

College Essay Handbook

***Tips on How to Write a
Great College Admission
Essay***

WRITING THE SUCCESSFUL COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

Gaining entrance to just about *any* college continues to get harder as more and more applicants are applying for a limited number of spaces. You can improve your chances of being admitted to the college or university of your choice by writing a stellar personal essay as part of your college application.

The admissions essay portion of a college application can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. Your personal essay shows the admissions committee why you are different from everybody else. It provides information about you that test scores, grades, and extracurricular pursuits cannot.

Writing the college application essay can be one of the most daunting parts of applying to college. To help you get started, we've given you some thoughts on brainstorming ideas, choosing a topic, and how to write an effective and powerful essay.

Step One: Brainstorming

The most important part of your essay is the subject matter. As you begin brainstorming a subject idea, consider the following questions:

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? The most interesting essays often are based on accomplishments that may have seemed small at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.
- Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with? These questions should help you realize what you love most.
- Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something you were previously blind to?
- What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy? How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your admissions essay for you?
- What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful?

If these questions cannot cure your writer's block, consider the following exercises:

1. Ask for Help from Parents, Friends, Teachers, etc.

If your own personality traits do not automatically leap to mind, ask those closest to you to write a list of your five most salient personality traits. Ask them why they chose the ones they did. Consider life experiences that could illustrate these particular traits.

2. Consider your Childhood

While admissions officers are most interested in the last 2-4 years of your life, you might consider events of your childhood that inspired the interests you have today. Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they were shaped from your upbringing.

3. Consider your Role Models

For those of you who have special role models and actually aspire to become like certain people, you may want to incorporate a discussion of that person and the traits you admired into your application essay.

4. Read Sample Admissions Essays

Before you sit down to write a poem, you would certainly read past poets. In the same way, we recommend reading sample admissions essays to understand what topics other applicants chose. (*See sample essays that worked further on in this booklet.*)

5. Goal Determination

Life is short. Why do you want to spend 2-6 years of your life at a particular college, graduate school, or professional school? How is the degree necessary to the fulfillment of your goals? How else will your education fit your needs and lead you to a fulfilling life?

Step Two: Selecting a Topic

Having completed brainstorming, you should now have a rough idea of the elements you wish to include in your essay, including your goals, important life experiences, research experience, diversifying features, spectacular nonacademic accomplishments, etc. You should also now have an idea of what impression you want to make on the admissions officers.

While most admissions essays allow great latitude in topic selection, you must also be sure to answer the questions that were asked of you. Leaving a lasting impression on someone who reads 50-100 essays a day will not be easy, but we have compiled some guidelines to help you get started.

Consider the following questions before proceeding:

- Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance in your life, about which you can use **vivid personal experiences** as supporting details?
- Do you plan to write your essay in a quirky way or make it funny? You should be very, very careful if you are planning to do this. Almost always, attempts at humor fall flat and are not appreciated by the admissions committee.

- Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPAs, standardized test scores or other data in your essay.
- Can you fully answer the question asked of you? Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit, or is the topic too broad? Keep your audience in mind, and be sure to use appropriate, educated language and grammar in your writing.
- Is your topic overdone? Put a new spin on it. A unique or convincing answer to a classic topic can pay off big.
- Will your topic turn off a large number of people? Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial social issues. Writing about strong personal opinions on these topics can have a negative impact on your admission chances. If you still choose to write about a controversial topic, you must objectively acknowledge all sides of the issue without condescension.
- Will an admissions officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

After evaluating your essay topics with the above criteria and asking for the opinions of your teachers, family and friends, you should have at least 1-2 interesting essay topics. Consider the following guidelines below:

1. If you are planning on writing an essay on a personal tragedy, you should be careful to address your own personal qualities and growth in relation to the tragedy. Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college student. You want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. It is for this reason that essays relating to this topic are considered among the best. Use the difficult experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics.
2. Essays should fit in well with the rest of a candidate's application, explaining the unexplained and steering clear of that which is already obvious. For example, if you have an 850 SAT and a 3.9 GPA or a 1450 SAT and a 2.5 GPA, you would be wise to incorporate in your essay an explanation for the apparent contradiction. For example, perhaps you were hospitalized or family concerns prevented your dedication to academics; you would want to mention this in your essay. However, do not make your essay one giant excuse. Simply give a quick, convincing explanation within the framework of your larger essay.
3. Be honest. Your best, most passionate writing will be about events that actually occurred. While you might be tempted to embellish or exaggerate, it is completely unnecessary. Write an essay about your life that demonstrates your personality.

Step Three: Tips for Writing

In writing the essay you must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade the admissions officer that you are extremely worthy of admission and to make the admissions officer aware that you are not just a transcript, but a real-life, intriguing personality.

Unfortunately, there is no surefire step-by-step method to writing a good essay. However, we have compiled the following list of tips that you should find useful while writing your admissions essay:

1. **Answer the Question.** You can follow the next 12 steps, but if you miss the questions, you will not be admitted to any institution.
2. **Be Original.** Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. If writing about a gymnastics competition you trained for, do not start your essay: "I worked long hours for many weeks to train for XXX competition." Consider an opening like, "Every morning I awoke at 5:00, and through sweat, tears, and blood I trained on the uneven bars hoping to bring the state gymnastics trophy to my hometown."
3. **Be Yourself.** Admissions officers want to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions. If you do this, your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you. Stay away from grand themes that you have little personal experience with.
4. **Don't "Thesaurize" your Composition.** For some reason, students continue to think big words make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate contexts with complex styles. Think Hemingway.
5. **Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose.** If you are not adept with imagery, you can write an excellent essay without it, but it's not easy. The application essay lends itself to imagery since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details.
6. **Spend the Most Time on your Introduction.** Expect admissions officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.
 - a. **Don't Summarize in your Introduction.** Ask yourself why a reader would want to read your entire essay after reading your introduction. If you summarize, the admissions officer need not read the rest of your essay.
 - b. **Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction.** It is not necessary or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.
7. **Body Paragraphs Must Relate to Introduction.** Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.
8. **Use Transition.** Applicants continue to ignore transition to their own detriment. You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay. Transition is not limited to phrases like "as a result, in addition, while, since, etc." but includes repeating key words and progressing the idea.
9. **Conclusions are Crucial.** The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary since the essay is rather short to begin with; the reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words before. Also do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in

summary, to conclude, etc.” You should consider the following conclusions:

- a. Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
 - b. Consider linking your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
 - c. Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
 - d. End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not **try** to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
 - e. Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
10. **Do Something Else.** Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.
11. **Give your Draft to Others.** Ask editors to read with these questions in mind:
- a. What is the essay about?
 - b. Have I used active voice verbs wherever possible?
 - c. Is my sentence structure varied or do I use all long or all short sentences?
 - d. Do you detect any clichés?
 - e. Do I use transition appropriately?
 - f. Do I use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid?
 - g. What’s the best part of the essay?
 - h. What about the essay is memorable?
 - i. What’s the worst part of the essay?
 - j. What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
 - k. What parts of the essay do not support my main argument or are immaterial to my case?
 - l. Is every single sentence **crucial** to the essay? This **MUST** be the case.
 - m. What does the essay reveal about my personality?
 - n. Could anyone else have written this essay?
 - o. How would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: “I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more _____.”
12. **Revise, Revise, Revise.** You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Do you use transition? Are your introduction and conclusion more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?
- a. Allow for the evolution of your main topic. Do not assume your subject must remain fixed and that you can only tweak sentences.
 - b. Editing takes time. Consider reordering your supporting details, delete irrelevant sections, and make clear the broader implications of your experiences. Allow your more important arguments to come to the foreground. Take points that might only be implicit and make them explicit.



Sample Essay #1

Accepted by Princeton University

Hiking to Understanding

Surrounded by thousands of stars, complete silence, and spectacular mountains, I stood atop New Hampshire's Presidential Range awestruck by nature's beauty. Immediately, I realized that I must dedicate my life to understanding the causes of the universe's beauty. In addition, the hike taught me several valuable lessons that will allow me to increase my understanding through scientific research.

Although the first few miles of the hike up Mt. Madison did not offer fantastic views, the vistas became spectacular once I climbed above tree line. Immediately, I sensed that understanding the natural world parallels climbing a mountain. To reach my goal of total comprehension of natural phenomena, I realized that I must begin with knowledge that may be uninteresting by itself. However, this knowledge will form the foundation of an accurate view of the universe. Much like every step while hiking leads the hiker nearer the mountain peak, all knowledge leads the scientist nearer total understanding.

Above tree line, the barrenness and silence of the hike taught me that individuals must have their own direction. All hikers know that they must carry complete maps to reach their destinations; they do not allow others to hold their maps for them. Similarly, surrounded only by mountaintops, sky, and silence, I recognized the need to remain individually focused on my life's goal of understanding the physical universe.

At the summit, the view of the surrounding mountain range is spectacular. The panorama offers a view of hills and smaller mountains. Some people during their lives climb many small hills. However, to have the most accurate view of the world, I must be dedicated to climbing the biggest mountains I can find. Too often people simply hike across a flat valley without ascending because they content themselves with the scenery. The mountain showed me that I cannot content myself with the scenery. When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away from the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos. Similarly, despite the frustration and difficulties inherent in scientific study, I cannot retreat from my goal of universal understanding.

When observing Saturn's rising, the Milky Way Cloud, and the Perseid meteor shower, I simultaneously felt a great sense of insignificance and purpose. Obviously, earthly concerns are insignificant to the rest of the universe. However, I experienced the overriding need to understand the origins and causes of these phenomena. The hike also strengthened my resolve to climb the mountain of knowledge while still taking time to gaze at the wondrous scenery. Only then can the beauty of the universe and the study of science be purposefully united. Attaining this union is my lifelong goal.

SAMPLE ESSAY #2

Accepted by Yale University

Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

He could hardly breathe. Between intermittent gasps for air, and through the tears streaming down his face, he explained what happened. Springing into action, a dark figure retrieved a single, white ice pack for the little boy's swollen eye. "Wow," a nearby woman gasped with excitement. "Good thing Batman was here to save you!" The thankful little boy looked up at him with awestruck eyes and marveled as if Batman had actually saved his life.

This incident occurred on a Tuesday night at the Auburn YMCA while I was staying late to coach the younger children. Someone had broken the unspoken law of the swimmers and held a kickboard underwater, which is like throwing an object into the air; it will inevitably return from whence it came, and it will most likely hit someone in the face. My friend Michelle brought the young victim of this careless crime over to me and I, clad in my Batman tank top with swimsuit underneath, saved the day with a mere ice pack. While I can vaguely remember fetching the ice pack, the one thing that I can never forget is the look that little boy gave me. He gazed up at me the way that I would look at a favorite author, a favorite band member or an Olympic Swimmer. In that instant, I was on top of the world. I was a celebrity. I was Batman.

Being a lifeguard, a former Boy Scout, and the son of a registered nurse, getting ice to reduce the swelling was second nature. I've been first aid trained since the first grade and had never had a chance to use this training until that point, but when I did, that boy and his mother created an epiphany for me. They helped me discover something inside myself that had been waiting to manifest since first grade: I belong in the medical field. When I saw that little boy cry, a protective instinct that I didn't realize sixteen-year-old boys could even possess came over me and I needed to help. I got an adrenaline rush from knowing what to do and even gained some genuine perspective on life. I came face to face with my destiny and I knowingly embraced what the future held. Since then, I adopted all of the old medical textbooks on my basement bookshelf, sterilized the moldy ones, and made them a home beneath my bed. I proudly accumulated one hundred and eighty six pages worth of knowledge to accompany me, like a sidekick, in my academic pursuits. Sometimes this sidekick of mine assists me when my mother and I play our favorite game, an app in which the player diagnoses diseases by performing tests on imaginary patients, yet it usually does not. However, being ignorant of a majority of medical terminology does not frustrate me; it intrigues me. I am wholeheartedly fascinated by the medical world and want to discover all its secrets. I envision myself performing a doctor's exhilarating tasks like running alongside gurneys, dressing wounds, administering epinephrine to victims of anaphylaxis, and even doing the simple things like listening to patients' lungs. Ideas like these are what fuel my passion, they fire me up and make my heart beat at a different tempo. I know that saving a life could make me feel more alive than I have ever felt, and, as I learned firsthand, I also know that I don't need to legitimately wrestle someone away from death's cold grasp to make a real difference in their lives and feel like a superhero. I look forward to this adrenaline-charged future, my future, hopefully, knowing that one day I will be able to truly do good - without a cape or a batmobile.

Sample Essay #3

Accepted by Wellesley College

It took me eighteen years to realize what an extraordinary influence my mother has been on my life. She's the kind of person who has thoughtful discussions about which artist she would most want to have her portrait painted by (Sargent), the kind of mother who always has time for her four children, and the kind of community leader who has a seat on the board of every major project to assist Washington's impoverished citizens. Growing up with such a strong role model, I developed many of her enthusiasms. I not only came to love the excitement of learning simply for the sake of knowing something new, but I also came to understand the idea of giving back to the community in exchange for a new sense of life, love, and spirit.

My mother's enthusiasm for learning is most apparent in travel. I was nine years old when my family visited Greece. Every night for three weeks before the trip, my older brother Peter and I sat with my mother on her bed reading Greek myths and taking notes on the Greek Gods. Despite the fact that we were traveling with fourteen-month-old twins, we managed to be at each ruin when the site opened at sunrise. I vividly remember standing in an empty amphitheater pretending to be an ancient tragedian, picking out my favorite sculpture in the Acropolis museum, and inserting our family into modified tales of the battle at Troy. Eight years and half a dozen passport stamps later I have come to value what I have learned on these journeys about global history, politics and culture, as well as my family and myself.

While I treasure the various worlds my mother has opened to me abroad, my life has been equally transformed by what she has shown me just two miles from my house. As a ten year old, I often accompanied my mother to (name deleted), a local soup kitchen and children's center. While she attended meetings, I helped with the Summer Program by chasing children around the building and performing magic tricks. Having finally perfected the "floating paintbrush" trick, I began work as a full time volunteer with the five and six year old children last June. It is here that I met Jane Doe, an exceptionally strong girl with a vigor that is contagious. At the end of the summer, I decided to continue my work at (name deleted) as Jane's tutor. Although the position is often difficult, the personal rewards are beyond articulation. In the seven years since I first walked through the doors of (name deleted), I have learned not only the idea of giving to others, but also of deriving from them a sense of spirit.

Everything that my mother has ever done has been overshadowed by the thought behind it. While the raw experiences I have had at home and abroad have been spectacular, I have learned to truly value them by watching my mother. She has enriched my life with her passion for learning, and changed it with her devotion to humanity. In her endless love of everything and everyone she is touched by, I have seen a hope and life that is truly exceptional. Next year, I will find a new home miles away. However, my mother will always be by my side.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

The topic of this essay is the writer's mother. However, the writer definitely focuses on herself, which makes this essay so strong. She manages to impress the reader with her travel experience, volunteer and community experience, and commitment to learning without ever sounding boastful or full of herself. The essay is also very well organized.

Sample Essay #4

Accepted by Stanford

When I look at this picture of myself, I realize how much I've grown and changed, not only physically, but also mentally as a person in the last couple of years. Less than one month after this photograph was taken, I arrived at the [school's name] in [school's location] without any idea of what to expect. I entered my second year of high school as an innocent thirteen year-old who was about a thousand miles from home and was a new member of not the sophomore, but "lower-middle" class. Around me in this picture are the things which were most important in my life at the time: studying different types of cars and planes, following Michael Jordan's latest move, and seeing the latest blockbuster show like "Phantom of the Opera" or "Jurassic Park". On my t-shirt is the rest of my life -- tennis. Midway through my senior year at the special [school's name] school, the focuses in my life have changed dramatically.

If there is one common occurrence, which takes place for every single person in the diverse student body at [school's name], it is that we all grow up much faster for having lived there. I do not know whether this speeding up of the maturing process is generally good or bad, but I definitely have benefited.

The classroom has become a whole different realm for me. Before, the teachers and students alike preached the importance of learning, but it was implicitly obvious that the most important concern was grades. At [school's name] teachers genuinely believe that learning is the most importance objective and deeply encourage us to collaborate with each other and make use of all resources that we may find. In fact, in a certain class this year, my teacher assigned us to prepare every day of the week to discuss a certain book; there were only two requirements in this preparation -- we had to maximize our sources, gleaning from everything and everyone in the school, but we were not allowed to actually look at the book. As a result, I know more about that book than any other that I have actually read. It is teaching methods such as this which ensure that we will learn more. Indeed, this matter of "thinking" has been one of the most important aspects of my experience. Whether in Physics or English, I'm required to approach every problem and idea independently and creatively rather than just regurgitate the teacher's words. In discussion with fellow students both inside and outside of class, the complex thoughts flowing through everyone's brain is evident.

However, I believe that the most important concepts that I have espoused in being independent of my parents for half of each year, deal with being a cosmopolitan person. The school's faculty and students are conscious about keeping all of the kids' attention from being based on the school. Every single issue of global concern is brought forth by one group or another whether it be a faculty member, publication, ethnic society, or individual student. Along with being aware of issues of importance, after attending [school's name] my personality has evolved. First, my mannerisms have grown: the school stresses giving respect to everyone and everything. Our former headmaster often said, "Character can be measured not by one's interaction with people who are better off than him or herself, but by one's interactions with those who are worse off." The other prime goal of the school's community is to convert every single timid lower-classman into a loud, rambunctious senior. Basically, if you have an opinion about something, it is wrong not to voice that opinion. Of course, being obnoxious is not the idea. The key is to become a master of communication with teachers, fellow students, all of who are a part of the community, and most importantly, those who are outside of the community.

I do not want to make [school's name] sound as if it produces the perfect students, because it doesn't. But the school deserves a lot of credit for its efforts. Often, some part of the mold does remain. As the college experience approaches, I am still the same person, only modified to better maximize my talents. Although I still have some time to play tennis and see movies, perhaps one of the few similarities between this photograph and me now is my smile.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

This essay is fairly well written. The essayist makes boarding school his focus, using it to explain and describe how and why he has changed over the years. A lot of students write about what wonderful people they have become, but they fail to do a good job of understanding and explaining the forces that prevailed to make them change. This writer focuses on the strengths of the school itself. He demonstrates the sort of values it tries to instill in its students such as, "Encouraging us to collaborate with each other and make use of all resources that we may find," and "Giving respect to everyone and everything." Because the writer does so, the reader never doubts that the applicant possesses all the qualities that he credits to the school. Using this method has two advantages. First, the positive, upbeat attitude he has toward his institution is rare. Second, Stanford, for one, recognized that this would reflect well on his ability to adapt to and be a positive force at their school.

2014-15 Common Application Essay Prompts

1. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
4. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community or family.

Common Application Workshops

Workshops will be held on Tuesdays during periods 1-4 and 8 & 9 in Room D304 from September 30th through November 4th.

Students will need to see Mrs. Hoff in the Counseling Office for a pass.

Students will only be allowed to attend if they have a study hall during these periods.