

Essay Writing Workshop



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Purpose of the College Essay



- Personalize the application
 - Shows who you are as a person vs numbers (transcripts and test scores)
 - Sets the tone for your application
 - Shows how you will contribute to the campus community
 - Can demonstrate fit
- Writing sample
 - The essay is evidence of your writing abilities – they want to see that you can write in a clear and organized way
 - No matter your intended major/career, ability to communicate in writing is key
 - Ability to follow instructions (proper word count, answering the given prompt, etc.)

Purpose of the College Essay



An essay doesn't need to consist of a dramatic story. The goal is to write about yourself and create a bond with the reader that will stand out from your numbers.



"I want to show my colleges I'm well-rounded, so I wrote a poem in Spanish about how chess club has made me a better quarterback."

How Essays are Used in Admission Decisions



Table 16. Percentage of colleges attributing different levels of importance to factors in the admission decision: 2013

Factor	Considerable importance	Moderate importance	Limited importance	No importance
Grades in college prep courses	81.5%	10.4%	7.4%	.7%
Strength of curriculum	63.7	24.8	8.1	3.3
Admission test scores (SAT, ACT)	58.3	29.5	10.0	2.2
Grades in all courses	51.5	37.4	8.9	2.2
Essay or writing sample	22.2	37.8	22.6	17.4
Student's demonstrated interest	20.1	34.0	23.9	22.0
Counselor recommendation	15.9	43.9	24.7	15.5
Class rank	15.2	35.3	33.5	16.0
Teacher recommendation	14.1	43.9	28.3	13.8
Extracurricular activities	9.6	40.6	33.9	15.9
Interview	7.8	21.2	27.9	43.1
Subject test scores (AP, IB)	7.5	30.6	32.5	29.5
Portfolio	6.4	9.4	34.3	49.8
SAT II scores	6.0	10.9	23.7	59.4
State graduation exam scores	3.4	10.1	28.4	58.2
Work	2.6	17.1	51.3	29.0

Source: NACAC Admission Trends Survey, 2013.

College Essay Question Prompts



Many colleges now days ask a specific topic to their applicants. Most specific college essay questions fall into three main categories:

1. **The You** - the college is asking for more detailed information about yourself
2. **The Why Us** - the college is wanting to know why you are choosing them and why they in turn should choose you
3. **The Creative Question** - this is often a chance to get a better sense of a student's personality

College Essay Question Prompts



1. “Tell us about why you would be a good fit for this school and why you have decided to seek out a college education.”
2. "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?"
3. “You have just completed your 300 page autobiography. Please submit page #217.”

College Essay Quick Tips



#1 - Be Yourself

- **Do** write in your own voice. Admissions officers have seen it all. They just want to read something authentic and genuine.
- **Don't** write what you think college admissions people want to hear or make up stories/exaggerate situations.

An essay doesn't have to be about a life-changing event to be interesting. Sometimes the simple things in life will give the reader insight into who you are!

College Essay Quick Tips



#2 - Choose a Topic That Will Highlight You

- **Do** share your personal story and thoughts, take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren't covered in other parts of the application, like your high school records.
- **Don't** focus on the great aspects of a particular college, the amount of dedication it takes to be a doctor or the number of extracurricular activities you took part in during high school.

College Essay Quick Tips



#3 - Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

- **Do** focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are. Remember that the readers must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Also make sure your essay answers ALL aspects of the question.
- **Don't** try to cover too many topics. This will make the essay sound like a resume that doesn't provide any details about you.

College Essay Quick Tips



#4 - Show, Don't Tell

- **Do** include specific details, examples, reasons and so on to develop your ideas. A good essay is descriptive. It uses all five senses and makes the reader feel as if they were there.
- **Don't** simply state a fact to get an idea across. For example, don't tell me that you're an empathetic person. Show me through your story.

College Essay Quick Tips

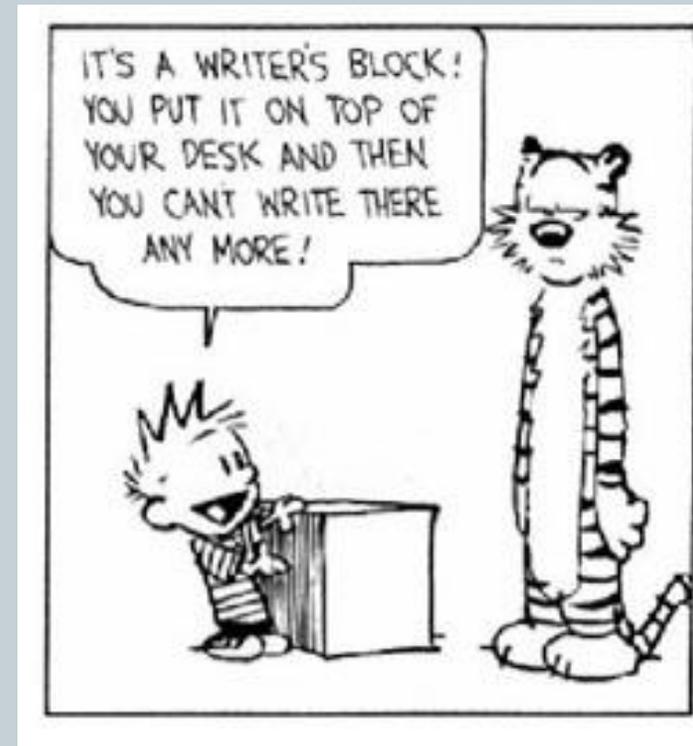


#5 - Proofread!

- **Do** ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes. You should also ask the person who proofreads your essay if the writing sounds like you.
- **Don't** turn your essay in without proofreading it, and don't rely only on your computer's spell check to catch mistakes (from vs form, etc.). Also, double check the name of the school in your college essay.

A Word on Writer's Block

- Exercise:
 - Put the application away and sit down in a quiet room with a notepad and pen.
 - Set a timer for fifteen minutes.
 - Sit down and write for the entire fifteen minutes.
 - Don't think about spelling or grammar or even writing about a college essay.
 - Once you are finished put it away for an hour and come back to it.
 - Read it and see if anything stands out to you.
 - Now do it again on that one sentence that stood out. Pretty soon you will have your college essay topic.



Common Application Questions and Tips



- Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
Be thoughtful about what story you share, the information in it, and how it truly describes you as a person
- The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
This is a good time for a college to see how you handle something that doesn't go correctly. You tread a careful line here of spinning it into a positive, but not being fake.
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
Be careful of an overly controversial topic. Pick something that will be personal, more local to you, so that we know more about you than just your views on one topic.

Common Application Questions and Tips



- Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
This runs the risks of being focused only on the issue rather than the actual answer. Can be an iffy topic based on the moral dilemma. This question rarely gets answered.
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.
This answer should be less about the event itself and more about the actual transition that took place. The focus on how it made you grow up is what the college is interested in.

College Essay Steps



- Know yourself and your audience
 - Brainstorm
 - Organize your thoughts and write a draft
 - Get feedback
 - Rewrite and get feedback again!
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- When you are finished you should have a well polished essay, that sounds like you and shares something about yourself that the admissions committee hasn't gotten from your application.

Questions?

