



A QUICK GUIDE TO WRITING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

Students who apply to schools with selective admission standards may be faced with a new task along with filling out the application--writing the personal essay. Suddenly, you are being asked to write something designed to reveal the real you behind all those impressive courses and activities and awards that you listed on your resume. You are going to be evaluated not only on what you say but how you say it. For many students, this can be an intimidating experience.

Why do some schools require an essay?

Most students who apply to highly selective schools are qualified applicants based on their transcripts and test scores. Because most of the applicants **are** highly qualified, a college needs some other way to differentiate students and decide which ones are desirable in terms of their school's "mission" and the "makeup" of the freshman class they are seeking. The committee then turns to the student's personal qualities as described in teacher/counselor recommendations and the personal essay written by the student as part of the application. Colleges look at the essay as an opportunity to understand you as an individual. The essay topics differ from school to school, but they are all "designed" to give you the opportunity to tell the admission committee **who you really are and what is important to you.**

Unlike a grade point average and a standardized test score, which are objective ways to look at a student's qualifications, the essay is a highly subjective means of evaluation. It is this subjectivity which makes the writing of the essay a somewhat intimidating task for a student. Knowing that some stranger or small group of strangers is going to read your essay and make judgments about you based on it can be a scary thought!

A way to remove the aspect of fear from writing the college application essay is to convince yourself that it is an opportunity. Look on it as an opportunity to show the college selection committee that you are more than just a list of courses or grades on a transcript or a score on a standardized test. It is your chance to show the admission committee that you are someone special and unique. It gives you the opportunity to show your insight into situations, your awareness of the issues affecting the world, and your capacity for self-evaluation. **The main question you should ask yourself as you begin to write is "What is it about me that I want this college to know?"**

Colleges and universities use a variety of essay questions or reaction statements, but all of them are essentially asking the same thing--who are you, and what makes you different from all the other well-qualified applicants who have applied to us? There is no "right" answer or "correct" response to an essay. It merely provides an avenue for you to introduce yourself to the admission committee as the real person behind your credentials. It also provides a way for the committee to evaluate your writing ability, a crucial component to college success.

What does the admission committee look for in an essay?

The admission committee will look at your essay on three levels.

At the lowest level, they will evaluate you **ability to write.** Your spelling, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary must be excellent. Always have others proofread your essay, especially your English teacher!

At the next level, the committee will evaluate your **content**. How convincing and clearly stated are the points you are trying to make? How effective are you in getting your point across in a limited number of words? Does your essay come across as sincere and honest attempt to communicate, or does it sound as if you are simply trying to impress the committee?

At the highest level, the committee will look for **creativity and originality** on your part. Remember that the committee must read hundreds and hundreds of essays each year, so the ones that are written in a hurry with little forethought or planning and little or no attempt at originality are probably going to be set aside quickly. Try a different approach, but be sure that it is appropriate for you and your style of writing. Don't try a humorous essay unless you are good at this type of writing. It could fall flat and hurt rather than help your chances.

What are some typical essay questions or topics?

It would be easy if there were just three or four standard essay questions or topics that all colleges use, but that is not the case. Each college prefers to use one (or may provide a menu of options from which you choose) that is unique to its own needs. Many colleges ask you to simply tell them more about yourself while others give you a very specific topic or topics from which to choose.

The questions that ask you to react to a specific situation (e.g., what five items would you contribute to a time capsule? Or, what one invention would the world be better off without?) may not seem, on the surface, to be asking for personal information. The committee's purpose, however, in asking such a question is to gain insight into your values and your perception of self and others.

The open invitation to tell the college more about yourself or to describe a significant event in your life is sometimes the hardest type of response to write. You have so much to choose from with 18 years or more experiences that have shaped the person you have become! The key is to focus on something significant, an event or occurrence that caused you to see yourself or others in a new or different way, and undertake a manageable bit of narration or reflection.

Listed below are some essay questions or topics actually used by selective colleges. As you read through the list, think about how you might respond to each.

>If you could automatically and irrevocably change one fact or facet in the development of human history, what would that change be and why did you choose this particular fact/facet?

>This essay is your opportunity to discuss an idea or an issue that matters to you, to write about a person who has influenced you, or to describe an experience that has helped shape who you are.

>Describe your sense of the time/world you live in and your place in it.

>The purpose of this application is to help us learn more about you. What else would you like us to know?

>If you had an opportunity to interview any prominent person--living, deceased or fictional--whom would you choose, and why?

>Discuss something you have read that has a special significance for you.

>Discuss an issue of personal, local, or national concern and its importance to you.

>If you were able to change one thing about your community or country, what would you change and why?

- >Tell one story about yourself that would best provide us with an insight into the kind of person you.
- >What prominent person (past or present) do you particularly admire and why?
- >What is the most difficult thing you have ever done?
- >Describe a scientific problem, research project, or academic issue in any field of study that you would like to pursue in college or later.
- >To better understand you, what else would you like us to know?
- >Briefly describe the reasons that influenced your decision to attend college and why this school is your choice?
- >What is the single invention the world would be better off without and why?
- >Tell us about your interests, achievements and talents.
- >How does an education at this institution fit into your future plans?
- >If you could spend a year pursuing any activity, all expenses paid, what would you do? Be specific, and describe why your choice is meaningful to you.
- >In the space provided, describe one of the most humorous experiences you have been through and what effect it may have had on you.
- >Briefly describe the environment in which you grew up and how it has influenced your thinking about such issues as sexism, racism, or prejudice>
- >You are about to meet your college roommate for the first time. You can bring only three items with you to your dorm room. What items would you bring to provide a first impression of your personality, character, or interests? Please elaborate.
- >Choose one memorable or significant hour from your life and describe it in detail.
- >We are creating a time capsule to launch into space and we would like you to contribute five items. What would you contribute and why?
- >Give us any personal statement of your choosing.
- >What do you see as the most pressing social problem currently facing humanity?
- >Please provide information about yourself that you feel will give a more complete and accurate picture, e.g, unusual background, personal philosophy, goals, etc.
- >If you were given the opportunity to travel in time, what era would you travel to and why?

Guideline for writing the essay:

Now that you know why some colleges require an essay, you have an idea of how they evaluate it, and you know what some of the typical topics are . . . you are ready to think about the actual writing process. Again you probably feel a moment of panic, especially if the college you are applying to has asked one of those difficult questions that

really make you think.

Don't panic if that is the case. Remember that writing the college application essay is not different from doing one for senior English class. You still need to follow the basic steps of good essay writing and then **proofread, proofread, proofread**. The only thing that is different is that you are writing for an admission committee rather than your English teacher. Since this committee does have the power to accept or deny your application, it is important that you put your best effort into writing the essay.

Organization: The Structure

- >The essay is built around a central idea or theme and all details support this idea.
- >The introduction is inviting and draws the reader in.
- >A satisfying conclusion leaves the reader with a sense of resolution.
- >Transitions between paragraphs and ideas are smooth and weave the various threads of the essay together.
- >The order of ideas is logical and easily moves the reader through the text.

Ideas: The Message

- >The topic chosen is narrow enough to be manageable.
- >Relevant details support and enrich the central theme or idea.
- >The material is presented in a fresh and original manner.
- >The overall effect is clear, focused, and interesting.

Fluency: The Rhythm and Flow

- >Sentences are well built and hang together into a coherent whole.
- >Sentence structure and length are varied to add interest.
- >The writing has a flow and rhythm that makes it easy to read aloud.
- >Sentence beginnings are interesting and guide the reader from one sentence to another.

Voice: The Heart and Soul

- >The writer speaks directly to the reader in a way that is individualistic, expressive, and inviting.
- >The essay is honest and written from the heart; it has the ring of conviction.
- >The reader feels a strong sense of interaction with the writer and senses the person behind the words.
- >The language is natural yet provocative. It brings the topic to life.

Word Choice: Lively Language

- >Words are used correctly.
- >Powerful verbs give the writing energy.
- >Imagery is strong.
- >Striking words and phrases are used to catch the reader's eye, but the effect is natural and never overdone.
- >Slang is used sparingly, if at all.

Conventions: Editing

- >The writer demonstrates a good grasp of standard writing, e.g., grammar, capitalization, punctuation, usage, spelling, and paragraphing so that the finished product looks clean, edited, and polished.
- >Paragraphing reinforces the organizational structure.
- >Spelling, punctuation, and capitalization are correct.
- >Readability is enhanced by the writer's skill with using a wide range of conventions.

Steps in the writing process:

Most colleges want a typed essay. Remember to make copies and save a copy to a disk or flash drive, just in case. If the essay is to be hand-written, the college will specify this. Otherwise, assume that you should produce a good quality word-processed paper. Most schools specify a maximum length, (e.g., the essay must fit into the space provided on the application form) or number of words (usually 300 to 500 words).

- >Brainstorm ideas for the given topic and choose an approach you feel comfortable with.
- >Create a simple outline to sequence your ideas.
- >Write a first draft.
- >Get input on the first draft from a parent, a friend, and a teacher.
- >Rewrite, paying special attention to your introduction and conclusion.
- >Read your rewrite.
- >Proofread your paper by reading it aloud.
- >Get your English teacher to proofread your paper.
- >Make any necessary adjustments and corrections.
- >Make a final draft and make copies.

Some final words of advice:

You now know all of the information necessary to write an effective college application essay. Just a few final words or advice:

DO:

- >Plan ahead. A **good** essay needs time for planning, time for writing, and time for revisions.
- >Be honest and tell the truth about yourself. Your words could come back to haunt you!
- >Read all directions carefully and follow them explicitly. If the essay says to write no more than 500 words, stick to the limit.
- >Be positive and upbeat in your approach even if the topic is not.
- >Emphasize what you have gained or learned from an experience.
- >Write from the heart using input from your head.
- >Revise and edit until you are satisfied.
- >Make copies of everything, just in case.

DON'T:

- >Don't overdo the language in an attempt to sound intellectual.
- >Don't be redundant by just repeating things about yourself that are stated elsewhere in your application.
- >Don't try a format you are not comfortable with, e.g., trying to write your essay in poetic form can be a disaster if you're a miserable poet.
- >Don't be afraid to highlight your strengths and talents in the name of modesty.
- >Don't try to be cute, use inappropriate language, or take liberties with the given topic.
- >**Don't** rely on the words and thoughts of others.
- >Don't forget to proofread, proofread, proofread. (Taken from a recent college essay: "If there is one word that really describes me, that word would have to be **profectionist**." Whoops!!)