

The College Essay In The Age Of AI

By [Scott White](#),

Jun 16, 2025, 03:11pm EDT

The college essay has been a common, central part of holistic admissions since the mid-60's. It has been used to assess how well students write and think, how well they fit the college under consideration, and also who they are. For decades, it has been one of the few parts of the process the student has complete control over, providing a unique opportunity for the student to personalize the college admissions process.

Sarah McGinty literally [wrote the book on the college essay](#), writing seven editions of The College Essay for the College Board. She is a former high school English teacher and department chair (Montclair High School, Millburn High School), a former admission director of Sarah Lawrence College, and taught at Harvard from 2003-2015.

“What I love about Sally is that, as the admissions process evolves, she consistently thinks about the implications,” notes Anna Wright, Director of College Counseling at The Benjamin School. “She takes that essential step back and asks, ‘Why are colleges asking these questions?’ ‘What are the colleges trying to learn about you?’ McGinty focuses her attention today on the future of the college essay and whether the essay is now less a reflection of the applicant’s character and insight and more a pseudo-resume built through fluency in artificial intelligence. AI has disrupted the idea of the essay being a grammar test or an indication of a student’s ability to string ideas together. However, the essay does still give students the ability to add their voice to the process and humanize the application.”

White: Has the college essay been an effective tool to assess college candidates?

McGinty: The reality is the college application essay is an assignment of significant consequence with unclear criteria for an unknown audience. That’s a tall order. I remember early days as a high school English teacher, under the mandate of a department chair who decreed that every student must write one (or more!) essays a week, a significant burden for them...and for me. In the first weeks, when I had not been able to evaluate all the first round of essays before I had to assign the second, a wise and brave student came to me: “It’s not really fair to ask us to write another essay when we’ve not received the first one back.” She was exactly right: you need to know your audience to be heard. And the application essay leaves most writers over concerned about correctness and driven toward a brag.

White: What makes a good essay?

McGinty: One word? How about “memorable”? A favorite essay read at Sarah Lawrence College showed the young author returning home after school one day to find her grandmother ensconced in a bed in the dining room, smoking her ever-present cigarette, propped up next to a small glass of straight gin. The essay recounted both the developing relationship between author and grandmother and reminiscences of Lord Marchmain’s bed in *Brideshead Revisited*. It seems unlikely that the author was coached to write about this. It was real, engaging, and fabulously literary...for me, an A+. There was an electric connection that day between this young woman and her reader—she had gambled on her audience and won. So you can see the prescription is pretty hard to replicate.

White: Is the present choice of Common Application essay prompts effective?

McGinty: They all herd you toward the brag. It has to be awesome. “Talent,” “obstacle,” “challenge,” realization, “accomplishment,” captivating idea. Wow. Kids start envying friends with tragedy and divorce in their lives. David Foster Wallace gave a memorable graduation address at Oberlin College, including an anecdote about young fishes. As they swim past, a grizzled old fish says “How’s the water?” One little fish says to the other, “What’s water?” Applicants are in the early days of self-reflection; life on a treadmill is unexamined. The application is, without a doubt, asking one of the first “look at the water” questions—this process will continue but it has hardly started at 17.

I think the Common App can produce good results with a vibe that is more collaborative and less competitive. Excellent educators and people from all areas of admission help rewrite and revise this form quite regularly. There are opportunities periodically to change the tone and also the questions. I’d vote for something like “Tell us about something small and insignificant in your life. Help us see it clearly and know how important it is to you”

White: Adaeze "Daisy" Ogunedo, the Senior Associate Director of Admissions at Smith College and President-elect of the New England Association of College Admissions Counseling certainly agrees. She commented to me that “I view the essay as an opportunity for the student to share their story. While applicants might see it as yet another assignment, as someone who has read hundreds of these in my career, it gives me a little glimpse into who the student is that their resume and grades don’t give me. It might not be a big story about major events in your life, but a quirky anecdote about how they take pictures of a certain brand of milk every time you see it. This is the students’ chance to reach directly out to the admissions officer and say ‘Hey look. There’s a person amongst all these words.’”

White: Do you think this is less likely to be affected by students using artificial intelligence to write their essays.

McGinty: Let's help applicants. If we do, the temptation to let Claude apply for you will diminish. The applicant should be able to enrich their application without feeling like there needs to be a start-up on their resume or a death in their family.