

Perfect College Essay Takes Lots of Practice -- And Extra Help Growing Industry Offers Kids Camps and Online Advice; Writing on 'Power of String'

BY JUNE KRONHOLZ

MEDFORD, Mass. -- If 15-year-old Anna Zvagelskaya were a shoe, she writes, she would be pink, with a very pointy toe, a flared heel, straps and a diamond buckle.

It's five months before the application deadline at most elite colleges, and a year and five months before Ms. Zvagelskaya's application is due at Harvard, her top choice. But on a summer day here at Tufts University, the San Francisco high-school junior and a dozen other teenagers are enrolled in a two-week college-application camp, spending two hours a day in class -- and hours more each night -- crafting the essays that they hope will vault them to the head of the college queue.

"There are so many kids with perfect grades out there," says Ms. Zvagelskaya, who frets over "a few B's" on her transcript. "Your essay gives you an extra push, a chance to shine."

It isn't enough anymore for a seriously ambitious high-school student to load up on tough courses, compile a stratospheric grade-point average, prep for the entrance exams, and adorn a resume with varsity letters, artistic accomplishments and community service.

The new deal closer in the eyes of students like Ms. Zvagelskaya is the application essay -- now at the center of a growing industry. Amazon.com lists 202 books of essay advice, including a compilation called "50 Successful Harvard Application Essays." ("I see my life as a mosaic," begins essay No. 46.)

Online essay services are flourishing, with "as many competitors as want to put up a Web site," says a spokesman for EssayEdge, which claims to be the biggest. For \$299.95, an EssayEdge editor brainstorms essay ideas with a student by phone, then provides unlimited critiques of the paper in progress. "Harvard-educated editors" do the work, promises the company, a unit of information giant Thomson Corp., in its online pitch.

Kaplan Inc., the tutoring and test-prep company owned by Washington Post Co., offers six hours of college-application advice for \$899, with counselors available by phone to help with essays, resumes and interviews. Kaplan and EssayEdge don't disclose how many students use their essay services, but Kaplan says there's "increasing interest."

At least three companies are marketing college-application camps this summer, typically offering hours of essay writing along with test-prep classes, interview rehearsals and college tours. **Academic Study Associates Inc., of White Plains, N.Y.**, says it enrolled 118 students in its \$2,895 college-application camps here at Tufts and on three other campuses this summer. When it first offered the

program two years ago, it says, 30 teenagers signed up.

All this is happening because the competition to get into elite schools is getting ferocious. Colleges are expecting 2.1 million new high-school graduates to enroll this fall -- 300,000 more than just eight years ago. The most prestigious colleges haven't added many extra seats to meet demand, though.



Anna Zvagelskaya

"Most of what we do is separating equals," says William Hartog, dean of admissions at Washington and Lee University, in Lexington, Va. He says he's making few decisions purely because of the essay. How a prospective student's talents help round out a class is more important. But among equals, he adds,

the essay "could be a factor."

"This is my best chance to tell admissions officers I'm perfect for their school," says Emily Berg, who will be a senior at Branford High School in Branford, Conn., as the Tufts class adjourns with instructions to return with a finished essay in 48 hours. If that weren't reason enough, she adds, it's also "a chance to explain things, like why you didn't get an A" in an important course.

Such self-promotion is possible because few colleges ask direct questions in their essay prompts. The University of Chicago, which prides itself on being an exception, is asking this year's applicants for their observations on "the power of string." The university offers string cheese and Theseus's escape route from Labyrinth as possible places to start. Chicago's admissions dean, Theodore O'Neill, says the school is really asking "how does this person handle ideas?"

Hundreds of other schools use a 12-page standardized form called the Common Application that asks students to write 500 words about some "significant experience," important issue or influential character -- or to pick a "topic of your choice." That makes it easier for students to apply to lots of schools without changing their essays, but it also puts the pressure on teenagers to buff those 500 words to perfection.

As the Tufts class crowded around a study table, **James Hughes**, who teaches high-school English at Sacred Heart Preparatory school in Atherton, Calif., and is leading the **Academic Study Associates** program here, gave some advice.

"Show us something about yourself, not everything about yourself," he said. "You want to offer something only you could write," and "what makes it interesting is the detail," he added.

In this motivated, affluent group, words like "devilish," "monstrous" and "exemplary" work their way into rough drafts. A boy writes about his favorite street in Cannes. "Often, I imagine myself with a bushy tail, wet nose and a fervent inclination for fire hydrants," writes Marion Cory, who will be a senior at Great Falls High in Great Falls, Mont., writing from the point of view of a dog.

Sahil Rajvansh, who wants to attend the University of Pennsylvania's Wharton School and has come from India for the Tufts camp, is writing about his bedroom -- his trophy case, his music system, his phone -- "as a reflection of my own self. A person should picture me when he reads it," the 16-year-old said.

Madelaine Eagon, admissions dean at Indiana's DePauw University, says she's irked that an industry is growing around the essay. Essay lessons lead to formula writing, she says, adding, "I hate it when anyone takes anyone else's money by building on their neuroses." Essay consulting "fuels the panic by saying if you don't do it, you must be crazy," adds Bruce Poch, vice president for admissions at California's Pomona College.

Other critics worry that expensive essay coaching gives rich kids yet another advantage over poor kids. Responds Mr. Hughes, the writing coach: "We're addressing the demands that have been put out there by the universities. It's easy for the (admissions) deans to frown on it, but it's part of a process they helped create."

Those deans say they usually can't tell when an applicant has used an essay service -- or a parent, for that matter -- to write an essay. But some, including Washington and Lee's Mr. Hartog, plan to "confirm the validity" of some essays by comparing them with students' results on the new SAT writing exam.

For their part, the essay services insist they don't actually do any writing. "We're not doing anything that a good high-school counselor or English teacher wouldn't do," says Linda Abraham, whose online company, Accepted.com, sells a \$600 editing service or \$150-an-hour advice.

EssayEdge says its editors generally have English, history or social-science degrees, although some are themselves undergrads. They all go through the company's online essay training, EssayEdge says.

Meanwhile, Ms. Zvagelskaya, of the pink shoe, plans to write a collection of practice essays before settling down to her final essay next summer.

What about the shoe? "It's a metaphor for who I am," she says. Pointy toes "go with business suits," and she wants to be a lawyer, she writes. High heels suggest intrigue, and there's so much about her that people don't know. And the diamond buckle: "I always find a way to shine," she says.