

# Why It is worth sweating over the college essay

By Lee Shulman Bierer, [College Admissions Strategies](#) September 15, 2021

Just how important is the college essay anyway? According to recent surveys conducted by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC), the essay was given “considerable importance” or “moderate importance” by over 50% of colleges surveyed. Essays will never carry the weight of rigor of coursework and grades, but they continue to serve as tipping factors.

Until relatively recently, students were judged mostly by the tried-and-true triad of: strength of curriculum, grades/rank in class and SAT/ACT scores. Many college admissions professionals believe that as more and more colleges have joined the ranks of test-optional schools, where students have the option of sending in or not sending in their standardized test scores, there is an increased emphasis on the essay. FairTest ([www.fairtest.org](http://www.fairtest.org)), an organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts is committed to deemphasizing the use of standardized tests in making admissions decisions. FairTest currently lists over 1,700 four-year colleges that are not requiring standardized testing (SAT/ACT) for the 2021-2022 application season.

When a college is looking at thousands of applicants, many students will be presenting almost the same curriculum, similar grades and often identical standardized test scores. A well-conceived and a well-written essay is one of the best ways for a student to set themselves apart from the pack. The frequently required essay is the one component of the application where the student still maintains total control. After all, freshman, sophomore and junior grades are already on the books and most students don't vary more than 50-100 points on the tests, even with test prep; so by the time students become seniors many of the pieces of the college application puzzle are already in place.

While the anticipation of the power of the essay can be daunting, especially for a student who is on the cusp or whose first choice college is a “reach” as opposed to a “target” school; most students will come to understand that the essay really presents an opportunity rather than serving as a liability.

There is no magic formula for writing the essay. Students have probably heard the same advice multiple times in college information sessions, from their teachers and from friends; the ubiquitous “be yourself”. How many students walk away saying “what does that mean?”

Here are a few additional basic writing tips:

- Tackle a topic that only happened to you.
- Think small – recall some event or conversation that made you think differently about the world
- Start with an outline to help you organize your thoughts.
- Don't forget to make your introduction interesting – use your five senses, ask a question, recall a conversation describe something vividly.
- Write a solid essay with supporting arguments and a conclusion.
- WRR – Write, Rest and Revise – allow yourself enough time to put the essay away for a few days and then come back and make edits
- Ask for feedback from teachers, parents or anyone you think is a strong writer
- Don't let anyone write it for you

