

## The Essay

### Why an essay?

Most colleges and universities require students to write an essay as part of the application (not all—many state institutions do not have this requirement). Why? Because they want to see: a) how well you write, b) as one admission officer puts it, “how students can wrap their brains around broadly based questions,” and c) who you are, in your own words and from your own point of view.

Except for possibly the interview, the essay affords your best chance to share your thoughts, insights, and opinions; to highlight your accomplishments; and to convey your maturity and outlook on life. Look at the essay, then, as an opportunity. One dean of admission at a major university likens the application process to building a house, and the essay creates the windows. “It’s what distinguishes you from other applicants; it’s what allows us to see in.” College essays are therefore different from those you write for English, history or other classes. You try to write well and to “wrap your brain around questions” for your teachers, but usually you do not write about yourself.

Some students find it hard, when applying to college, to shift gears and write about a topic that may be close to them personally. The task need not be difficult, however. Here are a few tips, many gathered from admissions people.

### Choosing a topic

Some colleges simply assign a topic, such as:

- Describe a person or an event and its importance to you.
- If you had to choose four things to put into a time capsule to be opened in a thousand years, what would they be and why?
- Write about an issue of local, national or global importance and its impact on you.

Many applications, in particular the Common Application, give you the option of writing about a topic of your own choice. Whatever you choose, bear in mind:

- No topic is inherently a “good” or “bad” one. Admission people want to discover something about you that they can’t learn from your transcript or test scores, so write about something that matters to *you*, not what you think they want to hear.
- While there are few “wrong” topics, there are wrong approaches. In general, do not dwell on specific experiences, but on your *perception of* or *reaction to* those experiences. For example, writing a travelogue about your summer trip to France is trite. (“The view from the Eiffel Tower was the most breathtaking thing I’ve ever seen!!!”) Instead, write about something you learned or that truly moved you while you were there. If you can’t do that, find another subject. Some of the most interesting topics are right under your nose, in the little events of daily life!
- Some topics do need to be treated with great care, and avoided if you can’t do so. It is very difficult, for example, to write about the three D’s: Death, Divorce and Disaster. If you choose one of these subjects, be sure to focus *less* on the events than on *how they affected you*—and *never* wallow in self-pity! Likewise, it is best to avoid sensitive political, social or religious issues such as abortion or the U.S.’s role in the latest war. You never know whom you may offend.

- Good advice from one admission person: Avoid writing about anything that costs money.

### Writing the essay

- Be yourself, and write for yourself; use your own voice. Generally, we are taught to write for a particular group. The college essay has no audience *per se* except a group of strangers known as the admission committee. With no specific audience, students may compose an essay that attempts to convey an “educated” writer. This approach can result in stilted diction, posturing, and labored prose, rather than writing that reflects energy and spontaneity. The admission director mentioned above encourages students not to be overly cautious. “Real emotion, real feeling has to come through. What we’re trying to do [at our institution] is create a community, and we want to be sure the people we’re placing in it are going to thrive here. Writing about something that reveals more about you helps us in that process.” If you write from the heart about a topic that is meaningful to you, you will be writing for yourself, and, as a result, your essay will be much more memorable to that group of strangers.
- Do not use a thesaurus. You don’t *ratiocinate* or *cogitate*, for example. You *think*.
- Don’t try to be funny unless humor comes naturally to you and you’re experienced—and good—at humorous writing.
- Good writing, as one admission officer put it, is lean, progressive, imaginative, grounded in specifics, energized by apt verbs, and respectful of the reader’s intelligence. Tell your story in a way that *shows*, rather than merely *claims*, that you have learned or matured through the situation or experience you are describing.
- Your opening sentence needs to “grab” the reader. Admission people read so many essays that an imaginative opening will grab their attention.
- *Do not allow family members or friends—anyone—to become involved in the writing process, other than as proofreaders.* It will be obvious if someone else wrote the essay for you, and *it will work against you!*
- Likewise, do not even consider for one moment “buying” an essay from one of the Internet “essay services”! Not only is this wrong in every possible way, but it is *extremely likely* that you will get caught and your application simply eliminated from consideration.
- Spelling, punctuation, grammar, clarity, and neatness all matter; neglecting mechanics can sabotage an otherwise competent and compelling essay.
- Allow plenty of time to write your essay(s). *Edit, re-edit and proofread again and again!* If you wait until the last minute, it will show.