Ask an admission counselor their favorite part of the application and most are going to tell you it's the essay. Think about the pieces we've discussed so far, your academic documents and testing, really important pieces, but totally boring. The essay is you. It is the only piece of the application where an admission counselor gets to hear your voice, feel your personality, and learn about you from you. And that is exactly what your essay should do. Show an admission officer who you are in your own voice. Notice I said who you are, not what you have done. What you have done, is going to be in other parts of your application. It's a grade on your transcripts, or an entry in your activity list. When you think about what you have done, you usually come up with a list. A list of accomplishments, awards, achievements, honors, events, things like that. An essay is no place for a list. A good essay will explore what you have done, and through that exploration the reader will learn about who you are. The best way to explore is to continually ask yourself why? And how? Many students feel like they need to write about a big accomplishment, climbing Mount Everest or something emotional like an illness or even death. These topics are not about you, they are things you experienced. To be about you, you have to be able to write about why climbing Mount Everest was important to you and how the experience has impacted you. You have to write about why the illness is a part of who you are and how you have used the illness, for growth, change, or motivation. This is why the best essays are rarely written about something big. In fact, the best essays are usually those that take something normal, something every day, and show how an every day item, interaction or experience affected the writer. Sometimes you'll hear these referred to as slice of life essays. It's easy to write that climbing Mount Everest had a big impact on who you are, it should have a big impact on who you are. It's much harder to write about how learning to cook a simple meal for example had a big impact on you. It's harder to write that essay, but that essay will be more insightful. So, how do you write a great essay? Unfortunately, I can't tell you all the ins and outs of writing a great essay in just a few minutes. At the ELP, we actually have a full class like this one on writing the university application essay. In that class, we emphasize three ideas for students to begin with, the first idea is tell stories. All of us, no matter where we're from no matter what language we speak, we all communicate by stories. The second idea is get personal. Remember the reader is trying to learn who you are. In order to learn who you are, you have to share part of yourself. Now I don't mean sharing your deepest, darkest fears. There is such a thing as getting too personal. But remember, this essay has to be about you. The third idea to keep in mind is, be detailed. Details are what makes everything come to life. Think about the three of those together. If I told you that I am having a great day, you're probably not going to remember that. But if I tell you I'm having a great day, because I just won a million dollars and I just met the love of my life and all of these other great things. You're probably going to remember that detailed personal story, more than just something simple like, I'm having a great day. Furthermore, you're writing an essay about who you are. This is not a book report or a research paper. Your essay should never be in that typical 5 paragraph model, that many students use in school. The five paragraph model is the one where you have your introduction and you tell the reader what you're going to say. Then, you have three paragraphs where you put one point in each paragraph. And then, you conclusion is a summary of what you just said. That model is boring, and it should not be used for writing your application essay. It's possible that you've never written an essay like this before, and admission officers know that. No one expects you to be Shakespeare, or even J.K. Rowling for that
matter. They just want to learn something about you. Admission officers will also look at your essay to measure your English language skills. They expect you to communicate clearly, with no major grammatical errors. But they understand that English might not be your first language and that your English probably won’t be perfect and it’s okay. If you have 90 on the TOEFL, they will expect your essay to reflect the 90. If you have a 110 on your TOEFL, they will expect the essay to reflect that higher score. By now you understand that writing your essay is going to take time and practice. I tell students that it’s going to take you at least three to five drafts of your essay, before you have something that’s ready to be submitted. The problem is, that with English language learners who have never written an essay like this, students often start at draft negative three. Over seven weeks of the face to face course here at the ELP, our goal is actually to move the students to a point. Where they have a good first draft, then they have three to five more drafts to go before they have something ready to submit and that is for one essay. None of you will be applying to only one school, so no one will be writing only one essay. So think about how much time it’s going to take for you to go through the writing process for three, four, five, ten, 15 essays, that you might have to write to fulfill your requirements. For your calendar you need to take that into consideration. You need time to write. You need time to edit. You need more time to write. And you need more time to edit. Like any skill, the more you practice, the better you become. I encourage you to start practicing by using the Common Application essay prompts. On your calendar, make sure you write dates for writing multiple essay drafts. Having, write common app essay, on one date is enough. What you should be listing is, write common app essay draft one, and then a week or two later, include another date for, write common app essay draft two, and so on and so on. Remember to keep an eye on those deadlines. You want to make sure that you give yourself enough time to write and revise, so that you’ll finish before the deadline. Your essay is usually part of your application form, so submitting your essay is easy. Just upload it, attach it, or copy and paste it into the form and you’re set. But remember, you cannot submit your application form until your essay is ready. So make sure you plan for both pieces to be finished in time. For the students I work with, the biggest source of stress as deadlines approach is the essay. They never expect that it’s going to be that hard or take so many drafts to finish. When one essay takes extra time to finish, it takes time away from writing another essay. When that happens over and over it creates a domino effect. To avoid all of this stress make sure that you start early. Also make sure that you get help. Remember other people will be reading your essays for admission. Those people are, of course, admission counselors. It’s important for other people to read your essay before you submit. Get help, but not too much help. Don’t let anyone rewrite your essay, or edit your voice out of your essay. This is your voice and your voice needs to be heard. When I was in admission, I would say the essays that I read fell into one of three categories. 10% of the essays were bad, 10% were great, and 80% were somewhere in between. Believe it or not, it’s hard to write a really bad essay. Don’t worry about writing a bad essay. If you’re taking this course, you care too much to write a bad essay. But it’s equally as hard to write a great essay. Its easy to write an essay that falls into that 80% of good essays and this is a really tough place to be because most of the essays in that range are actually good. The problem is that these essays are almost all the same. They’re about the same topics, or they never say anything really insightful, or the voice always sounds the same, and for the most part, they’re forgettable. But those top 10% of essays, they’re unique, they’re insightful, and most importantly, they’re memorable. Ask any admission officer about great essays that they have read, and I guarantee that they can recall not just one or two essays, but probably many great essays that they’ve
read. And that's how an admission officer is going to use your essay in the evaluation process. What did they learn about you? That you have the same story, personality and style as everyone else or that you are in fact someone interesting who they would really love to have on campus? Understand that even the greatest of essays cannot make up for poor academics. Additionally, an average essay will rarely send a student with outstanding academics to the deny pile. But if you're like most of us, somewhere in between, fighting for a spot, Your essay can give you a big push in one direction or the other. If your essay gives a good impression, that good impression can spread to the rest of the pieces of your application. But the same goes for a bad impression. Like I said, for many admission officers, the essay is their favorite piece of the application. It's always my hope that, as a student, it's your favorite piece, too. Your essay is you, your voice. Let your voice be heard, and have some fun. This is the only piece of your application where you're going to have the chance to do that. [BLANK_AUDIO]