

FULL TRANSCRIPT (with timecode)

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Welcome back to College Bound: Notre Dame Admissions podcast. I'm Maria Finan. I'm a senior assistant director in the office and also a Double Domer, Proud Double Domer in English as well. So super excited about today's topic, but I'll let Zach introduce himself and today's topic. Thanks for being here with us.

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Yeah. Hey, everyone, it's Zach Klonsinski, assistant director here in the Office of Undergraduate Admissions and 2017 Notre Dame alum. Also a history major. So I've done some writing in my day am also a journalism minor at Notre Dame, so I've done some editing in my day. So this is a really this is one of our pet topics that we're talking about today. And if you listen to our last episode, you got a little bit of a tease, but today is understanding the college essay. First off, I'm going to give you a shameless plug because Maria and I have done a presentation on understanding the college essay that's a little bit more robust than we can make in a podcast form.

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We've done it every year now for the last three summers. We've given a version of it, and that is available on our website. If you go to our website admissions.nd.edu. Again, admissions.nd.edu. You then go to look for the Visit and Engage tab. Once you click into the Visit and Engage tab, you will see another kind of list to choose from. One will be called On-Demand Sessions. Click on that. And right underneath the big headline of College Application Workshops, it is the fourth workshop down is understanding the college essay recording.

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You can watch it on demand. We have a little handout that you can use. It links to some blog posts that we've written as well. So it's a really great resource for you if you want to learn more. However, we also do want to give you a little bit of a taste of that with this podcast episode, starting with kind of thinking about your essay and kind of going from there. So one tip before we get started is that on the common application, if you are applying Coalition on score and on the QuestBridge application, there are various variations essentially on a personal statement.

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The big benefit that all of these application platforms provide to you as a student is that you can use that main essay to submit to all of the schools that you're applying to. Please do not feel the need to customize it to each school that you are applying to. We get it. That's the beauty of this. We don't want you to have to write a new common application essay for Notre Dame. If you've been using one for another school already. We want to save you time and make this as easy as possible. If you still decide to customize it for one school again, I recommend you do not do that.

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If you do decide to, however, please, please, please remember to edit it for the next school you apply to. I'm originally from Montana, so I love using Montana State as an example, but we will read every year a number of essays submitted to our name that say, I really want to go to Montana State University. It could be a great school for you. I almost went there as a student. There was a different conversation about my discernment process. But when we're reading that for Notre Dame, that's a missed opportunity, right? We just want to make sure, again, that you do not feel the need to customize it at each school. I recommend that you do not customize it to each school, because we understand now that we've talked a little bit about that.

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What is the purpose of the personal statement, Maria?

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Yeah, that's a great question. And I think the big thing to emphasize is that it's just an opportunity to get to know you. So at Notre Dame, we don't have interviews. That's not part of our process. It's one less thing to worry about. But we're really trying to get a sense of who you are, and that's why you don't need to customize it because this is your opportunity to tell your story. And the hope is that your story and who you are is something that you would tell to every university. We get a lot of questions about like, how important is it really? Is it going to make or break an application? And I understand that there can be a lot of stress with the personal statement.

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I will say that the essays, though, are my favorite part of reading applications. They're the part that we really get a sense of who you are and we get to hear your voice. So in that way, it is really important, right? We want to get a sense of who you are, what you're passionate about, where you're from. But, you know, do essays make or break applications? We've already talked about all the academic criteria that we review in our first episode and our second episode. We talked about non-academic criteria and how we do a holistic review.

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That holistic review means that we're looking at all the pieces of your application. So while essays are important and hearing from you is really important, I would say don't stress about this. For my seniors, this is the biggest piece of your application that you probably have in your control at this point, other than continuing to work really hard in your classes and doing really well academically.

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But this shouldn't be a stressful part of the application. We really want to give you permission to tell your story. We talked last episode about all the things that it doesn't need to be right. It doesn't have to be this massive thing you've overcome.

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And so we really just want to get to know you. Right? We don't do interviews. We see that as an important piece for consistency and equity of access. And, you know, we got over 26,000 applications last year, so I honestly can't imagine trying to do interviews. So really take this as your opportunity to sit down, compose your thoughts and tell your story. And we're not asking you to kind of tell your entire life story, but we really hope to just kind of get a sense of who you are as a person.

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So, Zach, we get a lot of kind of frequently asked questions about the essays section. Do you want to dive into some of those so that hopefully we can provide some answers and just relieve a little bit of stress on this topic?

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Yeah, maybe dispel some myths along the way, too. So one of the first questions that we always get asked is like, what are your favorite essays? And I can tell you right now, one of my favorite essays that I've ever read was about a teddy bear. I can tell you right now that one of my other favorite essays that I've ever read was about an item that, if I describe it, will probably be

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too specific and it might identify the person. So I can't do that legally for it, but prevents us from giving out that kind of information. However, as you can see, those were two just everyday objects from us, from a student's home, and they were kind of the topics that led to introducing themselves to us. So those are two of my favorite topics. Again, that doesn't mean you should write your essay about your teddy bear, because that might not be you. And so really thinking about anything can be a good topic.

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Anything can be a bad topic. Maria, do you have any favorite essays or anything that you've read?

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Yeah. So my favorite essay of all time was about a girl's hair color that had a very dramatic opening about how she was part of a race that was going extinct. And I'm sorry, but redheads, you can't steal this essay topic now that I'm telling you about it. But I really loved it because it just gave me such a sense of her personality. I've seen funny ones that somehow kind of make like Jeopardy work in them. But I think the big thing is that honestly, the more mundane topics are often the most enjoyable.

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Sometimes students go hiking, sometimes it's a conversation with a family member. But I think. To echo Zach's point, it doesn't need to be some grand story. Oftentimes kind of the simplest things that are most important to you make the best essays.

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Yeah, absolutely. And so another question that we're often asked is to kind of, you know, should we what kind of voice should we be using? What kind of talent should we be using? And I'm going to give you a very unsatisfying answer because I don't know what's the best way that you can introduce yourself to us. Same thing with another question we get asked in a similar vein, which is should it be a serious essay or should it be a funny essay or, you know, anything like that it or a sad essay or something like that.

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And the answer is, I don't know. How are you? How do you feel? You can best introduce yourself to people who are reading your application. Again, as I said in the last episode, your friends tell you you're not funny. Maybe don't try and be funny on your college application essay, but you can absolutely be serious. You can have some fun with it. You can write in a very informal tone. You can write in a very serious tone. You can talk about something that is very, you know, mundane or pineapple on pizza-ish, or you can talk about solving world hunger, you know, anything that works in there and anywhere in between.

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If it helps us get to know you, great. Do it. You know, another question that we're often asked is like one story in an essay, or should I try and tell my entire life story in an essay and you only have 650 words. So, Maria, how do you approach kind of that question?

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Yeah, I think it's a good one. And I would definitely recommend picking something really specific, trying to tell your entire life story. I tried to do it at an assignment for grad school and like a thousand words and it wasn't even close. So definitely pick a focused moment. We're not expecting you to tell us everything about you. I think, again, the best topics are really focused in on something specific and trust. Zach and I

and our entire admissions team to be good readers, we don't need you to tell us everything to get a sense of your story.

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What you choose to focus on honestly tells us a lot about you just kind of as is.

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Yeah, absolutely. And again, I say the topic that you choose to write about is only the gateway to introducing yourself to us.

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The topic that you're writing about, in a sense, is not the essay. The essay is about you and introducing yourself to us, and I realize that can be a little intimidating, a little scary. It might be the first time you've ever done an essay like that because you don't necessarily do something like that in your high school. But really, we just, again, want to make sure that the topic is what is the gateway to introducing yourself to us. It is not the essay the focus of the essay is about you. We then on that note do get some questions about, you know, some cliché topics.

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And I am going to say, yes, there are some cliché topics and we do read some that we read a lot. That doesn't mean that you can't write a good essay on a cliché topic. If you're thinking about writing something about a sports injury, we're a very athletic school. We draw a lot of people who are interested in athletics, too. Notre Dame. A lot of them have sustained injuries. That doesn't mean you can't write an essay about a sports injury. Just really try and focus on how do I make this my story and how is my story different than what someone else might have, or how can I approach this in a different way than someone else might have? If you sit here and you think, I don't know that I can do that.

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Well, then that's maybe not the best way to introduce your own story, right? Again, this is about you and your story and helping us get to know you. And so cliché topics are something you do want to be considered as you're writing this. Not saying you can't write them, but again, being considerate. Maria, do you have any other kind of advice on the cliché topic question?

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Yeah. So something I always think about is, you know, if I'm going to do something, do I think I can do it better than everyone else? Right. And if I'm going to write on a clichéd topic, I want to be confident that I could write, if not the best one of the best versions of that topic. And most of the time I would find that incredibly intimidating. And I think for me that makes me think maybe this isn't my story to tell. Right. So I think, as Zach said, you can write on topics that we see a lot, but ask yourself, is that what is most unique about you is that you know what your best friend would tell us about you? If it's not, maybe you haven't quite honed in on the topic.

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And I would definitely encourage you spend some time brainstorming and talking to the people who are closest to you, because I think a lot of my best ideas are often just they happen in conversations with the people that I'm closest to and that kind of love me most. So I would give that to you as some advice if you're feeling just a little bit stuck.

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Yeah. And if you need a handout again that is helpful in this journey and kind of helping you brainstorm and keep track of it. Again, you can find a link to that in our shameless plug. Number two for understanding the college essay that's available on our website. You can go back to the beginning of this episode to find the directions to find that. I think one of the things in summary for this little section before we get into kind of supplemental essays and how you should address those, something that Maria and I have noticed from giving this presentation over the years, many of the people and the students who are watching those sessions and give in answering questions in the chat or putting questions in the chat, many of you just want permission to write your essay.

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Can I write this? Can I write this? Yes. We give you permission. You can write however you want as long as at the end of the day, you're getting to know you as a person better by that essay. So yes, we give you permission to do that thing that you're thinking about. If you think you can do it well and that it introduces yourself to us, if you can feel confident in that. Yes, absolutely. We give you that permission.

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With that. Let's go now and change gears a little bit to the supplemental essays, especially maybe some that are a little bit more Notre Dame-specific advice. Maria, kick us off.

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Yeah. So I'm going to start with kind of the Why Notre Dame question. So you will have to write two short answer prompts. There are 200 words a piece, which is pretty short. So you're talking about either one chunky paragraph or maybe two. But the first question essentially asks you why you want to go to Notre Dame. And I think students struggle with this question sometimes, one, because they're trying to use the exact same. Why I want to go to a college essay prompt for every college they're applying to.

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So I would discourage you from that. But I think it's because students don't know kind of what process they're supposed to go through to answer this question. So the big thing that we're looking for is we want to see that you understand how an institution like Notre Dame is different from other schools. So that's kind of part of the process. The other part is how is what makes Notre Dame different or unique? How does that resonate with you? So this isn't just about us.

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This is about you wanting to go to Notre Dame and why. So if you're like, But how do I do that? Maybe you visited campus. Many students can't visit campus. So I'm going to give you some advice on things that you can watch or research or dive into if you enjoy learning. Hopefully, this will be a little bit helpful for you. So Notre Dame does have a mission statement, and I would point you to that as just a place that you can start that gives you a good sense of Notre Dame laying out our values and what's important to us.

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And I think that can maybe help provide some guidance, watch videos that Notre Dame produces. Right. Read news about us. If you like social media, follow our social media accounts. I personally am a really big fan of the and the admissions Instagram and the admissions Snapchat. In case you want to follow us, learn about kind of what opportunities exist on campus. What makes Notre Dame different? Think about what draws you to attending Notre Dame and kind of what do you hope to take advantage of on campus? Every student will have a different response to this and that's great.

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So really spend some time to understand us. I think something you'll hear us talk a lot about is education of the heart and mind or being a force for good. So think about like, what does that mean? What does that mean to you? We want you to kind of do some research on Notre Dame and then specifically tell us about kind of you at Notre Dame and what it is that draws you to being part of the Notre Dame family, because we really do think of ourselves as a family.

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So hopefully that is helpful if you want some really heartwarming videos. I will say personally, I'm a big fan of our "What Would You Fight for Series?" So maybe those will be somewhat inspirational. But the why Notre Dame question is only one of the two prompts. So, Zach, how do students figure out what other prompts they should respond to?

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Absolutely. And I love just to touch on the Notre Dame supplemental essay. I loved the piece where you broke it down really easily. Yes. We want to know that you understand Notre Dame and know a little bit about Notre Dame. But the more important layer and I think the one that struggles, students struggle with the most is, I don't want to use every cliché English teacher out there, but the how does that resonate with you? What about Notre Dame resonates with you and why does it resonate with you? That extra layer that's really important in that essay.

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And so if you're just saying this is what Notre Dame is, yeah, we know that we're paid to do this and it's great and it's wonderful. But yeah, that extra layer about you and making it use-specific is hard. But really what helps with supplemental essays when you're then looking at the other prompts, you know, we have some other prompts available this year. You'll be choosing one when you're thinking about that and going through the process of elimination. You know, think about things like, what else do you want us to know about you? Is there something that maybe lines up well with that or that has an easier entry point with that other piece that you want us to know about you? We don't want you to choose one that feels forced.

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There's not a right or wrong essay topic, right? We put these out there because we genuinely think all of these additional prompts can help us get to know you better. Don't feel forced into writing one because you think that's the right one to write from our perspective. Because if you haven't learned anything else at this point, I want you to learn that this is all from your perspective, and it's about helping us get to know you. So it shouldn't be forced for something about you trying to think about what we want, because what we want is to get to know you. Okay? We do also want you to think about choosing an essay prompt that shows why you've taken the time to think about the questions.

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You know, we don't want you to just use a response from another school that didn't necessarily fit the prompt or that almost, but not quite fit the prompt. We do see students will reuse essays or even reuse part of their comment application essay for a supplemental essay. Don't do that. That's a missed opportunity. Really think about that. You're asking the questions that you're answering the questions that we are asking. Not one that is close to what we're asking, but not quite. It really does stand out when you're reading the essay, especially because we're reading them again and again and again.

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And we can really, you know, it jumps out to us when there's something like that. So and again, the last point.

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Choose the supplemental prompt, the additional supplemental prompt that provides additional insight to who you are and what you value. Your values are really important. Your motivations are really important. All of this is really important in your supplemental essay and use the supplemental essay that helps you feel that you are communicating that best. Because again, it's one final reminder. The best college essay is one that helps us get to know you, your passions, your abilities, your character, your dreams, everything that makes you, you.

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So, Maria, let's close it out.

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All right. Well, hopefully this has been helpful. Again, we know that this is in some ways the most intimidating part of the process, but we hope that it's also kind of fun. And I know one of the things I struggled the most with when it came to the essay section was figuring out how to write about myself. It wasn't something I really did in school. And so hopefully this gives you permission to tell your story. This is not an academic research paper. This is really just an opportunity for us to get a sense of who you are.

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For my seniors, best of luck writing those essays. Don't forget to revise them. That's an important part of the process, and I always recommend walking away before you come back to it. But again, hopefully this has been helpful for you. Next episode, we're going to get into demystifying the admissions process. So we busted some myths in some of the previous episodes of the season. We did one last season. You all seemed to really enjoy it, so tune in next time to hear more about that. But again, thank you so much for joining us as we talked about essays on College Bound.