

College Essay Writing Tips

PREPARING FOR THE ESSAY

Before you begin the process of writing your essay, look over your application carefully to see what kind of person is revealed there so far. What aspects of your background and achievements seem most important to you as you review them? Is there anything special about your family background, your community or school, your achievements, or your work experience which might inspire a specific essay topic about which you could express yourself in an interesting, genuine, perhaps touching or amusing way? Do you have specific memories of happy times, sad times, difficulties you've overcome?

Specific experiences usually make the best essay topics.

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE ESSAY

The essay is one of the most carefully read and influential parts of application. Your essay is your chance to really come alive in your application, to express your personality and character. It can be your most powerful "hook," the part that really attracts someone on the admissions committee. How well you organize your ideas and express them is just as important as what you choose to write about. The members of admissions committees have read thousands of essays. They can usually spot the student who is telling them what he or she thinks they want to hear. Let your individuality come through in your choice of topic and your style of writing.

The most important thing to remember is to be your self.

CHOOSING THE TOPIC

For some colleges, the essay topic is wide open, completely up to you. Others give you two or three specific topics from which to choose. Some ask you to discuss a book you have read, to tell them something significant about your extracurricular activities or work experiences, or to describe important academic goals. Typically, colleges ask a general question that gives you a great deal of leeway in how you choose to answer. Many ask you to describe a special interest, an important experience, or a significant person in your life and to discuss the impact of this person or thing. When the topic is wide open, it is still a good idea to write something about your family background, an experience that has influenced you, or a person who has inspired you. **No matter what the question, remember: make it specific, make it personal, and make it interesting.**

The first step in getting ready to write your essay is narrowing the topic. Instead of trying to tell everything about yourself, focus on one specific aspect of your experience and then make it come alive with vivid incidents and examples. You could write about how you overcame a hardship in your life, how you took on and completed a difficult project, what it is like growing up in a large family or having immigrant parents, or how you were affected by a family crisis. If you choose a serious topic, be open and personal, but do not write a sob story that makes you sound self-pitying. Good essays can be humorous, too. But humor can be risky, so do not attempt this kind of essay unless you are a naturally funny person and a good writer. Remember that there is a fine line between being funny and being a smart aleck. If you choose to write about a job or outside activity that has changed you in some way, remember the advice stated earlier: **be specific.**

Don't say, "Working in an office taught me how to cope with red tape and boredom and still motivate myself to do a good job." Instead, give examples serious or humorous of things that happened on the job and how you coped with them. Describe the day the copying machine broke down and your boss came in three hours late and the phone would not stop ringing and how you dealt with it all. Don't say, "Playing the violin has taught me the value of dedication and the necessity of making sacrifices in order to achieve my goals." Instead, describe an incident in which you were forced to give up immediate pleasures in order to pursue long-range goals.

GETTING STARTED

How do you get started? **Make a list** of topics or experiences that might be interesting to write about and read about. Look at your list a few days later and **choose the two or three topics that seem most appealing**. Make an outline for each of them, detailing specific points or incidents you would write about. If it helps you to "bounce" ideas around with other people, or express them out loud, by all means do so. Just make sure the final idea that emerges is your own. Choose the topic that seems to have the most potential and let it simmer for a few days, giving you time to jot down thoughts related to the idea without feeling any pressure.

WRITING THE ESSAY

Your essay will not be written in one sitting. Think of it as a process extending over several weeks. **The finished product should be 200 to 500 words or one to two typed pages**. Once you have your topic and have jotted down some ideas about it, make a more detailed outline than the first one you did. Try to organize all the material you have in a way that makes sense. Then start writing. Don't be too critical of your work at first. Just let your ideas flow. Spend a few days writing, putting the essay away, then coming back to reread and rewrite.

Once you have a draft that you feel comfortable with, have one or two people whose judgment you trust read it over. What you need to know at this point is how interesting and readable the essay is. Ask your readers to keep these questions in mind: Is it interesting? Does it have enough specific details to make it lively? Is it well organized? Do the ideas make sense? Is there a natural flow from one idea to the next? Are there good transitions from one paragraph to the next? Do you come across as an intelligent, interesting person? Do you sound genuine and honest? Or, do you sound conceited and egotistical; preachy and pompous; stiff and impersonal? Is your vocabulary conversational but correct? Have you used sentences of varying lengths and structures? Are there grammatical problems in the essay? Spelling errors? Carefully consider the comments made by your readers and spend a few days rewriting your essay. **When you have completed the final draft, have at least two people (including your English teacher, if you like); proofread it for errors in spelling, punctuation, or grammar.** Then type or print the essay on the form provided. Make several copies of the essay form first and practice printing or typing your essay on the copies before you put the final, final draft on the original form.

Tips for Writing a Great College Admissions Essay

Don't recycle essays. Nothing will land your essay in the circular file faster than an obviously recycled or "near match" essay. It is important that you write a new essay for each application that you submit.

Be yourself. Choose a topic that is meaningful to you. Write in your own words. Write what you feel, not what you think the admissions committee wants to hear. The essay is your opportunity to explain to the committee who you are and why you are unique.

Don't overextend. Don't take on too big of a topic, and don't adopt a preachy tone. College admission officers don't want to be lectured on rainforest destruction. Instead, tell them how you became interested in environmentalism.

Be creative. Try to come up with something different. Remember that the people reviewing your essay have read hundreds - if not thousands - of essays. Don't give them one more "The Teacher Who Influenced Me Most" or "Drinking and Driving is Bad" essay to wade through.

Captivate your audience. Your essay needs to be engaging and memorable. Try to draw the reader in with a quick, enticing introduction. You want to catch their interest and give them a reason to finish your essay.

Accentuate the positive. If you're writing about a traumatic experience, describe the negatives but don't dwell on them. Rather, explore how the experience changed you and what you took away from it.

Leave time for drafting. Write a first draft. Let it sit for a few days. Then review it carefully and look for weak or dull spots, as well as spelling and grammatical errors. Never let your first draft be your final draft.

Revise, rewrite, reword. Revision is the key to all good writing - college admission essays included. Hammer your draft into shape through various rewrites. Read each draft aloud. Your ears can pick up problems that your eyes may miss.

Ask people for input. Teachers, counselors, friends, parents, siblings - ask people you respect for some candid feedback. *"What do you think I'm trying to say?" "Does it sound confusing?" "Is it boring?" "Do I come across well?"*

Pursue perfection. No essay needs to be error-free more than this one. Have your English teacher look it over. Quadruple-check the spelling. Type your essay carefully. Don't let careless mistakes get between you and the school of your dreams.

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