

Writing Your Admissions Essay



This publication provides guidelines for composing your college admissions essay, including tips for getting started, following directions, engaging the reader, and avoiding pitfalls.

Your college admissions essay is one of the most important parts of your college application. Not all colleges require an admissions essay, but for those that do, what you say about yourself can set you apart from other applicants. The personal information you include in your essay makes you more than just a compilation of test scores and transcripts. You become a unique individual with skills and talents to contribute to a college campus.

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Types of Admissions Essays

There are two types of admissions essays. The first type is a personal statement. This essay is general in nature and gives you the opportunity to tell an admissions counselor more about yourself or about events and people that have influenced you.

The second type of admissions essay requires you to answer a specific question with a more structured response. These questions cover a wide range of topics and can be creative, analytical, or philosophical. Take a look at the following personal statement questions and past essay prompts at colleges across North Carolina.



Personal Statement

Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, or science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

Duke University

Discuss an obstacle you have overcome in your life. What change did you make? What did you learn?

Guilford College

Structured Question

Some scientific advances are so counterintuitive that they completely change the way we think about the world. Examples are the ideas of Isaac Newton or Charles Darwin or Marie Curie. Which scientific discovery made during your lifetime has most significantly affected the world around you?

UNC Chapel Hill

Getting Started

If you are applying to more than one school, you might have to write several essays. The first step is determining how many essays you need and making a schedule based on your writing speed and application deadlines. For example, you might allow yourself one week per essay, so plan on three weeks for three essays.

Begin the writing process by brainstorming. Ask yourself what interests and excites you about the topic. Write down anything that occurs to you, knowing you can always eliminate it later. When you brainstorm, ideas build upon each other. Something that may seem boring at first glance can become very interesting as you write it out.

Don't be afraid of less traditional topics such as failure or frustration. Sometimes writing about situations when you have overcome obstacles reveals your true character and values. These topics can also reveal valuable qualities such as maturity and self-awareness. (A note of caution: be sure to be generally positive in order to avoid sounding as if you are complaining or appealing for sympathy.) If you are stuck, consider reading some sample essays available in books and on the Internet. Other essays can provide inspiration or give you a jumpstart on your topic. Remember that essay readers are trained to spot plagiarism, so don't try to imitate another essay. Use the samples only as a tool to help you find your own words.

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Following Directions

Your essay provides an abundance of information to an admissions counselor, including how well you can follow directions.

Here are several questions to ask yourself:

- Have I fulfilled each part of writing assignment?
It's easy to get in a hurry and give only a partial response.
- Have I adhered to all formatting requirements?
- Have I kept the word count at or below the maximum allowed?

Finally, don't be tempted to write one general essay and send it with all your applications. If a college asks a specific question, be sure to answer THAT question.



Keeping the Reader Engaged

Think creatively. Because your essay is one of hundreds to be read by admissions counselors, it needs to make an impression. Focus on what you are excited and passionate about. The best strategy is to reveal your genuine self, and it will make the writing process more fun. Your goal is to get the reader to remember you favorably. Be honest and sincere, and let your individual voice and personality separate you from the crowd.

Try to grab the reader's attention with a great opening sentence. Be bold and colorful. If it succeeds, the reader will be encouraged to continue.

Don't feel pressure, however, to have a brilliant opening line before you begin to compose the body of your essay. Often it's best to do a draft of the entire essay and then return to the opening sentence. It might be easier to write an attention-grabbing first line when the following paragraphs are already on the page.

Show, don't tell. Try to capture people, places, events, and feelings in words so a reader can visualize and respond to them. Illustrate your points with examples and specific descriptive details. For instance, don't just say that you're a leader. Show your leadership with life experiences and stories instead.

To keep the reader engaged, use present tense, active verbs and other descriptive language; give interesting details and facts; and if possible, use all the senses in your descriptions. How did something look? How did it sound? How did it feel, smell, taste?

Remember you are not writing an assignment for a grade; you are writing an essay for a reader to appreciate. Admissions officers want to read what you want to write, not what you think they want to read.

"Because we cannot meet each applicant personally, the essay plays a crucial role in helping us learn more about you. When writing your essay, we encourage you to be as serious or as humorous as you would like. Feel free also to write about something other than yourself if you feel that, by doing so, you will help us gain a better understanding of who you are, how you think, and how you hope to contribute to the UNC Chapel Hill community."

Vice Provost for Enrollment and Undergraduate Admissions, UNC Chapel Hill

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Avoiding Pitfalls

Do not use your essay to summarize activities and achievements you've already listed on the application. Although you may ultimately decide to write your essay on an activity, personal experience, or achievement, avoid writing an essay that's merely a summary or retelling of information presented in other parts of your application.

Be original, but not gimmicky. For example, do not write your essay in an unusual, "clever" format just to be different. Leave out language a reader might not understand, such as jargon and technical terms.

Stick with the truth. This advice may seem obvious, but it can be tempting to stretch the truth when you are trying to impress someone. Keep in mind that the purpose of the essay is to tell a reader what sort of person you really are.

Do not hire a professional writing coach or get excessive help from your parents. Admissions counselors are trained to spot plagiarism and writing that does not sound like the applicant.

Stick to vocabulary that is familiar to you. If you rely too heavily on a thesaurus in search of bigger and better-sounding words, you risk sounding pretentious as well as unintentionally misusing words.

Write several drafts. Polish and proofread for positive results. Read your writing repeatedly for errors in spelling and grammar. Reading the essay aloud is helpful. Ask a few good proofreaders to check your writing for mistakes, since it's easy to miss errors in your own writing. Also ask them to point out any passages that are vague or unclear. Do not underestimate the importance of grammatical correctness. Represent your ideas in the best light by checking your essay thoroughly for correct usage, spelling, and punctuation.



Sample Essay Prompts

How will the experiences of higher education assist you in becoming a leader in the 21st century?

Brevard College

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, or risk that you have taken or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

Davidson College

Discuss an issue you once thought you knew with certainty that you have since re-evaluated. What prompted you to change your opinion?

Elon University

"Science and art belong to the whole world, and before them vanish the barriers of nationality."

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

Provide a specific example of either instance.

Wake Forest University

Guidelines for Writing the College Admissions Essay

1. Whether your topic is a structured question or a personal statement, take plenty of time to think through what the writing prompt is asking you to do. Think of many ways to approach the topic and make a list. Take time to think through your list before you select one approach or a combination of several.
2. When you have settled on an approach, make more lists of details, memories, and associations. You might take time to read or reread parts of a book, story, poem, or article that the writing prompt suggests. Or you might discuss the idea with your friends or parents.
3. Make a plan for your essay. Whether you use a formal outline or not, a plan helps you connect ideas effectively and gives you a sense of beginning, middle, and conclusion.
4. Write a first draft.
5. Revise your first draft. Remember that revision means adding, deleting, and rearranging.
6. Write another draft.
7. Revise again.
8. Have one of your friends read this draft aloud to you. Hearing what you have said will make it clearer for you if you have written what you intended.
9. Revise a final time.
10. Proofread for grammatical correctness and spelling errors. Remember: spell-check and grammar-check are useful tools, *but they will not catch every error*. Read the essay backwards, a sentence at a time, to see if each sentence is complete and makes good sense. Read each sentence backward word by word to check the spelling.



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Helping you plan, apply, and pay for college

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