weaken a short answer.

The Common Application short answer essay prompt states, "Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences in the space below or on an attached sheet (150 words or fewer)."

In response to the common application's short answer question, Doug writes about a lawn-mowing business that he founded:

*My freshman year I founded Beat the Joneses, a lawn care company. I was a kid with a hand-pushed mower, a second-hand weed whacker, and a desire to build a successful and profitable company. Three years later, my company has four employees and I've used the profits to buy a riding mower, two trimmers, two hand mowers and a trailer. This kind of success comes naturally to me. I'm good at advertising locally and convincing my customers of the value of my services. I hope to use these skills in college as I earn my business degree. Business is my passion, and I hope to be even more financially successful after college.*

#### **Critique of Doug's Short Answer Response**

What Doug has accomplished is impressive. Most college applicants haven't started their own business and hired employees. A college business program would probably be impressed by Doug's accomplishments.

Doug's short answer response, however, has some problems. The most significant issue is that Doug comes off sounding like a braggart and an egotist. The phrase "this kind of success comes naturally to me" is likely to rub the admissions officers the wrong way. Doug sounds full of himself. While a college wants confident students, it doesn't want obnoxious ones.

Also, Doug comes across as someone who doesn't think he has much to learn in college. Why exactly does he want to go to college if he already thinks he has all the skills he needs to run a business?

The overall message that we get from Doug's essay is that the writer is someone who thinks very highly of himself and likes to make money. If Doug has any ambitions more noble than "profit," he hasn't made those goals clear in his short answer response. Doug does not sound like someone who will be a charitable and contributing member of a campus community.

Colleges hear all too frequently that students want to attend so that they can get a great job and make money. However, if students have no passion for learning and participating in college life, the road to that degree will be fraught with problems. Doug's short answer doesn't succeed in explaining the connection between his lawn care company and his desire to spend four years of his life studying business.