
Writing The College Essay

Presented by: Emily Petersell, Director of Admission

Goals for Today

- Discuss the role the essay plays in the college admissions process
- Review how to get started on crafting an authentic essay
- Share helpful tips for strengthening your essay
- Share information about optional and supplemental essays

Purpose of the Essay

The Purpose of the Essay

The Admissions committee uses your essay to learn about your...

- personal qualities, values, and interests
- writing abilities

This is your chance to:

- bring your voice into your application
- share something important about YOU that isn't captured in other parts of your application

Remember: your essay will NOT make or break your application!

Choosing a Topic

Choosing a Topic: Myths and Missteps

MYTHS:

- There are “good essay topics” and “bad essay topics”
- If a topic is common/you know someone else is writing about it, you should not write about it
- If you haven’t experienced a life-changing event or a major obstacle, you have nothing to write about

MISSTEPS TO AVOID:

- “Everything about me in 650 words”
- Telling someone else’s story
- Writing about something overly personal or uncomfortable to share
- Trauma dumping

Choosing a Topic: Make it about YOU!

Write about something YOU are interested in!

Do NOT write about what you think admission counselors want to read.

Plot Twist: We are most interested in learning about YOU!

Activity Time! Brainstorming Topics

What do you think is important?

Consider: your relationships, your values, your beliefs

What do you enjoy?

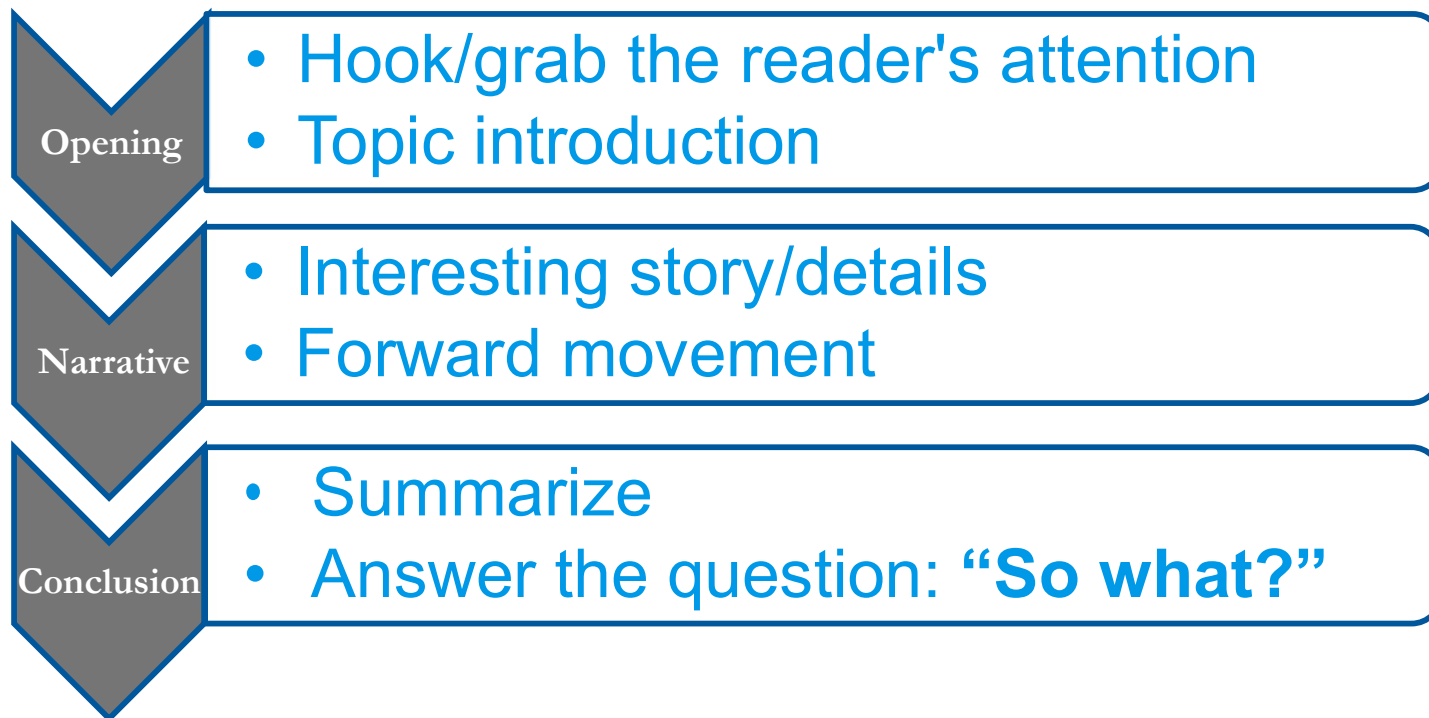
Consider: hobbies, sports, favorite subjects, things you “nerd out” about

What does your everyday life look like?

Consider: your typical day, your community, how you spend your time

Drafting and Editing

Sample Essay Structure



Remember: Clarity over Creativity!

Give Yourself Time (but not too much!)

Tip: Start writing your essay early, well before college application deadlines, so you can write in a relaxed state, seek feedback, and produce multiple drafts before your finished product.

Too few drafts run the risk of...

- Grammatical errors
- Sloppy mistakes
- Underdeveloped story

Too many drafts run the risk of...

- Overworked
- Lifeless
- Less authentic

Get Writing Support

Readers **who know you:**

Parent or guardian, friends, siblings

Readers **who don't know you well:**

Teacher who taught you a year or two ago

Readers **with perspective:**

College counselor, English teacher, etc.

AI Tools: Use them wisely and with integrity, or not at all

You! Try reading your essay aloud

Read Closely

Spell Check does not solve all problems!

Front page of the Wall Street Journal: “Jesters in a British competition riding *unicorns*.” **(unicycles)**

College Essay: “A favorite activity of mine is *torturing* children.”
(tutoring)

College Essay: “I enjoyed being surrounded by so many *perspiring* lawyers.”
(aspiring)

Pay Attention to the Visual

- Paragraph length & breaks
- Use PDF Preview

Think about your reader's eyes!

The Perfect Burrito

Recently, I was at Tortilla Sam's (Worcester's finest establishment for Mexican food) and I began thinking about the perfect burrito. What makes a burrito the perfect burrito? Is it the ratio of rice to beans? Is it the freshness of the salsa? Or perhaps it's the texture of the tortilla? The more I thought about it, the more I realized that a burrito is comprised of so many components, so many complementary parts, that it's impossible to identify which one plays the largest role. Put differently, you don't know what makes a burrito the perfect burrito until you taste it and even then you're unlikely to know why it's perfect – more likely, it's the precise combination of all the assembled parts. In addition, perhaps we all have our own unique tastes which dictate what will make a burrito perfect for each and every one of us. The perfect burrito for one person might be far too spicy for someone else. As the days tick by on April's calendar and we move closer to the May 1st deadline when all admitted students must decide at which college to set up their futons and mini-fridges next year, let's remember the lesson of the burrito. Colleges are complex and complicated homes for living and learning and they can't be summed up in a sound bite nor summarized in a Facebook posting. The best way to identify the perfect college is to think for yourself and know that when it happens, you won't know why – you'll just know that you've found the perfect college for you. In the meantime, keep an open mind and keep the salsa off your shirt. What a wonderful holiday it is – today is the deadline to apply for first year admission to College of the Holy Cross. Like many of you, we are in the midst of our Deadline Day celebrations. Here in the Holy Cross Admissions Office, we are eating the traditional Deadline Day breakfast – coffee and eraser shavings; we are exchanging the traditional Deadline Day gifts – mechanical pencils, carpal tunnel survival kits and prescription glasses; we have even performed the traditional Deadline Day circle dance around the Deadline Day tree. (Well, it's more a stack of applications than it is a tree . . .) So, now that Deadline Day is here, we are afforded the opportunity to reflect back upon this last recruiting cycle – several thousand admissions interviews, over a thousand high schools visited, 120,000 airline miles and nearly 400 hours of free Wi-Fi logged at Panera's located around the continental United States. It's been an exhausting and exhilarating spring, summer and fall. Now all that's left to do is to read, read, present, discuss, debate and then finally vote. A month from now, our committee process will begin selecting and completing the next class of Crusaders. But before we can do that, we first must read. And read. Every application. Twice. So for now, I will bid adieu and return to my stack of applications. If you call my office in the next few weeks and don't get an answer, know that I'm reading applications somewhere else. And if you find yourself in a Panera anytime soon and you see a spectacled, wrist-brace wearing, mechanical-pencil using academic surrounded by green folders and eraser shavings – don't laugh. Just know that we appreciate calculus, we appreciate early morning swim team practice, we appreciate tech crew and we'd appreciate one of those enormous chocolate chip cookies.

Editing: Things to Keep in Mind

Maintain Your Voice

Even if you get help with your edits, make sure the content is yours

Be Genuine

Don't use go outside your vocabulary; it should sound just like you!

“This essay is very extemporaneous.”

Double-Check Before Submitting

Be careful not to mention another college!

“...and that is why I am a perfect fit for Yale University!”

Final Review

Ask Yourself:

What is the impression of me that the reader will be left with?

Supplemental and Optional Essays

Another Essay?!

Optional Essays = Not required, but highly encouraged

Supplemental Essays = Required

- Colleges rely on these essays to gain additional insight to your character
- These essays are also a great way for you to demonstrate interest in the colleges you are applying to

Do your research! Use college websites, attend information sessions and tours, or connect with college representatives to learn about each of your colleges

Start early and take your time! Don't leave these until the day before the application is due, and don't recycle the same essay and just change the name of the college – it will be noticed!

Essays That Worked

www.conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/

Emily Petersell
Director of Admission
Connecticut College
New London, CT
epetersel@conncoll.edu