

APPLY YOURSELF

Every night this fall, Jenna Arnold, 17, rehearsed for her high school musical. But whenever Jenna had a spare moment, she worked on the story of her life. The senior from Elkins Park, Pa, doesn't want to be a writer—she hopes to be a set designer one day. But to achieve her goal, she knew she had to perfect a single, hugely important essay.

Like millions of college-bound seniors, Jenna has to wow admissions officers with her grades, SAT scores, activities—and a personal essay. “It’s the only part of the application where you have to express yourself and tell them who you are,” says Josh Berezin, 19, of Shaker Heights, Ohio, who turned the essay that helped him get into Yale University into the book *Getting into Yale* (\$14, Hyperion). “It’s your chance to be creative.”

But that can be tough if you haven’t had much practice writing.

Parke Muth, assistant dean of admissions at the University of Virginia, has seen plenty of essay triumphs—and failures. “One of the major problems is a lack of focus,” he says. “People think they have to come up with a huge, important topic—the Middle East, abortion. That’s much too large.”

To help you find your focus, check out these tips from Muth, Jenna and Josh:

- **Think small.** Choose a topic that allows you to write from a personal perspective and use specific details. Jenna focused on her bout with a rare disease, alopecia areata, which causes baldness. “There I was, trying to live a normal life and wanting to date

boys,” she says. “And I was always worrying about my wig falling off.” Jenna chose a single, traumatic episode to describe—the moment a friend accidentally knocked her wig off.

“I felt my wig slide slowly backward down the back of my head, like chocolate syrup rolling down a scoop of ice cream. My deepest fear became a reality; I was exposed. In the sunlight, out in the open, my secret was revealed, as were the few patches of hair I had remaining on my head.”

- **Write vividly.** And let the action flow naturally. Here’s how Josh described himself on the field:

“Even I have to laugh sometimes. Here I am, at 5-foot-8, surrounded by my fellow offensive linemen, who average 6-foot-2. It must be a sight to see. Me, in the back of the huddle, clawing my way back within earshot of the quarterback, or stretching up on the tips of my toes, straining to read his lips.”

- **Be willing to take a risk.** Some applicants attach cartoons, write movie scripts or ignore the question and take off on fantasies of their own.

“Of course, you can crash and burn, too,” Muth says. “Someone who isn’t a strong writer probably should not take a risk.”

But sometimes a risk pays off big. Published author Josh says he never imagined himself to be much of a writer. “The only piece of advice I can think of is to be yourself,” he says. “It sounds stupid and clichéd and everything, but that’s the only way it’s gonna be good.”

—Joseph D’Agnese

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