

Practical Advice on Writing the College Application Essay

Top Five Most important Points

- 1) The essay can make the difference in whether you are accepted, waitlisted/deferred or rejected.
- 2) Start early; have essays drafts ready before the senior year starts
- 3) The essay is error-free; ask two or three grammarians to proofread
- 4) Yawn. The essay must be interesting to read. Admissions officers read hundreds, perhaps thousands of essays . . . you need to stand out for the right reasons. Be memorable, but not shocking or outlandish.
- 5) Optional essays are mandatory if you want to be accepted.

Topics/Styles to Avoid

- Trips or vacations (unless there is something significant—life-changing)
- Adversity (many times these essays give reasons for colleges to reject an applicant); if you select the adversity essay, be very careful
- Essays that match the applicant to the college because of climate, prestige/reputation, friends, parents, fun or some other shallow reason.
- Influential books, people, or events that are nothing more than a report from Wikipedia.
- Major catastrophes (unless you have firsthand experience)
- Humor that isn't funny or is offensive to a subgroup
- Going over the word limit
- Essays written by parents or a college counselor
- Essays published in books and merely copied or paraphrased
- Avoid gimmicks
- Do not exaggerate
- Avoid getting too personal; highly personal information used for shock value seldom works
- Avoid bragging or an arrogant tone
- Rehashing activities or something else in the application which could be inferred
- Making excuses (e.g., I have a low GPA because my parents watch reality TV every night)
- Avoid telling your life story in 500 words; go for the slice of life
- Overused topics or topics from books of essays
- Melodrama (“It was a dark, stormy night . . .”) or overuse of adjectives to the point that the nouns are an afterthought

Good Topics/Styles

- Essays that explain why you want to attend a particular school; matching the applicant to the school with good reasons why the applicant needs the school (carefully avoiding essays that could be constructed from just looking at brochures); the essay will most likely mention specific courses, programs or professors; lots of specifics needed for this essay
- Essays that demonstrate the applicant's stated passions or goals
- Influential books, people, or events: focus on how you were influenced
- Humor that is really funny.
- When approaching the "what do you do for fun" essay, consider constructive activities; avoid "hanging out" or video game playing.
- "Show, don't tell" – describe sensations, actions and dialogue
- Telling a story tends to work
- Work for a strong opening; otherwise the admission's officer may not read the entire essay
- Be yourself, use natural language (yes, use big words, but not words you have to look up to use)
- Write a fresh topic for every question
- Some of the best essays are about nothing; in other words, they are about small incidents or experiences because your effort to describe them actually reveals more about you

Essays that Admissions Officers Hate (courtesy of Elizabeth Wissner-Gross):

- Luxury tours
- Itinerary essays (places I have visited)
- Luxury Resort essays
- Travel Wish List
- Adversity Essay

Best Essays (courtesy of Elizabeth Wissner-Gross):

- "Why Do You Want to Come Here" essay
- "Make Your Mark" essay (demonstrating a deliberate track record to prove that your goals or ambitions are not just pipe dreams)
- "Most Meaningful Activity" (essay supports other statements made in the application)
- The "Describe a Person, Book, or Event That Influenced You Most" Essay
- The Humorous Essay
- "Describe Your Ideal Roommate Essay"
- Think metaphorically; demonstrate the ability to be a big-picture thinker

Different Types of Essays & Tips

The “Why Do You Want To Come Here” Essay

- Explain why you are a good match for the school
- The school is looking for your educational direction and career goals
- Share how much you know about the school, using specifics from a tour or sitting in on a class (names, courses/programs, facilities)
- Demonstrate a concrete knowledge of the school
- If possible, demonstrate why you need this school (e.g. it has a program that only this particular school offers or a professor who is a leading expert in something about which you are passionate)
- Avoid clichés that could come from campus brochures or websites
- Do not try to flatter the school, that often backfires
- When visiting campuses, take notes for essay material for the schools to which you believe you will eventually apply

The “Make-Your-Mark” Essay

- This essay may be about where you see yourself in ten years or if you were to write an article about yourself in twenty years
- The tone should be upbeat and ambitious
- Colleges want students who are eager to achieve or change the world in a positive way
- Make sure your ambitions are supported by your interests (e.g. the person who wants to cure cancer should have a keen interest in the sciences)

The “Most Meaningful Activity” Essay

- Make sure this is an activity where you have demonstrable success
- Make sure the activity you mention is something the college has (i.e. if you say playing soccer and the school does not have a soccer team, it won't work)
- Make sure to focus on “why” the activity is meaningful-

The “Describe a Person, Book, or Event That Influenced You Most” Essay

- Focus on “how” and “why”; this is not a book report
- Aim to provide a sense of values, sophistication and world awareness
- Choose the topic carefully if doing a family member; the story must be compelling and not ordinary; it is “okay” to choose someone famous and not mom or dad, but do the research
- Avoid major catastrophes unless your experience is firsthand (e.g. I spent a month in New Orleans helping clean up after Hurricane Katrina)
- Make sure the focus of the essay is you and not the subject; the reader needs to learn more about you and not the subject
- Choosing shows preferences, values and how you think (creativity, sense of humor and depth of knowledge)

The Humorous Essay

- Ask someone who will be honest with you to read your essay to see if really is funny
- Avoid humor at someone else's (or subgroup's) expense; do not offend anyone (gender, ethnicity, race, religion, sexual orientation, nationality, disability, economic standing, or level of education)
- Avoid inside jokes that outsiders would not find humorous
- Better be funny
- Humor often has a generation gap; make sure an adult finds it humorous as well
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The “Describe Your Ideal Roommate” Essay

- Most people seek roommates who are similar to themselves
- The essay still needs to be about you and not the fictional roommate
- Do not offend any subgroups

The “What Do You Do For Fun” Essay

- This is serious—not fun
- Focus on constructive activities that will support your areas of interest (e.g. a potential engineering student may like to spend a lot of time building, fixing things or experiments in your basement)
- Good answers might include competitive sports, discretionary reading, the arts
- Be careful about choosing an activity for which the school does not have a team (shows a lack of research about the school)
- Avoid video games, card games, gambling, hanging out, spectator sports, junky novels, or anything that might make you look lazy or unscholarly)

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you

- Focus on intellectual risks if choosing a risk
- Do not discuss any obstacles that have not been overcome
- The result should always be positive
- Do not discuss anything illegal or for which law enforcement was involved
- Do not go for shock value
- Do not let the description of the experience overcome the significance of the experience for you
- Instead of trying to be dramatic, be interesting

Unusual Circumstances in Your Life

- Do not divulge highly personal information (drug addiction, physical abuse, eating disorders, sessions with a therapist, etc.)
- Avoid shock value
- Overcoming adversity to the point where you appear to be spoiled or insensitive to others
- Avoid the “pity” parties

How You Express Your Interest, Curiosity or Excitement about Math/Science/Engineering

- Be interesting
- Be honest
- Consider telling a story
- Avoid the tried and true physics projects (Trebuchet, mousetrap car, bridges, etc. that high schools all over the country are doing)
- Avoid stories of building bombs in your garage or basement

Tell Use Something Else About Yourself We Cannot Learn Elsewhere from Your Application

- Think of something different: Why I enjoy reading E. B. White or Why American Idol is good for America
- Quotations are always good if they are thoughtful; make sure you focus on being analytical
- It is okay to provide a slice of life rather than the whole story: a great essay might be observations on a bus ride to Mock Trial
- Make sure the essay reflects you and not an idealized version of yourself
- Avoid name-dropping (knowing someone famous probably isn't going to be great essay material unless you are with that person all the time and then you would want to use great discretion)

Using a favorite quotation from an essay or book you have read in the last three years as a jumping off point, tell us about an event or experience that helped you define one of your values or changed how you approach the world.

- Make sure the essay actually responds to the quotation or prompt used
- Think deeply and metaphorically
- Choose your quotation carefully; select a writer who is reputable
- Put the topic down for awhile; can you see a different perspective after a couple of weeks? Will adults respond to the quotation as you did? Could anything be misinterpreted?