

High school students get help writing their personal statement essays for college applications

BY DEBBIE CAFAZZO

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Talking about yourself is easy. Most of us do it without even thinking about it.

But writing about yourself? Not so much.

With college application season getting underway, it's a challenge teens face as they begin writing their personal statement essay — a crucial part of most college applications.

The purpose of the personal statement is to get students to reveal themselves to the college admissions officers who review the statements. The trick is to make *your* essay stand out from the stack of hundreds of other essays.

On Saturday, local high school students got some help from a team of volunteers — everyone from local college staff members to university students. The write-a-thon took place at the downtown Tacoma Public Library. Computers for writing and snacks for refueling were part of the event, which gave dozens of students a chance to polish essays they had already drafted or brainstorm ideas to get started.

The event was sponsored by Graduate Tacoma, which is part of the Foundation for Tacoma Students, and Write@253, a Tacoma-based organization that works with students throughout the city to promote writing, literacy and creativity.

Students like Lincoln High School seniors Tashayia Thompson and Jasmine Kennedy had a head start. They have been working on their personal statements with teachers during after-school sessions at Lincoln. But Thompson said she was anxious to hear honest opinions on her writing from someone who doesn't know her as well as her friends and teachers.

"If you are working with someone who knows you, they might sugarcoat it," she said of essay critiques. "It's important to me to make sure I get it the best that I can."

Kennedy said she needs help with all of her college preparations. "Who doesn't?" she asked.

Tacoma Community College staff member Shelly Peterson read both girls' essays and offered advice. Even small wording changes can help an essay, she pointed out. An example: Instead of writing about "coming into high school," write about "starting high school."

"You can say the same thing in fewer words," Peterson noted.



Kevin Ly, right, a student at Tacoma's Science and Math Institute, gets friendly advice about college admission essays from Pierce College librarian Rachel Go on Saturday at an event that paired community volunteers with high school seniors seeking help with their writing. Photos by Dean J. Koepfler

That's an important concept, because most college applications limit the length of the personal statement; length limits for Washington colleges vary from 250 to 650 words.

Peterson also asked the girls about their career interests. Asked why she was interested in becoming a lawyer, Thompson told Peterson: "I believe in justice. When I have a passion for something, I like to make sure justice is done."

That's the kind of statement that reveals something about a student, and that's what colleges want to see in personal statements.

"It's about you — it's your voice," said Wendy Holcomb, a volunteer organizer of the event who works for Stand for Children.

"It's hard to see yourself," added Mary Fox, a TCC writing teacher. She told students they may have impressive life experiences, but that "you may not think it's amazing because you've lived it."

University of Puget Sound seniors Nicky Reed and David Adler worked with two Tacoma high school seniors: Matt Pringle from Stadium High School and Andrew Manos from Wilson High School.

"You start with the hook," Adler explained to Manos. "You start with a specific incident, then you explain the context."

For Manos, the context is his life as part of Tacoma's Greek community and his role as a member of the city's St. Nicholas Greek Orthodox Church. He has written before about his family's journey from Greece to Tacoma.

Adler encouraged Manos to write about the church as an institution and about Greek culture.

Reed helped Pringle polish an essay he'd already written about his passion for tennis. She picked out a sentence in the middle of his essay about climbing the steps to the tennis courts as a nervous freshman and eventually being selected captain of his team.

"There's a metaphor about climbing the steps and growing," Reed said. She suggested he lead his essay with that idea.

Tristan Desmarais, a Foss High School senior, worked with Holcomb to start his essay from scratch.

First, they created an idea web, jotting down phrases and sentences on a white board: "When I was little, I never wanted to leave Tacoma" stood at the center of the board, surrounded by notes about how much Desmarais has changed since then. He started learning Korean by Googling the alphabet — he's not sure what prompted it. Now, he's studying Korean at Foss and hopes to become a translator or teach English in Korea.

Holcomb assured Desmarais he had a great story to tell in his essay. He said his parents suggested he attend Saturday's workshop. "I usually have a tendency to put things off," he said. "I came here because I wanted to prepare myself for college."

Debbie Cafazzo: 253-597-8635 debbie.cafazzo@thenewstribune.com @DebbieCafazzo