

## *Three Steps to a Great College Essay*

### You, in 500 Words or Less

The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision, and spirit to the admissions committee. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. Don't let the chance disappear. Stand up straight and believe in yourself!

### The Essay Writing Process

Okay, boot up your computer and let's get to it. To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you'd use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

### Prewriting

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- **Brainstorm:** Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on strengths of personality, not things you've done. For example, you are responsible (not an "Eagle Scout") or committed (not "played basketball"). If you keep drifting toward events rather than characteristics, make a second list of the things you've done, places you've been, accomplishments you're proud of; use them for the activities section of your application.
- **Discover Your Strengths:** Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline:** Now, next to each trait, list five or six pieces of evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections:** Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?

## Drafting

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."
- The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- The conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

An application essay doesn't need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the Congress of Vienna, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main points.

There are three basic essay styles you should consider:

- **Standard Essay:** Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence. Choose things not apparent from the rest of your application or light up some of the activities and experiences listed there.
- **Less-Is-More Essay:** In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.
- **Narrative Essay:** A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two narrative paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

## Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool:** Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?
- **Feedback Time:** Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- **Edit Down:** Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- **Proofread Two More Times:** Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.

This article is based on information found in *The College Application Essay*, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

# College Essay Writing Tips



## Write an Effective Application Essay

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from the other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin.

## Dos:

### Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Try having someone read just your introduction to see what he thinks your essay is about.

Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—instead, it's about showing them who you are.

### Prove It

Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"
- **Better:** "During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

### Be Specific

Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

- **Okay:** "I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."
- **Better:** "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

## Don'ts

### Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

### Don't Write a Resume

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

- "During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."

### Don't Use 50 Words When Five Will Do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world."
- **Better:** "I'm a slob."

### Don't Forget to Proofread

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.





- "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

# The College Essay








Most selective colleges require you to submit an essay or personal statement. (*Pause for moaning and groaning.*) It may sound like a chore, and it will certainly take a substantial amount of work. But it's also a unique opportunity that can make a difference at decision time.

Admissions committees put the most weight on your high school grades and your test scores. However, selective colleges receive applications from many worthy students with similar scores and grades—too many to admit. So they use your essay (along with your letters of recommendation and extracurricular activities) to find out what sets you apart from the other talented candidates.

## Telling Your Story

-  So what does set you apart? You have a unique background, interests and personality. This is your chance to tell your story (or at least part of it).
-  The best way to tell your story is to write a personal, thoughtful essay about something that has meaning for you. Be honest and genuine, and your unique qualities will shine through.
-  Admissions officers have to read an unbelievable number of essays, most of which are banal and forgettable. Many students try to sound smart rather than sounding like themselves. Others write about a subject that they don't care about, but that they think will impress admissions officers.
-  You don't need to have started a company or discovered a lost Mayan temple. Colleges are simply looking for thoughtful, motivated students who will add something to the freshman class.

## The Mechanics of a College Essay

-  Write about something that's important to you. It could be an experience, a person, a book—anything that has had an impact on your life.
-  Don't just recount—reflect! Anyone can write about how they won the big game or the time they spent in Rome. When recalling these events, you need to give more than the play-by-play or itinerary. Describe what you learned from the experience and how it changed you.
-  Being funny is tough. A student who can make an admissions officer laugh never gets lost in the shuffle. But beware. What you think is funny and what an adult working in a college thinks is funny are probably different. We caution against one-liners, limericks and anything off-color.
-  Start early and write several drafts. Set it aside for a few days and read it again. Put yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer: Is the essay interesting? Do the ideas flow logically? Does it reveal something about the applicant? Is it written in the applicants' own voice?
-  What you write in your application essay or personal statement should not contradict any other part of your application—nor should it repeat it. This isn't the place to list your awards or discuss your grades or test scores.
-  Answer the question being asked. Don't reuse an answer to a similar question from another application.
-  Have at least one other person edit your essay—a teacher or college counselor is best. And before you send it off, check, check again, and then triple check to make sure your essay is free of spelling or grammar errors.



### Tackling Common Essay Questions

- The college application essay is your chance to show what makes you unique. Admission officers read hundreds of these every year.
- Don't write about the same subjects as every other applicant.



### Write about someone you admire.

- Many people write an ode to Gandhi, Mother Teresa or Martin Luther King, Jr. These leaders are admirable and heroic, but you shouldn't write about them unless you have a strong, genuine and very personal reason to do so.
- Otherwise, ask yourself what individual has actually had the greatest influence over your life. Describe the impact they've had on you. The more specific details you include, the better.



### Write about something you have read.

- This question is not asking for a book report! Don't just summarize the plot; detail why you liked this particular selection and what it meant to you.
- Your book choice should make it clear that you read outside of class—stay away from high school mainstays like *The Catcher in the Rye*.



### Why do you want to attend this school?

- Unless your real reason is something better left unsaid (hint: avoid mentioning keg parties), you should be truthful in responding to this question.
- Steer clear of generalities (e.g. "to get a good liberal arts education," "to broaden my knowledge") and stay specific (e.g. "I'm a future doctor and your science department has a terrific reputation").



### What will you be doing ten years from now?

- It's okay to be creative and ambitious, but don't be silly. And don't feel that you need to talk about the ways in which your college education will help you snag a dream job.



### Write about a meaningful activity.

- Careful—it's easy for this response to read as clichéd and uninspired. Don't just say that your service on student council was significant because it taught you the importance of effective leadership. Push yourself to really examine what experiences have been valuable to you. Maybe you learned more from your after-school job at a burger joint than you did as president of the student council. Admissions officers can tell when you're being genuine and when you're just saying what you think they want to hear.