

The College Essay

Gaining entrance to just about *any* college continues to get harder as more and more applicants are applying for a limited number of spaces. The college essay can help to set a student apart.

It may be only 500 words, but the admissions essay portion of a college application is important. College admissions officials want to know that a student can write a respectable essay.

The essay also shows the admissions committee why a student is different from everybody else. It provides information about the student that test scores, grades, and extracurricular pursuits just cannot.

The essay can be used to describe a favorite activity, to tell a story about the student, or even a story about the student's dog. The goal is to use the essay to capture the attention of the reader and to show the reader that the student is extraordinary.

Writing the college application essay can be one of the most daunting parts of applying to college. What makes it so difficult is that students frequently wait until the last minute to begin writing the essay.

Writing about yourself asks for a different kind of writing than do most high school assignments. Admissions officials, however are interested in reading about you.

Authenticity is the key. Write from the heart.

Every once in a while a student is admitted to college because of an essay, but that event is rare. What your essay gives the reader is another reason to admit you. As the discussion of your application file

progresses, a solid and maybe even an interesting essay can only help your efforts at admission.

STEPS TO WRITING THE COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY

Step One: Brainstorming an Admissions Essay Topic

The most important part of a student's essay is the subject matter. Students should expect to devote about one to two weeks simply brainstorming ideas. To begin brainstorming a subject idea students should consider the following points:

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them to be?
- Does any skill or attribute distinguish you from others?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed?
- What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait?
- What have you done outside the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after?
- What are your most important extracurricular or community activities?
- What are your dreams for the future?

If these questions do not assist you, you may want to ask others for suggestions.

- **Ask your friends** or parents to write a list of five personality traits you exhibit.

- **Consider your childhood.** Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they shaped your upbringing.
- **Consider your role models.** Consider their admirable qualities and how experiences from your own life demonstrate those traits.

Coming up with an idea is difficult and requires time. Without a topic that you feel passionate about you risk writing like the 90% of applicants who will write boring essays.

Step Two: Selecting an Essay Topic

You must now consider topics that will enable you to synthesize your important personal characteristics and qualities into a written piece. You must also be sure to answer the question asked by the essay prompt.

Leaving a lasting impression on someone who reads dozens and dozens of essays is not an easy task.

Consider the following questions:

- Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance to your life, with which you can use vivid personal experiences as supporting details?
- Is your topic a gimmick? That is, do you plan to make yours funny or amusing? Nothing is worse than not laughing or not being amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing. This is almost always done poorly and is not appreciated.
- Will your topic only repeat in-

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formation listed elsewhere on your application? If so, select a new topic. Do not mention your GPA or standardized test scores in the essay.

- Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, then you should probably choose a different essay topic.
- Can you fully answer the question asked of you?
- Is your topic overdone?
- Will your topic turn off a large number of people? If you write on how everyone else should do this or that, or how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Democrats and Republicans are evil, that will not impress the reader.
- If you do address controversial topics, then acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.
- Will an admissions official remember your essay a day after reading it?

Step Three: Writing the Essay

In writing the essay you should keep in mind two goals:

1. To persuade the admissions officer that you are worthy of admission.
2. To make the admissions office aware that you are more than a GPA and standardized test score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality.

Unfortunately, there is no surefire step-by-step method to writing the essay. Every topic requires a different treatment. The following thoughts can be used to help guide you in your written response.

- **Answer the question.** Period.
- **Be original.** Anything can sound interesting if creatively developed.
- **Be yourself.** Admissions officials want to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not actions.
- **Don't *thesaurize* your composition.** Big words do not make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in an appropriate context.
- **Use imagery and clear vivid prose.** Appeal to the five senses.
- **Spend the most time on your introduction.** Expect admissions officials to spend 1 to 2 minutes reading your essay. Grab the reader from the beginning.
- **Use transition.** You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs.
- **Conclusions are critical.** The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. Avoid summary since it is a short essay and do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in summary, to conclude."
- **Give your draft to others.** Ask editors to read the essay. Do not ask too many people to read your essay. Too much feedback is not productive and will confuse you. The Writing Center in Harrison High School is staffed by English Language Arts teachers. They can assist you with this work.
- **Revise, revise, revise.**

OTHER TIPS

- Don't let anyone else write the essay. It must be your work.
- Type your essay.
- Conform to length guidelines.
- Check spelling and grammar.
- Avoid overly familiar quotes.
- Don't repeat lists of activities.
- Don't write about writing, SAT's or the college admissions process.
- Accentuate the positive, even in painful experiences.

A SAMPLING OF ESSAY QUESTIONS ASKED BY COLLEGES

Generally, there are three types of questions: The "you," the "why us," and the "creative." Here are tips and actual sample questions for each type. Don't assume that the questions are currently being used by a college (most colleges adjust questions annually).

THE "YOU" QUESTION

- Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application.
- How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?

THE "WHY US" QUESTION

- Why is (college name) a good college choice for you?
- Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study.

THE "CREATIVE" QUESTION

- Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others.
- Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.