

COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS

NOTE: There are two excellent websites with more detailed information related to application essays. The relevant portions are included at the end of this section.

While the essay is a chance to make yourself more personal to the admissions committee, it is also an example of your writing ability. All the rules of good writing need to apply. Admissions officers read hundreds or thousands of these a year. You need a strong introduction to catch their interest. Link your conclusion back to the introduction. It is generally true that someone who writes well will do well in college. Most college faculty members are worried that students do not write as well as they used to and college admission offices are under some degree of pressure to be aware of that.

Do not treat the essay lightly. Applying online increases the temptation to just type and hit "SEND". Resist that temptation! Resist the temptation to think that this "assignment" matters less than your English assignment. Treat online essays with the same seriousness you would a paper essay or English class assignment. That means write, rewrite, get input, finalize. Allow yourself plenty of time- not just one night.

The essay gives an admissions committee a significant amount of information about an applicant. They are looking for something that can't be learned from the other information in your application, so don't repeat your list of activities and awards. The essay allows the college to differentiate one student from another and to separate a student from his/her more objective data (GPA/test scores). Admissions officers know all the tricks and can spot them in essay- generic essays, essays that are used for large numbers of applications, essays not written in your own voice, essays written when you are trying to figure out what they want to hear rather than telling your own story, use of vocabulary that is not normal for you and so on.

Some colleges allow you to choose the topic. Some ask you to answer one specific question. Many give you a choice of several general questions. Make sure you answer the question in your essay.

Many college essays ask you about you- and limit you to one page. The student needs to look at his/her life, select one element, event, experience or insight, and assign meaning to it. The student needs to prove the validity of that meaning, backing up and substantiating the view taken. The idea here is not to be solely different, noble or scholarly (although these qualities help), but rather to be vivid and clear, showing intensity, enthusiasm, insight and understanding.

After writing your first draft, look at it critically and ask: Could anyone else have written this essay? If the answer is yes, then it needs to be personalized more. Use specific examples to illustrate your point. Tell a story in order to hold their interest. You want

people sitting around the admissions table looking at your file and saying “Remember-that’s the student who...”. Can you picture them doing that with your essay? If not, keep working on it.

The typical admissions committee reader is looking at the essay on three levels:

- **Primary level-** The words are quickly skimmed to see how well it is written. The student needs to demonstrate his/her command of the English language. Spelling, grammar, syntax, and usage must be perfect. This implies the need for a proofreader. Your English teacher or parents can serve in this capacity.
- **Secondary level-** The admissions committee will consider the content of the essay. They are concerned with the logic of the argument and the writer's ability to say something of substance in a relatively economical and effective manner.

Tertiary level- The admissions committee is hoping to see something creative and original. This is where students can position themselves as unique, where they can tell the stories that will stick in the admissions committee's mind. It is very difficult to write humor, but when well done it can help the essay stand out. Do not try humor unless you can do it well. When using humor, always have a parent or teacher read it for appropriateness.

APPLICATION ESSAYS (Additional Resources)

- **Telling your story**
 - Focus- Don't try to tell too much or too many stories.
 - Answer the essay prompt- Don't try to make an essay written for one application work for a different question.
 - Use your own voice- Be yourself. If you are funny, write a funny essay. If you are serious, write a serious essay.
 - Tell your own story- If your story involves something you did that involved another person (e.g., tutoring a mentally disabled peer), make sure the reader ends up knowing more about you than they do about the challenges faced by the person you worked with.
 - Show, don't tell- Don't just give facts. Draw us in.
 - Make sure the real beginning is at the start of the w=essay, not buried in the middle. Start your essay with the kernel of the story.
 - Give yourself enough time- Good essays need time to percolate.
 - Don't use big words because you think they will impress. Avoid clichés.
 - Proofread several times- Then ask someone else to proofread as well.

- **Where do I start? What if I have writer's block?**

- Complete the rest of the application before starting the essay- This way you know what you've already said, you're not trying to fit everything you think you need to say into the essay, and completing the rest of the application first may trigger ideas that you would like to expand on or highlight in the essay.
- Ask those who know you best to share their memories of you- Funny, crazy, sad stories from friends and family remind you that you do have stories to tell, that you are memorable and they may trigger a good essay idea.
- Brainstorm- Don't write about the first idea that comes to mind. On a sheet of paper, write "I believe" at the top. Fill the sheet with a sentence on each line about ideas, people and truths you believe in. It can be silly (I believe if no one sees me eating ice cream then I won't gain weight) or deep (I believe helping others also helps ourselves). There are stories behind your personal beliefs.
- Don't read other people's essays until you have your own rough draft- It's important that you write in your own voice. Reading other people's work can cause you to try to imitate a certain format.
- Pretend your first draft is a letter to a close friend- You are most likely to talk in your own voice when talking to a friend. Write your first draft to a friend, not an admissions committee.

- **If asked "Why do you want to attend this college?"**

Colleges ask this part to judge the seriousness of your interest. Do you really want to come, or is this application a whim? They are looking for clues to your personality, interests and goals. By asking why their college is a good fit for you, they indirectly assess whether you are a good fit for them. So include in your essay the things that make you right for them in addition to the things that make them right for you.

- Brainstorm- Before you write, list 5-10 things you are looking for in any college, and then add a list of your most important goals and interests. Brainstorm how this particular college meets those.
- Be informed- Learn what you can about the college. If you visited, remember particular things from that, including conversations you had or places on campus that made an impression. Really look at their website- go beyond the admissions section, look at the faculty bios, read the school newspaper, etc.
- Be personal- You don't want to answer this question by writing about things that any applicant could say. "You have a wonderful science program" is too general. "I have a lifelong interest in zoology and Professor Smith's undergraduate research program will allow me to get direct experience with chimpanzees."

- Don't restate the obvious- their beautiful campus or ranking, the exciting city.
- Be specific- "I was impressed with your library when I visited" is generic. Mentioning the name of the library and exactly what impressed you is better.
- Try this test: If you can drop in the name of a different college and the essay still makes sense, then you've been too generic.

- **From the Director of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Virginia:**

"Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call McEssays- usually five paragraph essays that consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalizations...They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure, but they are boring. Sort of like a Big Mac. I have nothing against Big Macs, but the one I eat in Charlottesville is not going to be fundamentally different than the one I eat in Paris, Peoria or Palm Springs... A McEssay is not wrong, but it is not going to be a positive factor in the admissions decision. It will not allow the student to stand out."

