

The Essay: Show Them Who You Are

Essays serve two main purposes in the admission process: it gives you the opportunity to advocate for the person who you know the best as well as show off your writing. You should look at the essay as an opportunity to have a conversation with an admission officer. This is your opportunity to speak for yourself and your candidacy in an honest and straightforward manner. Your essay alone will not get you into any college, but it may well be the key factor in swinging a decision in your favor.

Some colleges provide specific questions for your essay while others give you much more freedom to choose your own topic. Follow instructions. If there is a specific question, answer it and don't try to bend something else you have written to make it work. Admission officers are savvy and are on the lookout for people taking the easy way out.

Choose a topic you are passionate about. Write with sincerity. Let your personality shine through. Tell them what you want them to know, not what you think they want to hear. Never underestimate the power of your own written words. Make one experience come alive. Reinforce something positive in your application. "Slice-of-life" essays are the best. If you are given freedom to write what you want, take some risks with your essay. Whatever you write about, make sure it is at the core about you. A long narrative about Dante's Inferno may showcase your intelligence, but unless you carefully connect one of the levels to the events of your life, you probably have given the admission officer(s) more insight into Dante's character than yours. Be creative and work hard to come up with something that really highlights your individuality. Any topic is fine as long as you write about what is important to you, not what you think others will want to hear. Steer clear of the "life-altering bicycle trip through France" or "how I learned about the real world through my Martha's Table experience." It is hard to avoid the trite in such a theme and many others will submit similar essays.

David Letterman's Top 10 Bad Titles For College Essays

10. "Why I'm Gonna Get So Much Attention In College."
9. "Chico, My Most Unforgettable Cellmate."
8. "D's = A's: My High School's Complex Grading Scale."
7. "Gross Things I Did To Food When I Worked At McDonalds."
6. "I Hired Some Chinese Kid To Write This Essay."
5. "Why The Admission Director Loves His Car And Wouldn't Want Anything To Happen To It."
4. "A Few Ideas On What To Do With All Those Annoying Old People."
3. "Faith Hill: She's A Good Singer, But Is She Really A Diva?"
2. "Instead Of An Essay, Here's A Photocopy Of My @*&."
1. "One Year In College, Then Hello, NBA!"

Once you have decided on your topic find a quiet place, sit down and write whatever comes into your mind; brainstorm; do a map or web; just let your ideas flow; edit later. Find your own voice; don't twist yourself into someone else. With practice you will find that voice. The college admissions people expect you to write the way a 17-year-old writes, not the way a parent writes. Use Hemingway's sentiment, "Show don't tell!" How long should your essay be? "As short as you have time to make it," writes one admissions officer.

Take your time on your essay and get to work on it soon. The best essays are not written in the wee hours on the day prior to the deadline, but rather percolate over time. Write rough drafts and show them to your friends, parents and teachers asking first if you have “captured” yourself in your writing and only after this has been assured, ask for editing and proofreading help. While the essay **MUST** be your own work, you should solicit constructive critiques. Remember, you want to submit your best effort.

More Tips on Essay Writing:

- **Be Smart** - Follow the directions in regard to length, format and whether it should be typed or in your own handwriting. Read the question carefully and answer the question accordingly.
- **Don't Opt Out** - Many colleges require a personal essay. Some colleges make it optional, in which case you would be wise to take the initiative to write; let them know who you are. Give them more reasons to admit you.
- **Think Before You Write** - Pre-plan and think of possible approaches before writing. Those who do usually produce more mature and thoughtful essays. Nothing is more dreaded by admission officers than artificial, bland, thoughtless essays. Let people you know read it before mailing. Ask them if it sounds like you.
- **Don't List Activities and Achievements** - This information is clearly listed on other parts of your application or transcript. If you decide to discuss an accomplishment, try to focus on how it influenced your personal growth. Remember the reader wants to get inside you and beyond the objective data.
- **Re-read the First Sentence of Your Favorite Books** - This can be a great way to brainstorm or generate ideas.
- **Use the Five Senses** - Smell, taste, touch, hear and see are great ways to get started.
- **Eliminate, “I Was Born” Beginnings** - The reader of your essay has presumed this but the approach usually produces an unimaginative chronology of irrelevant trivia.
- **Make Your Writing Interesting** - Be conscious of your writing style. Try to make it colorful.
- **Be Distinctive** - Let your essay clearly project who you are and what makes you a unique person. Try not to focus on what makes you the same as your peers. Use your own voice.
- **Avoid Excessive Humility** - If you must make a mistake, let it be in the direction of self-confidence. It would be bad to ignore or play down some significant personal achievement because you are trying to be humble.
- **Beware of Multi-Syllable Words** - Some students feel that they can gain the attention of the reader by using words of many syllables. Unless it is part of your natural style, you probably will produce a stilted, stuffy and formal essay that does not sound like you. More is not better. Keep it short and simple without big words. If your writing is not consistent with other pieces of writing in your application or with what teachers may say, you may raise some skepticism among readers.

- **Avoid Unimportant Sentences** – Admission officers read several applications a day that say their university is one of the most outstanding institutions of higher education. They also read that you are going to college to broaden your mind. Both may be true, but try to catch their attention with more original expressions or ideas.
- **Use the Present Tense** – Wherever possible, write in the present tense as it makes your writing more active and more exciting to read. Avoid the verb “to be” and “to get.”
- **Be Human** – Don’t be afraid to admit a weakness or two. This will not lessen your chances; in fact, done properly, it could make your statement more powerful.
- **Edit, Edit and then Edit** – Make sure your grammar and spelling are correct. A mistake is evidence that you are not truly interested in that college. Submit only your best work.
- **Get to Your Point** – Remember to be concise; the reader often allows only 2-3 minutes per essay.

Some Sample Essay Questions: The Common Application includes the same three essay questions every year. As many, many schools accept this application form, having an answer prepared when you return in the fall makes good sense. The following is a sampling of questions from around the country. (The Common Application questions are listed first.) We have purposely not listed the schools along with the questions as schools change their questions periodically.

Whether you use one of the questions listed below to actually form an essay or just to brainstorm ideas, it is definitely worth your time reading through to get a sense of what will be expected of you.

1. Evaluate a significant experience or achievement that has had special meaning to you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, or national concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. What is the greatest challenge you have faced and how did you react to it?
5. Describe your room and what it reveals about you.
6. If you could choose one course that every high school student would be required to take, what would it be?
7. It has been said “in the future everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes.” Describe your fifteen minutes.
8. Select a creative work – a novel, a film, a poem, a musical piece, a painting, or other work of art – that has influenced the way you view the world and the way you view yourself. Discuss the work and its effect on you.
9. Describe a situation in which someone you respect questioned your values or beliefs. How was the issue resolved?
10. Describe an experience that has resulted in knowledge of a culture other than your own. Write about how the experience has affected you.
11. If you could spend an evening with any one person, living, deceased, or fictional, whom would you choose and why?
12. You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.
13. Should there be a mandatory one-year service requirement (either community or military) for all 18-year-olds? Yes, no, why?
14. Why do you want to attend _____ (fill in the name of the college)?
15. Ask and answer the one important question you wish we had asked.