

A Student Guide to How to Write College Application Essays

Why Essays Make a Difference

Everyone talks about S.A.T. scores, academic records, and extracurricular activities as key factors that affect your college admission. But, there is one more—the *college application essay*—that is often overlooked in importance, according to college counselors and admissions officers alike. Particularly in small and medium-sized schools, concerned with how an individual will fit into college life, applicants who present a lively, honest and self-motivated image are definitely helping their chance for acceptance. The essays make the facts in a folder come alive for us, explains the Dean of Admissions at Princeton University. “Admissions counselors don’t know the applicants personally. We haven’t taught them, coached them or counseled them. All we have is the image presented in the portfolio, and the essays do much to shape our impression.”

What makes a good impression? Enthusiasm, intelligence, talent, leadership, maturity, writing ability, creativity, and perseverance. All are high on the list, but no one expects to find them wrapped up in one person. In fact, the biggest pitfalls for applicants are fifty-cent words and promises of perfection, according to the Director of Admissions at Columbia College of Columbia University. “Too many people lose out by trying too hard to impress in the essay. What we want is honest insight into a real person and what is special about him or her.”

A good essay animates the writer as a real and valuable person, worth knowing. It conveys who you are and what you’ve accomplished, and fills in gaps in the statistics, explaining what four years of facts won’t show. This booklet should help you write such an essay. In it, you will find ideas for topics, strategies for getting started, tips for organizing and polishing drafts, and a checklist to consider throughout the writing process. You will find samples of what others have written and read what other college applicants have wanted to know. In short, you will find a variety of aids for introducing yourself effectively through writing, so that a reader who hasn’t met you will know what is special about you.

How to Approach Your Topic

Colleges may request one essay (like Brown) or three essays (like Princeton), or as many as eight essays (like Dartmouth) in order to learn more about what you are like and how well you write. Whatever the number, you will find that essays, for the most part, fall into four categories:

1. Tell us about yourself.
2. Tell us about an academic or extracurricular interest.
3. Tell us why you want to come to our college.
4. Show us the imaginative side of your personality.

Tell us about yourself...

The most common request—particularly if only one essay is required—is “tell us about yourself.” You will recognize it in many forms:

- a. “We are interested in anything of importance to you that will help us understand you: your abilities, your interests, your background, your aspirations.” (Yale University)
- b. “In reading and evaluating your application we hope to gain as complete a picture of you as is possible, but our knowledge of you is necessarily limited to the information provided to us. Why not, then, use this opportunity to tell us about anything you think we should know...” (Brown University)
- c. “If you were to describe yourself by a quotation, what would the quote be? Explain your answer.” (Dartmouth)

Since this kind of essay has no specific focus, applicants sometimes have trouble deciding which part of their lives to write about. To make the right choice, you must first assess what in your personality and accomplishments best illustrates the strong points of who you are, what you think and do, and what you want out of life. Your focus may be a commitment to ballet, or your skill in managing a household of brothers and sisters, or the intellectual growth you experience through an activity or personal contact, or your ability to bounce back in football after a season of injuries. Even minor events can be used to effectively express personality and writing style. One applicant, for example, wrote a fine essay on how she felt that first day in a guidance office, staring at rows of college catalogues on the shelf, and how much she’s learned since then. Another described how the tedium of working in a grocery store for four years, which he resented daily, actually gave him self-discipline, a sense of independence, and his college tuition!

Whatever subject you choose, remember that your aims are to show who you are, not just what you do, and how your experiences have shaped you as an individual. Beware the shopping lists of events—in chronological order—that produce dull structures like this:

I have read and enjoyed many books in high school. As a freshman, I read Julius Caesar, Tale of Two Cities, Wordsworth’s poetry, science fiction, short stories, and Song of Myself. As a sophomore, I liked the Odyssey, The Scarlet Letter, Oedipus Rex and more poetry which I really liked. In my junior year...

If you continued, you’d find out what this writer read in his junior and senior years, but not why these books were important to him. Had he limited his essay to a few key books that affected his personal and intellectual growth, the reader might have received more than a book list in prose form.

Remember, also, to accent the positive rather than the negative side of an experience. If you write about the effect of a death or divorce or illness in your life, tell—but don’t dwell—on your bad luck and disappointments. Instead, emphasize what you have learned from the experience, and how coping with adversity has strengthened you as an individual.

Tell us about an interest or idea...

To find out your academic and extracurricular interests, colleges often ask you to write on such topics as:

- a. "Discuss any reading you have done recently that has been particularly meaningful to you, and tell why." (Colby)
- b. "Describe an intellectual experience of the past two years that has given you great satisfaction..." (Amherst)
- c. "Which activity in or out of school is most meaningful to you? Why?" (Dartmouth)

Or they may provide a quote to stimulate your ideas:

- d. "Early in the century, John Dewey, philosopher and educator, wrote, 'It does not pay to tether one's thoughts to the post or use too short a rope.' Do you agree or disagree?" (Trinity)

If you find yourself faced with such a topic, remember that colleges are not interested in a plot outline of your favorite novel, a description of your favorite course, a running commentary of your hockey team's wins and losses, or a term paper on the life of John Dewey. They want to know about you: how you think and what you feel. Be sure to show how the book, experience, quotation, or idea you discuss reflects your outlook and aspirations.

Tell us why you want to come here...

Schools want to know why you want a higher education, what you hope to accomplish with it, and why you think that their school, in particular, is the right place for you. So, expect questions, both on the application and in the interview, such as: *Why do you think our college is a good place for you?* or *How do you expect our college to affect your growth as an individual?*

It is important to respond with specifics. Vague statements such as "Your college will give me the educational experiences I need to be what I want in life," is true for anyone and any school. You need reasons that apply to your particular college and a particular person, namely you. You will find these reasons when you read about the college (in guide books, catalogues, etc.), talk to students and alumni and visit the campus (if you possibly can), and you must be able to explain why you like what you see. Avoid following the footsteps of the misinformed applicant who wanted to major in business at Princeton (there is no business major) or the one who looked forward to a great sorority life at Smith (there are no sororities there).

Show us your imaginative side...

A final category of questions encourages you to express the "what if" rather than then "what is" side of life:

“Imagine the year is 1881. You may expect to live for another thirty-five years. What person would you most want to know well during that time? For what reasons?” (Swathmore College)

“If you were given the opportunity to spend an evening with any one person, living, deceased, or fictional, whom would you choose and why? (We are interested here not so much in whom you choose, but in how you use your choice to illustrate something important about yourself, your values, the kind of person you are, or hope to become.)” (University of Pennsylvania)

Here’s an opportunity to show off your originality both as a writer and as a person. You can be fanciful or serious in tone, as long as you are natural (neither stiff nor silly). If you relax and don’t overburden your imagination with too many mental instructions (“Be clever!” “Be profound!” “Be poetic!” “Be intellectual!”), you will find an honest voice and have fun with this kind of essay.

Getting Started (Prewriting)

Before you can begin writing an essay, you need to collect (and recollect) real data about yourself, to jot down notes about who you are, what you’ve accomplished, and where you are headed. Aside from its value for application essays, this kind of self-assessment at the end of a high school career can be personally satisfying and enlightening. It can also help you be articulate in college interviews, so that when asked about yourself, you can answer with specifics rather than with “Uhhhhhhh” or “I’m not really sure.”

To help you put your thoughts into words, try the suggestions, listed below. Work with as many ideas as you want in any order or length that you feel gives you the information you need. If you can start a summer journal, before the pressure of school starts to build, so much the better. In any case, allow at least a week of jottings before attempting essays. And don’t worry about spelling, punctuation, and the flow of ideas at this stage. These writings are for yourself.

1. List all your activities for the past four years, including (1) school activities, (2) community services, (3) other activities (lessons, work, travel), (4) awards and honors. Include years of participation and office held. (This list can also serve as an aid for people writing your recommendations and/or as mini-resume for jobs.)
2. Record major travel experiences. Note your strongest impressions and how they affected you. If you loved the Grand Canyon, for example, write down three specific reasons why, aside from the grandeur and beauty that everyone loves.
3. Think of one or two sayings that you’ve heard again and again around your house since childhood. How have they shaped your life?
4. Describe an accomplishment that you have had to struggle to achieve. Include what it was, how you tackled it, and how it changed you.
5. List any shortcomings in your school record and explain why they occurred. If you could relive the last four years, what would you change and how?

6. What personality traits do you value most in yourself? Choose a few and jot down examples of how each has helped you.

Because these responses are for yourself—and no one else—feel free to put down single words, phrases, or whole paragraphs in whatever form they come to you. As long as they help you remember specifics rather than generalities, you will have what you need to write and talk about myself.

Writing First Drafts **(Brainstorming)**

How you approach your first draft depends on whether you are usually an explorer or a pre-planner when you write. Explorers discover ideas as they go, searching for meanings first and worrying about logic, order, and form in later drafts. Pre-planners, on the other hand, want to know what they will say before they begin. As a result, they have a tougher time starting, often pacing around for a week or more saying, “I don’t know what to write about.” Only when they think they know do pre-planners begin, usually with an outline followed by a draft they expect to be good.

You might find it beneficial to combine these two strategies: relax about first drafts, like the explorer, but give some thought to your essay before writing, like the pre-planner. To do this, try the following steps:

First: Allow yourself “thinking” time between the jottings described in the previous section and the first draft. Ideas will perk inside without your knowing it, and you will find that when you start writing, your thoughts will have some shape or form already.

Second: Try a freeform outline; it allows you to explore possible ideas without the need to be organized or logical prematurely. Unlike the formal outline, freeform listings include everything you *might* want to say about a topic. You don’t decide which ideas are good or not, or what order they should be in, until afterwards.

Third: Talk about possible topics with friends or parents. Short conversations can help you discover what you most want to express and why. Don’t go into great detail (save your energy for writing), and you’ll find that you have more words to work with after these exchanges.

Fourth: Set aside a block of time (at least an hour) to see what happens on a blank page. Staring into space until an inspiration comes will produce more essays, more easily, than running around panicked about what you will write about when you sit down

Sharpening Your Focus

Once you’ve completed your draft, you need to decide which sections are working and which are not, and to make changes accordingly. If you just recopy your draft neatly, fixing spelling and punctuation but not reworking ideas, chances are that you have a shapeless presentation of events rather than a focused essay with a theme.

To decide what to emphasize, read over your draft and ask yourself, “What’s the main thing I want to say?” Summarize it in a sentence and then add, combine and rearrange ideas with this in mind. One girl, for example, wrote a first draft about three key factors in her life: a six-month stay in France, a strong desire to be an actress, and a supportive family life. But in reading it over, she realized it rambled dreadfully. So, after showing it to a friend and her English teacher, she focused the second draft on her trip to France, but showed how the visit enhanced her desire to be an actress and explained how her family life had prepared her to deal with adjusting to a foreign culture.

To sharpen your focus, you may have to cut or condense sections that are important to you. One writer, who began by writing how piano affected her life from age 7 to 17, gave equal time, in draft one, to her mother’s nagging and the effect of practicing on other parts of her life—lacrosse, studying, and so on. But, in rereading this draft, she realized that her best sections showed how piano had helped her mature, and that the tensions with her mother, although part of the process, would be best condensed into a single, strong paragraph.

Putting On a Reader’s Hat (Audience)

Sometimes you finish a draft and know immediately what needs changing and how to do it, but often, these insights require more time and distance from your work. You must shift hats from writer to reader before you know how to best revise. There are several ways to do this:

- 1) Let your draft sit for a few days (or at least, a few hours) without looking it over.
- 2) Read it aloud. Your ear will pick up problems (dull sections, awkward phrasing, etc.) and you will stumble on words. Mark these spots you will have most of your problem areas.
- 3) Ask yourself these questions: Where am I bored? Where am I confused? Where have I gone off the subject? What details have I left out that are still in my head? Does my introduction hint at what is coming and make me want to read on?
- 4) Finally, trust your intuition, particularly if it makes you feel uncomfortable.

As one professional writer told me, “If you feel it’s wrong, it’s wrong.” Your intuition as a reader doesn’t always know how to change a problem, but it points you down the right track

Showing Your Draft to Others

Another way to improve your draft is to get responses from others. You know what you intended to say, but the reader can tell you if, in fact, your writing says it. Show it to more than one person, if possible. Otherwise, it’s hard to assess the opinion. If one reader is confused by a section, it may be his problem, but if two readers are confused by the same section, it’s your problem.

Ask people whose opinion you respect. If they are experienced writers, teachers, or editors, so much the better, but any thoughtful person—a friend, a parent, even a

honest younger brother or sister—can provide helpful answers if you make specific requests: *Tell me what you think I'm trying to say. Tell me how I come across as a person. Tell me where you are confused. Tell me where I need more detail. Tell me where you are bored. And, most important, TELL ME THE PARTS YOU LIKE BEST!*

Knowing the strong points of a draft can be as valuable as knowing what falls flat.

What you want readers to avoid are vague generalizations. Comments such as “Oh, that’s really good!” or “I’m not sure I see your point,” don’t tell you enough. To make changes, you must find out what specific parts are good and why, and what points are clear. At this stage, you also want readers to focus more on meaning and tone than on mechanics. If a reader copy-edits your test prematurely, pointing out your grammar and spelling problems, you may end up with a paper that is mechanically perfect but doesn’t do justice to you or your theme.

Some people are concerned that showing a draft to others makes it less their own. Only if you let others write (or rewrite) it for you is this a problem. If you remember that readers give responses and make suggestions, but that you, the writer, make the decisions, your writing will reflect your thoughts as honestly as if you write in isolation.

As Princeton University’s admissions counselor points out, “Besides improving your clarity of expression, others can tell you what kind of image you are presenting. By showing a draft to someone and asking, ‘Is it accurate? Does it reflect my strengths realistically?’ you can make sure your writing reflects the real you.

Polishing Final Drafts (Revision)

If possible, wait a week or more to write a final draft so you will have the energy needed to pay attention to details. So far, you have been concerned with the overall text: Does it have a main idea? Is it coherent? Do ideas relate to one another? Is my tone natural? Does my introduction do justice to my paper? Now, you are ready to focus on details of phrasing, spelling, punctuation, and grammar.

To write a fine essay, you need to smooth out as many of the rough edges as possible. Here are some steps to consider:

- 1) Read your work aloud again and listen for stumbling.
- 2) Consider any of these four ways to make changes: add more detail; cut away repetitive phrases; combine sentences for a smoother flow of ideas; write in another way.
- 3) Look up any word that looks strange. Your intuition will spot 95 percent of the errors even if you don’t know what the correct spelling should be.
- 4) If a word, sentence or paragraph bothers you, write two new versions. One of them will please you.
- 5) Ask someone to proofread your essay for you.

How carefully you polish your essays determines how effective it will be. All too often, what could be a first-rate essay creates a negative impression because of too many rough spots. As the Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania points out, “Something that looks good sounds better. Sloppy writing, misspellings, ideas that haven’t been tied together, reflects a lack of interest, and an I-don’t-care attitude.” So,

allow the time and effort to show that you do care, by eliminating the cross-outs, misspellings, poor transitions, and awkward phrasing that detract from even the liveliest of essays. Unless your handwriting is a job to behold or the college requests a handwritten effort, you might consider typing your essays. Handwritten essays may seem more personal, but a well-typed paper is easier to read.

A Checklist of Tips

Throughout the writing process—from first to final draft—consider (and reconsider) these four tips for good writing.

Keep Your Audience in Mind

Remember that you are introducing yourself to a college (not a roommate, a psychiatrist, or *True Confessions* magazine). Colleges want to know:

- 1) Your intellectual and creative interests;
- 2) Your personal strengths;
- 3) How well you write;
- 4) What's special about you?

Try for essays that provide positive but realistic insights into *all* these areas.

Beware of “Engfish”

Writers who try to impress readers with long-winded sentences are “Engfishing”, a common practice in school, according to a well-known writing teacher. It's also common on college application essays, according to admissions officers. An Engfisher will write: “I have always considered attending Podunk U ever since I gave serious thought to my future aspirations.” Yet that same person would say to a classmate, “When I visited my friend's classes last year, I realized that I really liked the seminar system and independent projects at Podunk.” To avoid Engfish, relax, be natural and ask yourself, “Am I being honest and direct?”

Show, Don't Just Tell

Specific details make writing and the writer come alive. Generalizations without details fall flat, for the reader learns so little. Compare these two 28-word statements. Which one makes you want to read on?

I have always wanted to study law because it is an interesting, important and significant field that is of interest to me both now and in the future...

Ever since I won the Moot Court in seventh grade, I've wanted to study law. Four years of summer work for our local judge has heightened this interest.

The first statement just tells that the writer likes law, the second shows why.

Leave Enough Time

Good writing does not happen in one draft. Time and outside responses are needed to produce an essay in which ideas flow, meanings are clear, forms are correct. Seniors who have complete the essay writing process for college applications all offer the same advice: Beware of the rush job. Those who wrote frantically as the deadline fell now look back on their essays and see exactly how they could have improved them, *if* they had allowed themselves enough time.

Some Final Assists: Sample Essay Passages

Applicants say that if only they could see how others start, the rest would be easy. So, here are four beginnings—each with its own approach, style, and tone—to help you on your way. Three trace experience over several years, one focuses on the present. Three are serious in tone; one is more light-hearted. All convey a feeling that a genuine person is behind the words: one who is lively, thoughtful, positive, and able to handle life, including the next four years at college!

This beginning presents a serious side, but with a light touch...

My friends tell me sometimes that I think too much. And perhaps I do. They say that I am too busy analyzing to ever relax and enjoy things, that I should stop thinking and start doing. They may be right. I guess I tire them with my theories and revelations. I was talking to a friend at a party several weeks ago, and I told her that in a way the party symbolized Pascal's theory of the duality of man. She laughed. I blushed. She went to get more beer.

I find myself pondering at the strangest times. I remember forming an idea about my own insecurities once as I stepped onto the ice before a hockey game. I was at a rock concert this summer, and I remember seriously trying to determine why I had to stand up and sing to enjoy the music while my brother only needed to sit back and listen. Of course, most of the concert had slipped by unnoticed as I thought these things. I find myself gliding in a trance through stop signs or walking in entirely the wrong direction. They get in the way sometimes, these thoughts, but I can't help it; I love to think. I derive more pleasure from thinking than from almost anything else. It's the traffic tickets for going through stop signs that I could do without...

This high school senior, in need of a "significant experience" found that the suggestion—"Think of a quote you always hear around your house and show how it affected you"—gave her a topic: piano practicing...

The question, "Julie, did you practice the piano?" has gone in and out of my ears at least once a day since I was six years old. But, at six, those words didn't bother me, because my only ambition was to be a famous pianist, or at least as good as my seven-year-old friend. However, when the reality of the three-hour practice sessions struck at

the age of fourteen, the most important things in my life then included boys, socializing, and tennis, not only the eighty-eight black and whites of the keyboard. As a result, instead of being an inspiration, those six awful words became a daily curse from a nagging mother; and it was not until my junior year in high school that I finally realized the important part piano had played in developing my personality.

It was because of piano that, between the ages of fourteen and sixteen, I was forced to acquire a sense of responsibility—with my parents' help. At first, I resented them because at fourteen I was going through the stage when I thought that I was always right and they were always wrong. I took my mom's nagging about the piano as an insult to my precious adolescent pride, claiming that I could run my own life. But, in fact, I couldn't and ended up acquiescing resentfully to the task—missing those dreamed about Saturday morning shopping and after-school get-togethers with friends, just for practicing and feeling very left out...

This writer explains with insight and lively detail why her poor grades didn't become A's and B's until her junior year in high school...

It wasn't until the beginning of my junior year in high school that I seriously considered the idea of going to college. It wasn't that my family was not college-oriented. Quite the opposite, it was assumed from earliest elementary school days that we would all go to college—if not Princeton at least an equivalent.

From the start, my older sisters were excellent students. We all went to the same nursery school, Miss Mason's, where they taught reading to three and four-year-olds. Laura, Sarah, and Jenny were star readers. When I came along, Miss Mason assumed I'd be another Mcphee whiz, but I wasn't. In fact, I hated nursery school. I remember my mother carrying me in each time I went (that wasn't too often because I objected so violently). My mother worked in the Head Start Program at the time and I begged to go there instead. And better yet was a chance to stay at home. When I try to analyze why, I can remember only vague things like wanting to be with my cats and my "Wendy" dolls. I liked being read to but I never had any interest in reading. Then I say *Gone with the Wind*. I was twelve years old and wanted to live that story. I read the book four times. My father bought me a copy of the original script, my stepmother made me hoop dresses, and my grandmother curled my hair, all in hopes of sustaining my interest. No luck. When we took family trips, all my sisters had a pile of paperbacks in their tote bags. I played cars, put together puzzles, made brownies, or sent away for samples from magazines...

A trip to France was the focus of this writer's essay

I became a member of the Calvel family during the latter half of my junior year. I was an American abroad on a study program, and they were a French family whose home was to become mine. The experience of living with a new family in a foreign culture added new dimension to my life and broadened my perspective as well as confronted me with obstacles I had never faced before.

Communication was a primary barrier. I had always been a very verbal person, but suddenly I had to convert my many thoughts into a different language. "Ah, que tu fais des gestes!" remarked my classmates at the lycee, in reference to the many faces and

gestures I made while expressing an idea. Yet, I was determined to speak and therefore I did.

None of these applicants tries to appear as a Superman or woman, but rather as a real person, assessing ideas, events and interests—past and present—with insight, maturity, and personality. Each writer conveys a reason for writing other than just trying to impress an admissions office or fill in a black space. That conviction is essential if you want to make an impression. If you think of an essay as an opportunity to say something that you *want* to say—not just what you think we expect you to say—than your personality, as well as your ideas and experiences, will come across with energy and naturalness, and that's what the essay should do.

Words worth remember as you put pen to paper.