



MANHASSET HIGH SCHOOL

THE COLLEGE ESSAY GUIDE



Most students who have applied to college would agree that writing the college essay(s) was the most difficult part of the entire application process. The following are a few helpful thoughts and tips that should help ease the concerns about the task.

What is an essay?

An essay is a brief literary composition in which the author describes, analyzes, or interprets a specific topic from a personal viewpoint.

An essay tells the reader not only about an event, activity, or thought that is important to you but also **why** it is important to you.

By the time a member of a college admissions committee reads your essay, he/she will have reviewed your academic profile, specifically:

- *Determined your preparation for college by reviewing the courses on your transcript and their academic rigor*
- *Noted or re-calculated your GPA*
- *Reviewed your standardized test scores*

In general, he/she knows what type of **student** you are and whether you meet the **academic** criteria for admission. Once this is established, however, there is an additional and equally important detail to be determined. This is: **What type of person are you?** While reading through your application he/she will begin to get a sense of the person you are by reviewing your activities, special interests/talents, community, and work experiences. Your personal essay(s) will also be a **significant** factor in providing insight into who you are beyond what is written in your application.

Why are you asked to write an essay?

At the most basic level, college admissions committees want to **assess your writing ability**. Most of the courses you take in college will require a great amount of writing, so it is important that you have mastered the ability to write well.

In addition, the essay gives you an opportunity to **bring yourself to life so they can learn something about you**. While GPA and test scores give evidence of your ability to succeed academically, we are all aware that with competitive college admissions, these abilities alone do not mean automatic admission to every college to which is applied. The admissions committees want to know **if you'll be a good fit**. The essay gives you a chance to do all the above.

Required Essays

The Common Application

The Common Application is accepted by more than 900 colleges and universities. With regard to the essay topics, the essay prompts for the Class of 2021 are included here and you will be required to choose one (1). Although you can submit different essays to different colleges, it is **most advisable** to write one essay and submit it to all colleges. Members of the Class of 2024 can get a head start on reviewing the topics and writing draft copies. **While new prompts are released each April/May for the following year, they have not changed drastically from year to year. These essays have a strictly enforced cut off point at 650 words.**

Option #1: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

Option #2: The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

Option #3: Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What prompted your outcome?

Option #4: Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?

Option #5: Discuss an accomplishment, event or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself and others.

Option #6: Describe a topic, idea or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

Option #7: Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Be sure to read and reflect carefully on each option, as you want to choose the prompt that best allows you to share a piece of yourself that will not be evident in any other part of the application. These questions ask you to reflect upon your experiences, not upon how well you may have done in school, the strength of your SAT or ACT scores, or how many AP classes you have taken. Remember that specific information is revealed elsewhere in your application. The personal reflections you share, while often difficult for students to write, bring you to life as a person.

Supplemental Essays/Writing

Some schools which accept the Common Application will require you to write one, or more, full length supplemental essay(s). These are often focused on getting you to write about why you want to attend *college X* or what you might bring to the college. Other schools will ask students to write supplemental short answer responses to a variety of topics and some may ask for both. Links to these writing supplements will be found within the Common Application itself.

In speaking with college admissions officers, many indicate that students don't spend adequate time addressing supplemental questions. Be sure to be as thoughtful about your answers to these questions as you are to the Common Application essay.

Non-Common Application Schools

While over 900 colleges and universities accept the Common Application, there are those that require students to submit their own, school specific, applications (Georgetown University is included in this group of schools). Such applications can be found on the school's website. Although the essay requirements will vary from school to school, and from year to year, the elements of good writing still apply.

What do College Admissions Committees look for in an Essay?

1. **Answer the question:** If a question has two parts, which most of the Common Application prompts do, be sure to adequately address both.
2. **Clarity:** Be clear about what it is you are writing about. Don't ramble on.
3. **Directness:** Get to your point and stick to it.
4. **Honesty:** You will write best when you write about what you have experienced, so be truthful.
5. **Organization:** Be sure your ideas flow in an orderly way.
6. **Self-reflection:** Write about yourself, in the first person.
7. **Sincerity:** Mean what you say and say what you mean.
8. **Student Voice:** Write your own essay. Others can comment and edit but, the story you tell must be your own.

9. **Values:** What values are you displaying? What are you saying about the things you value?

The Big *RED* Flag

The college essay writing industry is a multi-million-dollar industry and college admissions officers are well aware of this. They are keyed in on essays that do not match the applicant's record so be advised that if your essay is too well written, for the level of courses you've taken or the standardized test scores you've received, there could be a question raised as to who wrote your essay. Admissions staff have access to the essay you wrote on the SAT and, while those essays are considered rough drafts, a veteran admission officer would have a good sense as to the possibility that a student's application essay was not written by the student. It is perfectly fine to get help brainstorming ideas to write about and it is also advisable to have someone read and help edit your work. What is not fine, however, is having someone write your essay for you because no one can write about you, except you. Keep it real.

Essay Do's and Don'ts

Do

Follow Directions
Write in the first person
Write what you know about
Let your personality come through
Provide details and depth
Use action words
Use humor, with restraint
Be appropriate, be positive
Tell your story/engage the reader
Narrow your focus/keep it small
Be unusual; not shocking or outlandish
Proofread (don't trust spell check)
Edit and watch the word count
Write what you have a passion for
Show insight
Remember the rules of grammar
Be personal; not impersonal

Don't

Plagiarize
Write in a style that is not your own
Use vocabulary that is not your own
Provide a laundry list of activities
Make up stories that did not happen
Write about what you don't know
Not engage the reader
Use the school's marketing material
Procrastinate
Name drop
Get overly coached
Put other people down
Be pretentious
Focus on un-resolved problems
Use abbreviations
Forget the rules of grammar
Rely on your thesaurus

Essay Topics to Approach with Caution or Avoid Altogether

College admissions officers generally agree that certain topics have been overused. These include essays about the following:

- *Luxury vacations that turn into itinerary essays*
- *Mission trips*
- *Expensive summer activities*
- *Controversial issues/topics*
- *Tragic stories*
- *How I scored the winning goal*
- *Adversity essays where there is no real adversity*
- *Persuasive essays*

Please note: you are not being advised not to write about these topics. You are being cautioned, however, that many students choose these topics and end up talking more about the topic than themselves. If you do choose to write about one of these topics, be sure to **narrow the focus** to one detail that was the most meaningful to you. Remember, and this is repetitive, the essay should have a narrow focus; it should be a slice of your life.

What are Admissions Committees Looking For?

It used to be that admissions committees were looking for well rounded students and, while well-rounded students are still attractive candidates, committees these days are looking to construct well-rounded classes. What that means is that, in addition to looking for students who will be academically successful, admissions committees are also looking for students who represent a variety of interests, perspectives, and backgrounds. If all of the students admitted to an institution came from the same geographic area, socio-economic background, religious, political, or ethnic group, or if they all had the same interests/goals, that would not make for a well-rounded community. At most colleges and universities there are hundreds of academic disciplines to choose from as well as activities in which to get involved. Admissions committees will keep an eye on admitting students whose interests are as varied as the academic and non-academic offerings on campus.

When admitting a class, admissions officers are also looking for students who will benefit from being at the school and who will add to the life of the campus by enriching it with their intellectual or personal interests/passions. Questions that might be asked by committee members, while reviewing applications, could include: *What type of student/person is this? Will this student add perspective? What will this student add to the classroom experience? Will this student be an active and contributing member of the school community? Is there something for the student at this school that only we can offer? How is this student different from others who have applied? Does this student demonstrate intellectual/personal passion? Will this student benefit from being here?*

Who are College Admissions Officers and How Do I Impress Them?

The answer to the first part of this question is quite simple. College Admissions Committees are made up of “everyday people.” Some have worked in the field of college admissions for many years, and some have only recently graduated from college themselves. The point is that the members of an admissions committee are people like everyone else. They just happen to work at a college/university, and they are very committed to enrolling students who they believe will fit in academically and socially at their individual institutions.

The reason why it is important for you to know this is because too often students ask: *“What can I write about that will impress the committee?”* or, *“What do they want to read about?”* First, you DO want to impress the committee. Second, the way to impress the admissions committee, however, is by thoughtfully answering the questions posed to you and by keeping the answers to those questions focused on yourself.

Avoid writing about a topic if you are doing so simply to write about the topic. Keep in mind that the essay must be meaningful to you. It must reveal something about **YOU** that will strike a chord, something that will be remembered. You want the reader to come away knowing more about you than before he/she read the essay, and you want the reader to say: *“This is someone we want on our campus”*.