

**Record: 1**

**Title:** In 500 words or less ...  
**Authors:** Ward, Alyson  
**Source:** Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX); 11/14/2006  
**Document Type:** Article  
**Accession Number:** 2W62W63937678243  
**Database:** Newspaper Source

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By Alyson Ward

Ready? Here's the situation:

You are a writer for a popular Hollywood scandal magazine. You have been dispatched to report on a story involving a celebrity, a lost wallet, birthday cake and the Library of Congress. Tell us what happens.

OK, start writing. And remember: Your future may depend on what you write.

It really does, if you want to be a freshman next year at St. Edward's University in Austin, Texas, where this is one of the essay questions on the school's application for admission.

St. Edward's -- like a lot of other colleges -- has, in the past few years, revamped the essay portion of its application.

Out: the old, traditional questions (What obstacles have you overcome? What can you contribute to this school? Tell us about your role model.) In: oddball questions that make students say What?? -- and then sit down and solve a problem, use some creativity and show their personalities.

In a time when some kids are groomed for college from the time they start school -- when parents hire professionals to edit writing samples and boost test scores -- admissions officers say an unexpected essay question may be their best shot at drawing something genuine and surprising out of college-bound teens.

**A CLOSER LOOK**

Today's students know how to make themselves attractive to a college admissions staff. Some -- thanks to eager parents -- spend years building up a resume of activities and volunteer work. They have good grades and AP credit, solid SAT scores and thoughtful, well-edited answers to the questions they believe their college of choice will ask.

But the problem is, how do you tell them apart, when so many polished lives are represented only by a five-page college application?

"We want to understand things we can't understand by looking at an application," says Stephen Farmer, director of undergraduate admissions at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

In fact, Farmer, who is also the school's assistant provost, says that for the first time this year, in addition to the essay, applicants must also address a handful of short-answer questions: "The question I would most like to have answered is ..." "My favorite random fact is ..." "My least favorite famous person from the last 50 years is ..."

They're trying to suss out a kid's personality, true interests, passion, body of knowledge. And they don't think it's going to happen just by flat-out asking, "What are your interests? What have you learned?"

The idea isn't altogether new. For more than two decades, the University of Chicago has been famous for its funny and outlandish essay questions. It has asked applicants to expound on the words of Miles Davis, the implications of superstring theory and -- we're not making this up -- the deeper meaning behind those giant tubs of mustard sold at warehouse stores.

These days, though, schools all over are tossing at least one or two oddball questions into the mix.

Texas Christian University is experimenting with its essays for the first time this year, says Ray Brown, dean of admission. Three of this year's four writing topics are -- well, a little offbeat.

"Leap forward or backward 100 years and tell us about your day," one prompt commands. Another one issues this challenge: "Pick an important social, political or economic problem in today's world. Write a solution for it." (We say: If you can do this in 300 to 500 words, you really should tackle global warming in your spare time.)

So what was wrong with all those traditional questions? After all, for decades, students everywhere have dutifully written essays about the impact of role models, the importance of family and the wisdom that comes from the heartbreak of losing that championship game. Why aren't those questions good enough anymore?

"They were, frankly, a little boring," says Brown, who -- no coincidence -- used to be director of admissions for the University of Chicago's MBA program.

The boredom factor is what prompted St. Edward's to change its essay questions four years ago, says Tracy Manier, dean of undergraduate admission.

"We found that the answers to those standard questions wouldn't deviate very widely," she says. "And after you read 2,200 of them, they all start to sound the same."

Of course, not every off-the-wall essay topic inspires brilliant essays. Sometimes a question just doesn't work.

Last year, St. Edward's asked applicants: If there were no such thing as money, how would your life be different? They were hoping for thoughtful essays about how money determines our identity and place in the world. Instead, they got a bunch of obvious explanations about how, without money, we'd all have to set up a barter system and trade goods.

And when Southern Methodist University asked students to explain their clever e-mail addresses, they got a bunch of essays that were -- well, not clever. (A guy who goes by "Soccerstud," it turns out, tends to like soccer. Who saw that coming?)

But when an offbeat question works, it tends to inspire astoundingly good essays. When the University of Chicago asked its applicants about Langston Hughes' poem "Theme for English B," many of them responded in verse. When it asked, "If you could balance on a tightrope, over

what landscape would you walk?" students turned in everything imaginable, from the concrete (Brooklyn's Prospect Park) to the fully abstract ("my mother and her wishes for me").

One of the school's most talked-about prompts -- it's been brought back a few times since it debuted in '84 -- involves an astronaut stranded in space, a futuristic machine that sort of faxes humans from space to earth, and a debate over whether identity is physical or spiritual.

"You know, kids really dug into that," O'Neill says. "They really wanted to talk about religion; they wanted to talk about science; they wanted to talk about philosophy. They wanted to talk about the existence of the human soul, the nature of personal identity, they wanted to talk about physics. Some kids would write stories in response. Some would write scientific treatises."

## TRADITION ISN'T DEAD

Of course, don't assume that every college in America is asking students to wax poetic about mustard. In fact, many schools are jumping on the Common Application bandwagon.

The Common Application is a standard form accepted by nearly 300 universities, including Yale, Princeton, Northwestern and Rice. Started in 1975, it's updated each year by a not-for-profit organization. The application is thorough but generic; it's designed to reduce the paperwork nightmare for students who are applying to several schools. You can fill out the application once, then send it to any number of member schools.

The essays on the Common Application might sound familiar:

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

These are the kinds of questions college hopefuls have been answering for years. They're standard, straightforward and -- well, pretty dignified. And whether they use the Common Application or not, most universities still offer at least one traditional question -- just in case there's a student who doesn't want to play.

But what's the fun in that? Especially when you could be answering a question like this one, which St. Edward's asked last year's applicants:

"After getting separated from a high school field trip to the symphony, you and two of your friends find yourselves trapped in a wolf pit facing menacing wolves. The only items you have are your U.S. history book, your iPod, a protractor, Scotch tape and a note from your mother stating that you need to leave school early because of a dentist appointment. How will you use your talents and the items you have to lead your friends to safety?"

Don't try that one at home, by the way. The admissions staff didn't run any tests to make sure those objects will really get you out of a wolf pit.

But then, that means there's no wrong answer, either. And for a hopeful student whose college career may hinge on these few hundred words, that's pretty inspiring.

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**Source:** Fort Worth Star-Telegram (TX), Nov 14, 2006

**Item:** 2W62W63937678243