

How to write a college application essay

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Many colleges require a short essay as part of the application process. The directions for the essay vary from college to college. Most colleges offer some variation of the topic. “Tell us more about yourself.”

Like most students, you might hate this subject and dread writing the essay. You know that it is a crucial piece of writing and that it must be done, but secretly you hope somehow to avoid the task. Like most tasks, the tension created by procrastinating is worse than the work itself — in this case, just sitting down and writing the essay.

You can use the college essay to strengthen your application. In fact, your essay can be the strongest part, presenting you as a thoughtful, sincere, interesting applicant. You can use the college essay to explain mistakes of the past — failed courses, low SAT® scores or few extracurricular activities. Best of all, you can demonstrate that you know how to write well, an ability all colleges value.

Find a topic

Colleges genuinely want to know who you are. Although it is difficult to believe, they do not have an “ideal student” in mind. They want a variety of students. They understand that they can’t know everything about you by your grade point average and your SAT scores. They want to know what kind of person you are, what aspirations you have, what struggles you have gone through, what is important to you. They ask you to write an essay about yourself because they want more personal information.

Before you write, think about how you may be different from other applicants. What unusual experience would you bring to the college? What interests, activities, travel, struggles or situations have had a particular impact on you? You are probably thinking, “Nothing is special about me; I’m just an average kid.” That’s what most students think. Sometimes it helps to ask other people what they think is unique about you.

If you know exactly what you want to write about, you are lucky. Use that topic. Be sure to consider the traditional, but appropriate and effective, topics, such as academic achievements, extracurricular activities, travel and work experiences, and life-changing events.

Also think of more subtle accomplishments. What kind of student are you? In which class did you learn to think, to

study? What do you do with your free time? What have you done for the past two summers? What words would you use to describe your personality? Do you belong to any organizations outside high school? What jobs have you held? What have you learned about organizing your time? Who is your most unusual friend? What magazines, newspapers, columnists or authors do you like to read? What are some of the failures or disappointments in your life? What kind of plans do you have for the future? Who has been influential in your life? What responsibilities do you have at home? What do you do for other people? What does music (particularly playing or composing) mean to you? How have you changed (besides physically) in the last four years?

Be specific

Remember that the admissions board is reading hundreds of applications, and you must make yours memorable. Some students resort to gimmicks: 8-inch-by-10-inch glossy pictures of themselves hang gliding, or a videotape or a cartoon book about themselves. You may have heard stories about an ordinary student getting into an exclusive college by taking a creative or startling approach. But gimmicks are high risk. Maybe the admissions board doesn’t have the time or the equipment to play the videotape of your band. Maybe you will seem egocentric or cute or, more likely, as though you are dodging the difficult task that everyone else has done: writing an essay.

You can make yourself stand out from the crowd and stress your individuality by a less risky method. Your English teachers have been telling you for years to use specifics when you write. Specifics make a piece of writing memorable. This basic principle of good writing applies, as well, to writing the college essay. Be specific. Tell the truth about yourself as specifically as possible. If you claim that you like school, say exactly what you like: “I like biology and got particularly interested in a three-month project I did about algae on the teeth.” Always be as specific as possible.

Narrow your topic

You have only one-and-a-half to two pages for this essay. You can’t write about everything that has ever happened to you. You need one to three topics for this paper. You must pick a few of the most important aspects of your identity.

If you cover too much, you will be forced to be superficial. Don’t say, “I like school. I am a leader. I play basketball.

I've traveled to Sri Lanka, Alaska, Iowa and South Africa. I play the violin. I work every weekend. I believe in responsibility. I want to be famous." Pick one, two, or at the most, three important things about yourself and concentrate on them.

Show, don't tell

You need to know and apply the writing principle of "show, don't tell": Give the readers such convincing evidence that they draw the conclusion you want them to draw. If you provide all the evidence of your fine qualities, you don't have to list them. Besides, the college will be much more likely to consider you sincere if you give examples rather than a list of glorious adjectives about yourself.

For instance, you might be embarrassed to say, "I am extremely responsible." Instead you could say, "Last summer, I was put in charge of 12 ten-year-old girls for a three-day hike." When the college admissions board members read your example, they will come to the conclusion, "Ah, some adult must have felt this applicant could be responsible for a dozen children's health and safety for several days. This sounds like a responsible person." Give your readers the evidence and examples, and they will reach the right conclusions.

Describe what you have done

You don't need a long list of flashy experiences. What you have experienced is not as important as what you have done with the experience. Real maturity depends on how you understand what has happened to you and whether you let your experiences change your perceptions.

Colleges want to know how you have reacted to your experiences. For example, many students have failed some test or course. Colleges would like to know what you did with that failure. Did you mope? Blame the teacher? Quit doing homework because you were angry at the failure? Did you see the failure as a warning, an impetus, a challenge?

Even if you write about something exotic, you must say what you did and what you learned. One student went to Israel for two weeks; her only observation was that the Israeli women wore longer skirts than the Americans. Her trivial description revealed her immaturity and poor powers of observation.

When you are explaining what you learned, do not say, "I learned a lot." Be specific. Tell exactly what you learned.

You want to show colleges that you will change and grow through a college education.

Focus on yourself

If you feel self-conscious writing the essay, you may be tempted to dodge the task of writing about yourself and write, instead, about something related to you, such as a group or an organization you belong to. Avoid this approach.

Work on the first sentence

There are two opposing approaches to making a strong opening sentence. The first suggestion is that you spend hours on the first sentence because it sets the tone and direction of the essay. The reasoning is that you need to know where you are going before you begin. The problem with this approach is that students become paralyzed trying to find the perfect beginning.

The second suggestion is that you begin anywhere and write the first sentence last. The reasoning is that you need to get started, and you don't know what you will end up saying until you have finished the essay. You may discover that your essay really begins in the middle of the second or third paragraph, and you can cut out all the preliminaries. Then you can start with a sturdy statement. The problem with this approach is that you might begin an essay without a sense of direction and wander too much.

You may go back and forth between trying to write a perfect beginning and just trying to get started. No matter what you do, when you finish the essay, go back to the beginning and work on the first sentences. Cut out all wordiness. Make it specific. Check the grammar.

Final bit of advice

Millions of students before you have written college essays. They hated the task, too. But it must get done. Of course, it is better to write it long before the deadline. The real problem for most students is how to get started, what topic to use and how to avoid procrastination.

The solution is simply to begin.

Dos and don'ts on writing the college application essay

A great essay will help you stand out from the other applicants, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin:

DO keep your focus narrow and personal

Your essay must prove a single point. Your main idea should be clear and easily followed from beginning to end. Ask someone to read just your introduction, and then tell you what your essay is about. (And remember, it's about showing them who you are.)

DO back up what you say

Develop your main idea with specific facts, events, quotations, examples and reasons.

Okay: "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"

Better: "During that night, I sang the theme song from *Casablanca* with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

DO give specifics

Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

Okay: "I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family. I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."

Better: "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

DON'T tell them what you think they want to hear

Admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university. Bring something new to the table.

DON'T write a résumé

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

DON'T use 50 words when five will do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

Okay: "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends and teachers—and I have even noticed it myself—that I am not the neatest person in the world."

Better: "I'm a slob."

DON'T forget to proofread

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. And don't rely on your computer's spell chick.[!]

Source: Adapted from *The College Application Essay, rev. ed.*, by Sarah Myers McGinty (New York: The College Board, 2012).

Choosing an essay topic: Advice from member colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest

The essay personalizes your application. The essay is your chance to use your voice. The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college. In the essay, you can speak in your own voice and personalize your application. Here's your opportunity to show something about you that doesn't really come across elsewhere in your application.

So, step back and be reflective. Think about who you are as an individual. How do you view the world? What do you care about deeply? What experiences and people have been important in shaping you as a person? What are your aspirations in life? It is in such reflection that you can find your own unique voice. That's the voice that will help you write an interesting essay that only you could have written.

Why do colleges require essays?

A college application includes a lot of information about you, such as grades, recommendations, lists of your extracurricular activities and test scores. All of that information is very important and helps admissions officers form a picture of your accomplishments and abilities. However, while it tells about how other people see you, there isn't much about how you see yourself. It's that inside view — how you see yourself — that colleges hope to find in your essay.

The essay performs other functions, as well:

- The essay can be a way of showing that you have researched and thought carefully about the college to which you are applying. It shows, in your own words, why you and the college would be a good match.
- An essay demonstrates your writing ability, a key component of success in college.
- In your essay, you can show that you are willing to put yourself into what you do. That kind of commitment is an important part of effective learning in college. And it shows the admissions committee that you are willing and able to be a contributing member of a community of learners.
- For selective colleges especially, the essay helps admissions committees draw distinctions and make choices among applicants. An essay will rarely take an applicant out of consideration at a college, but it certainly can elevate an applicant in an admissions committee's eyes.

Choosing an essay topic: Advice from member colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest (page 2)

Choosing and handling a topic

Show your command of the basics of good writing. Here are some key points that admissions officers look for in an essay:

- Make sure to answer the essay question and to follow all the instructions.
- Start off with a strong opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest.
- Use a style that you find comfortable and that is appropriate for the subject matter.
- Use correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.
- Make a point and stick to it; develop your argument or narrative.
- Check all your facts. Do you mention a date, a place or an event in your essay? Make sure it's correct.
- Give your reader complete information, so he or she won't be confused.
- In general, be succinct. If there is a recommended length for the essay, pay attention to it.
- The essay should be neatly typed.
- Remember that mistakes, especially sloppy mistakes, make it look as if you don't take the essay (and, by extension, the application) very seriously.

Good sources of essay topics

Does the application ask you to choose a topic? There are as many good topics as there are applicants. Look for a topic among your interests, or among causes or events that touch you personally:

- Do you have hobbies and nonschool pursuits that engage your heart and mind? Writing about your out-of-classroom interests can help reveal a part of you that's not covered — or not covered to your fullest advantage — elsewhere in your application.
- Is there a social cause that you hold near and dear? Remember, an essay is not an academic paper; however, a cause that you feel passionately about may be the basis for a strong essay.
- Perhaps there is an event (local, national or international) that has touched you in a personal way.
- Is there an academic subject that sparks your interest? Why does that subject excite you? Has it led to experiences or study outside of school?

Choosing an essay topic: Advice from member colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest (page 3)

How to handle a topic

Often, you will be asked to write about an experience you've had, an achievement in your life, or a person who has been significant to you. Go beyond the what or who and dig into the how and why:

- This is a personal essay, not a travelogue. So if you're writing about a trip to another country, describe how your experiences affected you and why they were interesting or meaningful to you. The people reading the essay are interested in what makes you tick and how you got the way you are, not in how the trains run in Paris.
- Are you writing a tribute to your grandparents and their influence on your childhood? Be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how the particular things your grandparents did or said were important to you.
- Did you overcome an athletic injury and recover to perform well? A description of the type of cast you wore and your rehab routine won't make a compelling essay. But a reflection on what it felt like to watch your teammates, instead of playing alongside them, just might be the ticket.

Tips on avoiding possible pitfalls

- Writing a poem or making a videotape in place of an essay is probably not a good idea, unless you're applying to a specialized school that encourages such a submission.
- Humor can be risky, so be careful how you use it.
- Honor code rules are in effect when you write an essay, so do your own work and don't make things up. As a practical matter, other items in the application, such as letters of recommendation, make it likely that you'd be found out if you tried to give misinformation.

Some final tips

- Leave yourself time to rewrite and revise. For most people, this is not an easy assignment. You need to give yourself weeks, not days, and certainly not hours, to rework your essay.
- If your essay is longer than three pages (unless the instructions call for something longer), then it had better be interesting! Think hard about what you really want to focus on, and take out whatever distracts from your central point.
- The admissions committee will take your essay seriously. You should, too. You have a lot to gain by putting in the time and effort to write a good essay.

Source: *Associated Colleges of the Midwest* (www.acm.edu)