

Tips for a Great College Essay

Why write an essay? The purpose of the essay is to convince admission officers (whom you've never met), in fewer than 10 minutes, that you would be a good match for their college.

At the most basic level, the essay allows admission officers to evaluate your communication and writing skills. In addition, it allows admission officers to discover more about you as a person—a side of you not shown by statistics like grades and SAT scores. The essay gives information about your history, attitudes, interests and creativity; it gives a sense of your values and goals. What admission officers are doing is creating a community—looking to see how you would fit in that community, what would you bring to that community and what sets you apart.

How the Essay Is Evaluated

- Is your writing mechanically sound? Is your writing style comfortable? Can you write a good sentence? Can you write a good paragraph? Do you address the question asked?
- Can you form a thesis? Can you discuss a theme? Is your argument logical? Can you get in and out of the essay with some finesse?
- Do you write with style, nuance and creativity? Do you write with a distinctive voice?

Choosing a Topic

Choose the essay topic that appeals to you most. The topic is less important than your delivery. Remember, there is no right or wrong answer. The college just wants to know who you are and how your mind works.

There are bad essays, not bad topics, but be careful about the following:

- Winning or losing the big game.
- Relationship problems.
- Telling troubles to a journal.
- Anything that suggests that you don't see the world beyond high school.
- Simple solutions to world problems.
- Essays in poor taste.
- Parent bashing.
- Cynicism.

The First Draft

- Spend as much time thinking as you do writing.
- Narrow your topic and try to be as specific as possible.
- Brainstorm. Scribble down everything you can think of about your chosen topic. Pick out the good stuff and work it into a brief outline.
- Write a rough draft. Read it out loud.
- Ask yourself: “Have I answered the question? Have I focused on the topic? Is it specific and detailed? Have I written in my own voice?”

Polishing the Essay

- Eliminate the first sentence (or two); that allows the essay to “start fast.” A good opening sentence will hook the reader. If you're bored, the reader will be bored.
- Add details to make it richer and more interesting.
- Be revealing. Let us know things about you, but don't be confessional.
- Be careful with sentimentality. Use it sparingly.
- Beware of trying to impress us with what you think we want to hear.
- Don't try to “prove” your intelligence by choosing a topic you think makes you sound smart. Avoid sophisticated words when simpler ones will suffice.
- Don't be afraid to use your imagination or to be unconventional. But don't be weird just for the sake of being weird.
- Be concise. Ask yourself: “Did I make my points directly and without a lot of unnecessary padding?”
- Show, don't tell. Don't just list what you have done; detail it with action words. Use quotations wisely; if it's window dressing, you probably don't need it.
- Ask a teacher, parent or friend to read your second draft. Ask them: “Is it interesting from the word go? Does it sound like me? Was it fun to read?” Listen to what they have to say, but don't let someone else rewrite the essay for you.
- Read what the application says about essay length, but don't write just to fill space.

Navigational Hazards

The little details aren't the most important part of the essay, but you are trying to make a good impression. You don't want the admission committee to think you're a sloppy, careless writer.

- Proofread! If you are sick and tired of the essay, let someone else proof it. A spell-checker won't catch everything.
- Check your word choice by reading out loud.
- Make sure that if you are including the name of the college in the essay, it's the correct school. Wesleyan doesn't want to know you've always wanted to go to Smith.
- If you are going to take risks (which is okay), be sure you know your subject matter and feel comfortable with that style of writing. For instance, poetry is often risky.
- Don't try to inject humor if you're not funny. Be careful even if you are funny; it often doesn't translate in writing.
- A college essay is not a research paper. Make it about you.

The Biggest Mistake of All

- Don't plagiarize. Admission officers have read all the books and seen all the websites.

The Good News

- Don't stress too much. Write what you feel, do it well...and we'll like you!

