Selecting an Essay Topic: Exercises, Guidelines and Tips to get You Started!

Ask questions to locate essay subjects:

- What are you good at?
- What are you trying to get good at?
- Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance to your life, with which you can use vivid personal experiences as supporting details? Write honestly about yourself.
- Is your topic supposed to be funny? Be careful—nothing is worse than not laughing or not being amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing.
- Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPA's or standardized test scores in your essay.
- Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should probably choose a different essay topic.
- Can you fully answer the question asked of you? Make sure you can back up your interest in a topic. Don't write over their heads as well.
- Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word? The entire essay must be interesting!
- Is your topic overdone? Read other essay examples. Remember: a unique or convincing answer to a classic topic can really pay off!
- Will your topic turn off a large number of people? The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions.
- If present a controversial topic, do you acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant?
- Will an admissions officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essay? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

Consider the Following Exercises if you're still suffering from writer's block!

Keep a journal; record whatever catches your eye or tickles your brain! Anything!
You will often run into rich veins of ideas; it is a personal reference book at your fingertips.

Try free-writing.
Write nonstop, without paying attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation. Concentrate on telling the truth about whatever comes to mind.

Focus your free-writing.
Circle ideas that stand out. Accumulate possibilities for topics to write about.

List ideas or an idea map.
Your mind will make connections and later can narrow down choices.

Make a time line of your life.
Write down every event you can think of, whether important or not. Key events, etc.

Talk to anyone who will listen—a teacher or a coach.

Ask for Help from Parents, Friends, Colleagues, etc:
Ask your friends to write a list of your five most salient personality traits until an image of your personality begins to emerge; consider life experiences that could illustrate the particular traits

Consider Your Childhood:
Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life. Analyze the reasons for your interest and how they were shaped by your upbringing.

Consider Your Role Models:
If you have role models, consider their admirable traits and how experiences from your life demonstrate those traits.

Read Sample Admissions Essays:
Read sample admissions essays to understand what topics other applicants chose.

General tips to Consider!

- Write about something important to you! Should walk away with a vivid sense of who you are, and what your personality is like. If you give them only what you think they want, you're being dishonest—posing—and an impostor—you will have a tough time remaining true to the lie throughout the essay.

- Make sure you can demonstrate real knowledge and personal interest. For example: before you write about the homeless, serve dinner in a downtown shelter or speak out about the issue of homelessness in your history class.

- The best essays come from the heart—be yourself!

- Write a unique essay—the one that only you can write! Don't fall into the pit of writing "assembly-line" essays. "I would like to attend _____school because I want a good college education." Begin with an anecdote or story of your childhood that expresses your interest. The main idea: show us, don't tell us! Keep us reading!

- Focus, focus, focus! Pick one area rather than boast your achievements on a wide scale. Bring out what makes you special, rather than, bury your uniqueness in lists of achievements and activities.

- Dangerous areas: The "Jock" essay that predictably tells the reader what you learned from being the first-string left tackle or playing goalie on the field hockey team. Every reasonably successful athlete has learned self-discipline, courage, and sportsmanship on the field. If a sport has truly been a crucial part of your life, your essay needs to show not tell. Be careful discussing overdone topics.

- If being creative doesn't suit you, be sincere! Don't be stumped by offbeat questions. Show your ability to wallow in the complexity of it. Want to hear your voice! You can bring out your best in a sober, sensitive, sincere essay—just don't get caught in a trap of dry, long-winded, and empty prose, such as this self appraisal: "During one's four years in secondary school, one's education is centered around a number of different things that hopefully will be helpful in college and in the career one pursues." Snooze!! Compared to: "I wonder if what I was taught in high school will help me in college and afterward. If not, I will be very disappointed." --Do you hear the writer's voice?

Works Cited: Ehrenhaft, George. Writing a Successful College Application Essay. Barron's Educational Series, Inc. New York: 1987; EssayEdges' Harvard-Educated Admissions Essay Editors.