



General College Admission Essay Tips

When You Write Your Essay...

1. Start early. Leave plenty of time to revise, reword, and rewrite. Write several drafts and revisit your essay after a few days. You can improve on your presentation.
2. Read the directions carefully. You will want to answer the question as directly as possible, and you'll want to follow word limits exactly. Express yourself as briefly and as clearly as you can.
3. Tell the truth about yourself. The admission committee is anonymous to you; you are completely unknown to it. Even if you run into a committee member in the future, he/she will have no way of connecting your essay (out of the thousands read) to you.
4. Focus on an aspect of yourself that will show your best side. You might have overcome some adversity, worked through a difficult project, or profited from a specific incident. A narrow focus is more interesting than broad-based generalizations.
5. Go beyond writing about an impacting event, achievement, greatest asset, etc. Add reflection and tell why this made you who you are or changed you.
6. Tie yourself to the college. Be specific about what this particular school can do for you. Your essay can have different slants for different colleges.
7. Speak positively. Negatives tend to turn people off.
8. Write about your greatest assets and achievements, but balance with humility.
9. Proofread! Your essay should be free of typos and grammar errors. Use more than spell check. Your computer may miss words that are spelled correctly but out of context.
10. Share your essay with your AVID teacher and/or counselor. Have them edit and give you suggestions.

But...

1. **DON'T** repeat information given elsewhere on your application. The committee has already seen it—and it looks as though you have nothing better to say.
2. **DON'T** write on general, impersonal topics—like the nuclear arms race or the importance of good management in business. The college wants to know about you.
3. **DON'T** use the college essay to excuse your shortcomings. (It would give them additional attention.)
4. **DON'T** use clichés.
5. **DON'T** go to extremes: too witty, too opinionated, or too “intellectual.” Be yourself.
6. **DON'T** plagiarize. College admissions representatives have electronic means of verifying whether your essay is written by you or if you copied someone else. Plagiarizing is the quickest way of ruining all chances of admission.

Remember:

- The college essay is YOURS. If it looks like Madison Avenue, the admission committee will probably assume that it is your mother's or your father's (or another adult's) work.
- A “gimmick” essay rarely goes anywhere. The committee may be amused but unimpressed with your candidacy.
- Write a serious essay, from the bottom of your heart, in the most mature manner possible.



College Essay Topics

Read through the topics listed below. All are topics that have been required on college admission forms. Choose the one that you feel you can answer best. Write a 2–3 page essay developing the topic.

- What have you undertaken or done on your own in the last year or two that has nothing to do with academic work? (Northwestern)
- Imagine that you have the opportunity to travel back through time. At what point in history would you like to stop and why? (Swarthmore)
- What is the best advice you ever received? Why? And did you follow it? (University of Pennsylvania)
- Select a creative work—a novel, a film, a poem, a musical piece, a painting or other work of art—that has influenced the way you view the world and the way you view yourself. Discuss the work and its effect on you. (New York University)
- What do you think has been the most important social or political movement of the 20th century? Do you share a personal identification with this cause? (Trinity College, CT)
- If you were to look back on your high school years, what advice would you give to someone beginning their high school career? (Simmons)
- It has been said [by Andy Warhol] that “in the future everyone will be famous for fifteen minutes.” Describe your fifteen minutes. (New York University)
- What single adjective do you think would be most frequently used to describe you by those who know you best? Briefly explain. (Stanford)
- Describe an intellectual experience of the past two years that has given you great satisfaction. (Amherst)
- If you were to describe yourself by a quotation, what would the quote be? Explain your answer. (Dartmouth)
- Tell us about the neighborhood that you grew up in and how it helped shape you into the kind of person you are today. (Yale and the University of Chicago)
- You’ve just written a 300-page autobiography. Send us page 217. (University of Pennsylvania)
- If you could be a “fly on the wall” to observe any situation (historical, personal, or otherwise) describe what you would choose to observe and why. What would you hope to learn and how would it benefit you? (University of Pittsburgh)
- If we could only admit one more student to the University of Pittsburgh, why should it be you? (University of Pittsburgh)
- Describe a risk that you have taken and discuss its impact on your life. (Kalamazoo College)
- If you could spend a year with any real or fictional person in the past, present, or future, whom would you choose? Why? (Kalamazoo College)

- What invention would the world be better off without, and why? (Kalamazoo College)
- If you had the gift of telepathy, the ability to read other people's minds, would you use this gift or not? Explain. (Middle East Technical University)
- Tell us about one of the best conversations you've had. (Stanford)
- If you were to write a book, on what theme or subject matter would it be based, and why? (Stanford)
- Tell us how a particular book, play, film, piece of music, dance performance, scientific theory or experiment or work of art has influenced you. If you choose a novel, film, or play, assume we know the plot. (Notre Dame)
- Select a technological innovation of this century and discuss its effects on your family, local community or nation. (Notre Dame)
- Read Annie Dillard's *An American Childhood*. Choose one of her observations or ideas and write a creative, reflective or provocative essay. (Notre Dame)
- Read Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter from Birmingham Jail." Drawing upon personal experience, write a creative, reflective or provocative essay. (Notre Dame)
- If you had only \$10 to plan a day's adventure, where would you go, what would you do, and whom would you take with you? (Johns Hopkins)
- Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you. (Common Application)
- Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you. (Common Application)
- Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence. (Common Application)
- Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence. (Common Application)
- A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity on you. (Common Application)

The College Application Essay: A Recipe for a Draft

Okay, it's time. You've made a list of college options, you've read over some applications, and you've settled into the first marking period. Time to think **ESSAY!** You've probably looked at the questions, wondered what the colleges meant by the phrase "a significant experience" (does someone have to die?), and hoped this part of the application would go away.

Let's take it on. Here's a recipe for getting started.

Assemble these ingredients:

- 3 sheets of paper
- a timer or stopwatch
- a pen or pencil

Procedure:

- Begin by thinking about yourself. What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your best qualities? Are you an intellectual? A creative type? Curious? Passionate? Determined? Resourceful?
- Choose a positive quality you'd like to convey to the admission committee, a strength that makes you an addition to any group. (DON'T pick an event or something you've done. President of the Nuclear Awareness Club is not a personal quality.) Focus on a quality of your mind or of your character. Now complete this sentence: "I am a very _____ person."
- Set the timer for 20 minutes. Pretend you're taking an exam at high school and the question is: "Tell a story about an experience or time when you showed you were a very _____ person." Use the characteristic you identified above. Write non-stop for 20 minutes; force yourself to keep telling the story and what it reveals until the timer goes DING.

OK...that's it. You've got a rough draft for your application essay!

You can look at the college application forms now and see what questions they ask. No matter what the questions are, you've already identified the important characteristic you want to convey to each college. You've actually answered any question that asks, "Tell us about yourself," or "Tell us about a significant experience in your life," or "We'd like to get to know you better." And for "Tell us about a person..." or a book, or a quote, you can make your choice based on the same quality you want to convey.

The key here is that the focus is on YOU and not on THEM, not on what they want but on what you are.
So **WRITE ON!**

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