

Tips for a Great College Essay

Why write an essay?

The purpose of the essay is to convince admission officers whom you've never met, in less than ten minutes, that you would be a good match for their colleges.

At the most basic level, it allows admission officers to evaluate your communication and writing skills. In addition, the essay allows admission officers to discover more about you as a person – a side of you not shown by statistics like grades and SATs. The essay gives information about your history, attitudes, interests and creativity; it gives a sense of your values and goals. What admission officers are doing is creating a community...looking to see how you would fit in that community, what would you bring to that community and what sets you apart.

How the essay is evaluated

- Is your writing mechanically sound? Is your writing style comfortable? Can you write a good sentence? Can you write a good paragraph? Do you address the question asked?
- Can you form a thesis? Can you discuss a theme? Is your argument logical? Can you get in and out of the essay with some finesse?
- Do you write with style, nuance and creativity? Do you write with a distinctive voice?

Choosing a topic

Choose the essay topic that appeals to *you* most. The topic is less important than your delivery. Remember: there is no right or wrong answer. The college just wants to know who you are and how your mind works.

Bad essay topics - there are bad essays, not bad topics; but be careful about the following:

- Winning or losing the big game.
- Death of a pet.
- Friendship problems.
- Religious or philosophical epiphanies.
- Telling troubles to a journal.
- Anything that suggests that you don't see the world beyond high school.
- Simple solutions to world problems.
- Essays in poor taste.
- Parent-bashing.
- Cynicism almost never plays well.
- Remember, be sure to answer the question!

The first draft

- Narrow your topic and try to be as specific as possible.
- Brainstorm – scribble down everything you can think of about your chosen topic. Pick out the good stuff and work it into a brief outline.
- Write a rough draft. Read it. Read it again - out loud.
- Ask yourself: Have I focused on the topic? Have I answered the question? Is it specific and detailed? Have I written in my own voice?

Polishing the essay

- Eliminate the first sentence (or two)...that allows the essay to “start fast.” A good opening sentence will hook the reader. If *you’re* bored, the reader will be bored.
- Add details to make it richer and more interesting.
- Be revealing...let us know things about you, but don’t be confessional.
- Be careful with sentimentality...use it sparingly.
- Beware of trying to impress us with what you think we want to hear.
- Don’t try to “prove” your intelligence by choosing a topic you think makes you sound smart. Avoid sophisticated words when simpler ones will suffice.
- Don’t be afraid to use your imagination. Don’t be afraid to be unconventional. But, don’t be weird just for the sake of being weird.
- Be concise. Ask yourself: “Have I avoided repetitiveness? Did I make my points directly and without a lot of unnecessary padding?”
- Show; don’t tell. Don’t just list what you have done – detail it with action words. Make your writing come alive to the reader. Use quotations wisely – to move the story along or prove a point.
- Start early!
- Ask a teacher, parent or friend to read your second draft. Ask them: “Is it interesting from the word go? Does it sound like me? Was it fun to read?” Listen to what they have to say, but don’t let someone else rewrite the essay for you.
- Read what the application says about essay length, but don’t just write to fill space.

Navigational hazards

The little details aren’t the most important part of the essay, but you *are* trying to make a good impression. You don’t want the admission committee to think you’re a sloppy, careless writer.

- *Always proofread* before producing the final draft. If you are sick and tired of the essay, let someone else proof it. Check for spelling errors. Spellcheck won’t catch everything!
- Check your word choice by reading out loud. What looks good on paper may sound awkward or, in fact, say nothing.
- Make sure that if you are including the name of the college in the essay, it’s the correct school. *Wesleyan* doesn’t want to know you’ve always wanted to go to *Smith*.
- If you are going to take risks (which is OK), be sure you know your subject matter and feel comfortable with that style of writing. For instance, poetry is often risky.
- Don’t try to inject humor if you’re not funny. Be careful even if you *are* funny...it often doesn’t translate in writing.
- Remember: a college essay is not a research paper. In fact, most often students are asked to evaluate a significant experience or achievement that has special meaning. That’s a very personal question.

The biggest mistake of all

- Don’t plagiarize: admission officers have read all the books and seen all the websites.

The good news

- Don’t stress too much – write what you feel, do it well... and we’ll like you!