

The College Essay



The college essay is your chance to use your voice to add to your college application. Many colleges require the essay as a way to hear from the student directly and to get a sense of who you are in your own words. It's a great opportunity to personalize your application beyond the grades, scores, and other information you've provided and can make a difference at decision time.

8 KEY POINTS

THAT ADMISSION OFFICERS LOOK FOR:

- A command of the basics of good writing
- A direct answer to the essay question
- A strong opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest
- A comprehensive argument or narrative—make your point and stick to it
- A style that is comfortable for you and that is appropriate for the subject matter
- Correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling
- Correct data—check your facts, dates, and names
- Succinctness—pay attention to the recommended length

WHAT THE ESSAY CAN DO FOR YOUR APPLICATION:

- Demonstrate your writing ability, a key component of success in college.
- Show that you have thought carefully about where you are applying and why you are a good match for the college, in your own words.
- Explain your commitment to learning and that you are willing and able to be a contributing member to the college community.
- Draw distinctions between you and other applicants, something that selective colleges especially rely on.

An essay will rarely take an applicant out of consideration at a college, but it certainly can elevate an applicant in an admission committee's eyes.

MAKE IT PERSONAL:

- Often you will be asked to write about a personal experience, an achievement, or a person who has been significant to you. Go beyond the what or the who and dig into the how and the why.
- If you write about a trip or event, describe how this experience affected you and is meaningful to you.
- If you are writing about a person in your life, be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how or what this person did for you that is important to you.

THINGS TO KEEP IN MIND

Revise, revise, revise. Take the time to reread and revise. This process will help you develop a strong opening and a solid direction, and refine what you are trying to express.

Show, don't tell. Give readers such convincing evidence that they will come to the conclusion that you want. Provide detailed examples instead of providing a list of things.

Be authentic. Don't stress trying to write what you think they are looking for—just showcase who you are!

Just get started! Writing something meaningful can be a long process, so get started right away to allow for time to draft and revise. Be sure to write your essay long before the deadline.

Tips for Writing Application Essays

If you're free to write your application essay on any topic under the sun, you'll need to pinpoint a topic that's just right for you. To narrow your options, consider the following:

Use the essay to reveal yourself.

Talk about what that winning basket meant to you last year, or how proud you were when you received a complimentary letter from someone who read your editorial in the school paper. This will help admissions counselors know the real you, not just the numbers on your transcript or college admissions test.

Use the essay to show you are a hard worker.

If you've dealt with something difficult in your life, use it to show how you worked hard and overcame it. If there is particular hardship (like a family illness, a disability or a death) that affected your high school performance, you should provide admissions counselors with a separate written record of this.

Use the essay as an explanation for grades.

If a teacher gave you low marks, show how you persisted and how your grades improved. Only do this if the outcome is positive. If you just couldn't get along with a teacher, it will reflect poorly on you.

Use the essay to show what you can do with opportunity.

Write about your first job. Write about how you have sought mentors in your life. Write about how you are excited to start your chosen career field because it's always been your dream, and attending college will make it a reality.

Use the essay to show your writing skills.

Show admissions counselors your writing, organizational, analytical and language skills. Writing is often a big part of college, and admissions counselors will use your essay as a measure of how well you write. If you use humor, have a teacher or counselor review your essay to make sure the humor is appropriate.

If you're still having trouble choosing a topic or simply getting started, don't be afraid to ask for help. Most students do! A parent, teacher, school counselor or other trusted adult can be a valuable resource and may offer you insights about yourself.

Have a high school teacher look at your essay for spelling, grammar and punctuation mistakes. Make revisions to the essay until you are satisfied it's the best you can do.

Things to Avoid in Your Essay

- Don't write what you think the admissions office wants to hear.
- Don't write about information that you supplied elsewhere in your application.
- Don't be too wordy. Be specific, but eliminate unnecessary words.
- Don't simply list your experiences or accomplishments. Describe how they're relevant.