

Writing the College Essay

It's all about you. The college application provides an overview of who you are as a student: the classes you took, the grades you earned, the activities you participated in. Then there are test scores and teacher/counselor recommendations to help round out the picture. The college essay is your opportunity to get personal – to transform your academic history and statistics into flesh and blood.

What should I talk about? In the words of Flannery O'Connor, "[A]nybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his life. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot." Here's your opportunity to take a look at your life and examine your accomplishments, your struggles, your adventures, your successes and your failures. No one knows better than you the key experiences in your life that have transformed you into the person you are today.

How do I begin? I have nothing to write about – nothing ever happens to me, my life is so boring, why would anyone want to read about me? Take the time and take a closer look at your life – you'll be pleasantly surprised at how much has gone on in your 16 or 17 years.

- Write a resume: List your activities in and out of school, community service, jobs, summer camp, travel, etc.

- Start a journal and begin by writing a sentence or two about:
 - Important events in your life;
 - Important people in your life, both from your childhood and right now;
 - Adventures you have had;
 - Teachers who have had a special impact on you;
 - Challenges you have faced;
 - Obstacles you have overcome;
 - Accomplishments;
 - Influences in your life: people you've known, books you've read, movies you've seen;
 - Your favorite qualities;
 - What you wish you could change about yourself;
 - Travel experiences and your strongest impressions of places you've been.

- How do you think other people would describe you? Try to honestly imagine how people you have known would remember you.

- Have fun and get your friends to help.
 - Sit down with your friends and take turns listing words or images that best describe each of you;
 - Compare your favorite memories;
 - Remember how you met;
 - Describe how you believe you've each changed since you first met.

- Your family has known you longest.
 - Ask your parents, siblings, cousins, grandparents, etc., to describe you;
 - Get your family to remember their favorite stories about you – this can be a real eye-opener;
 - Look at family photo albums, they are sure to stir up memories.

- Look where you live.
 - If you've lived in the same neighborhood or building for a long time, you will have friends and neighbors who have watched you grow up . . . Talk to them.
 - What are your favorite places in the neighborhood and what memories do they evoke?
 - Is there a friend or relative in a different city or different country whom you have visited?

Getting started

- Write about something important to you. Your friends or your parents might not choose the same essay topic, but this is your story.

- Think of your essay as a tool for self-discovery: Who you are, what you've done, where you are going.

- Tell a story.
 - Whether you begin at a high point of the action or start at the very beginning, “action” is the key word.
 - Your essay should be about events in your life rather than abstract ideas.
 - Use the elements of good storytelling including action, sensory detail and even dialogue.
 - Use imagery and clear, vivid prose;
 - Your story should have a point;

- Use your own unique voice. Write your essay as if you were telling a story to a friend. Forget about pretentious or flowery language.
 - Don't forget to show- not tell!
- Keep it focused, organized and WITHOUT ERRORS!
 - Start with your main point or argument and follow it through to the conclusion;
 - Don't meander;
 - Keep your verbs active and your sentences uncomplicated;
 - Don't lose the reader in the language;
 - Be clear, coherent and concise;
 - The very best essay will lose all credibility if it is filled with spelling and grammatical errors.
- Take your time writing your introduction. Admissions officers take about 1-2 minutes to read your essay, so you need to grab their attention and keep it from the first sentence.
 - Don't summarize, get right into the story;
 - Create mystery or intrigue in your introduction; raise questions, appeal to emotions and lure the reader through to the end of the essay.
- Don't be too clever or cute. Your essay should demonstrate:
 - Writing ability;
 - Reasoning ability;
 - Creativity.
- Revise, revise, revise.
 - After completing your essay, give it a rest for a few days.
 - Read it aloud. This is a great way to catch awkward sounding language and confusing structure.
 - Have someone else read it. Find out if you've succeeded in making your point. If you need to explain something in order for your reader to understand, then you have not done your job.
 - Rewrite fearlessly. You may have a few brilliant sentences that you simply cannot part with, but if they do not serve your essay, get rid of them. Use them another time.
 - Add more detail;
 - Delete repetitive language;
 - Combine sentences for smoother flow;

- And if necessary, write it another way: pick a different starting point, find a better conclusion, tell it from a different point of view.
- Proofread, proofread, put it aside for a day and then proofread again.

Essay Topics

Different college applications often ask variations of the same questions. Ideally, you should write an essay that can be adapted for more than one application so that you don't drive yourself crazy when the deadline arrives. Here is a list of topics:

- Tell us about a significant event that has had an impact on you;
- Discuss the personal importance of a book you have read during the last two years;
- Why do you wish to attend this institution or enroll in a specific program;
- Describe a significant personal achievement or challenge;
- Write an editorial concerning an issue of local or national importance;
- Autobiographical essay:
 - Family history, ancestors, heritage, parents;
 - Events that have impacted your life and why;
 - Interests, hobbies, activities, sports, music;
 - Employment experience and significance in your life;
 - Why is going to college important to you and what do you hope to achieve;
 - Career objectives and why;
 - What did you particularly like about high school.

A Few Don'ts

- Don't get too political or too topical – the person who reads your essay may hold equally passionate but completely opposite views.
- Be careful writing about the “3 Ds” – death, divorce, disaster: Nobody likes a “woe is me” story – many of us have suffered through personal tragedies. If the story is important to you, then it needs to be about YOU and its impact on your experience – not about your suffering.
- There are millions of baseball, basketball, football, soccer, hockey, etc., players applying for college. Unless your sports story is unique and about you (not about playing sports), think of another topic.

- Please don't focus your essay on your friend, girlfriend/boyfriend, or family member. It's you they want to hear about!
- If you aren't funny, don't use your college essay to try to be.
- Don't read sample college essays until you have completed your first draft. Colleges are interested in the unique way you express yourself. And please, don't "borrow" from any of these "good" essays and just change the details, because someone is bound to notice.

Resources:

- Do a Google search (www.google.com) on the phrase "writing the college essay" (include the quotation marks) and you will find dozens of websites that include information and tips.
- Ask your English teacher or another trusted source to take a look at your drafts and provide input on the technical aspects of your essay.
- If you would like your counselor to take a look at what you are working on, you can email it with [Your Name]'s COLLEGE ESSAY in the subject line of your email.

HAVE FUN! Don't think of the college essay as torture. It's a unique opportunity to be yourself and show the admission committee who you really are. There's no one in the world quite like you and colleges need to know just how special you are and what a valuable addition you will make to their next freshman class.

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