

College Application Essay Tips

Admissions committees use the college application essay to get to know applicants in a more specific and personal way. Colleges want a third dimension—something more than transcripts and resumes—without the essay, your application profile may lack life.

THE ESSAY...

- ❖ Is useful in determining the fit between the applicant and the college
- ❖ Shows your writing abilities and your mastery of standard English conventions
- ❖ Is particularly important for 'grey zone' applicants. It can sway a reader and get an application (that might otherwise get dismissed) to the committee for further consideration
- ❖ Most effectively personalizes your profile
- ❖ Is the only aspect of the application process that, as a senior, is wholly in YOUR hands

GENERAL TIPS FOR ESSAY WRITING

DO...

Write about what you know
Be specific in addressing your topic and narrow in your scope
Reveal your voice through your writing
Show rather than tell (use examples and illustrate the points you're making with anecdotes, etc.)

DON'T...

Write what you think others want to read
Exaggerate or write to impress—it's usually transparent
Write a five paragraph expository essay
Use flowery, inflated language or employ a pretentious style
Ramble
Neglect the technical part of your essay—grammar, spelling, sentence variation, etc.

WRITING THE ESSAY

STEP ONE

Identify the prompt for the university you are interested in applying to and start brainstorming original ways you can address that prompt. While brainstorming, consider the following points:

- What are your major accomplishments and *why* do you consider them accomplishments?
- What attributes and skills do you possess that are unique?
- What was the most difficult time/ experience in your life and why? How did it change you? How did you respond to this challenge? What does this tell us about you?
- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Whom would you most like to be with? (These questions will help you identify topics you're passionate about.)
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities?
- What are your dreams for the future? When you look back on your life, what would it take for you to consider it a success? How does the university factor into your dreams and plans?
- Fill in the blank: "I am a very _____ person" and now a) think of examples that prove this, and b) think of how this trait could positively impact a university community

STEP TWO

Write the essay! Rather than addressing the prompt in your standard 5 paragraph expository essay, try using a narrative style where you tell a story or paint a picture: rather than telling your readers about an event or interest, **SHOW** them. ("Coaching soccer made me a more patient person" is telling; "I had to remember that Johnny had never played soccer before; so I asked him yet again to stop picking up the ball, but this time I took a deep breath and did it without turning purple" is showing.) If you're having a difficult time giving "showing" examples, then chances are you should choose a different topic where you are able to provide descriptive, concrete examples.

Keep in mind:

- You need to keep your reader's interest from the first sentence.
- Your essay will be one of hundreds the reader has encountered that week; do not use an "overdone" topic unless you approach it in a truly innovative way
- You don't want a topic that will turn readers off. Choosing a contentious topic (why abortion is good/bad; why Christianity is the only "right" religion; why the Democratic/ Republican Party is good/evil; why marijuana should be legalized) is a huge risk.
- **YOU** are the topic—not an event, experience, or position you've held; always bring it back to **YOU**.

STEP THREE

- Proofread, proofread, proofread! And don't just proofread your own work; ask both people who are very familiar with you (family and friends) and people who don't know you as well (new teachers) for their feedback. Your family and friends will be able to tell you if your words properly convey who you are, and your less familiar readers will let you know if there are any gaps in explanation.

- In addition to noting grammatical errors, ask your readers for feedback on the following:
 - 1) Can they tell WHAT the essay is about? (what prompt it addresses)
 - 2) Are active verbs used whenever possible? (avoid am, was, is, are, will, were)
 - 3) Is my sentence structure varied? (some long, some short, some simple, some compound)
 - 4) Did you want to keep reading after the introduction? Did it intrigue you?
 - 5) Do I use imagery often? Can you picture what I am describing?
 - 6) What is the best part of the essay? The worst?
 - 7) Do I have clear connections/ transitions between my thoughts or are they abrupt? Do my thoughts follow a logical pattern?
 - 8) Does anything need more elaboration? Less?
 - 9) Is every single sentence crucial, or can I leave some parts out?
 - 10) Does my conclusion merely restate what I've already said or is it meaningful?
 - 11) Does the essay "sound" like me? Is it an accurate representation of who you think I am? Could anyone else have written it?
 - 12) Does this essay stand out? Will you remember it a week from now?
 - 13) Answer the following sentence: "As a reader, I want to accept you to the university because _____." (If you can't answer this, let me know! It means I have more work to do!)

- The answers people give you should help you determine how much more work you need to do. If you get overwhelmed, take a week off and come back to your essay with "fresh" eyes. Very seldom do writers get it "right" on the first or even second drafts.

My most important experience was not of my doing. It sought me out; I didn't cause it.

My preferred companions are books or music or pen and paper. I have only a small circle of close friends, few of whom get along together. We could easily be counted "misfits" and, to be plain, I found it quite easy to doubt my ability to have any sort of "intimate relationship."

However, after the closing festivities of Andover Summer School this past summer, on the night before we were scheduled to leave, a girl I had met during the program's course approached me. She came to my room and sat down on my bed and announced that she was debating with herself whether she wanted me to become her boyfriend. She wanted my reaction, my opinion.

I was startled, to say the least, and frightened. I instantly said, "No." I told her I on no account wanted this and that I would reject any gestures she made towards starting a relationship. I would ignore her entirely, if need be. I explained that I was a loner. I wanted nothing whatsoever to do with a relationship. I talked a lot and very fast.

To my surprise, she did not leave instantly. Instead, she hugged her knees and rocked back and forth on my bed. I watched her from across the room. She rocked, and I watched. I thought of the chance she had taken in coming to me, the courage that must have required. Doubts crept up on me. Opportunity had knocked and I had not unlocked the door. It might soon depart.

"I lied," I said. "I was afraid of what might happen if we became involved. But it's better to take the chance than to be afraid."

She told me she knew I had lied. My response made her realize, though, how much she actually wanted me to be her boyfriend. We committed ourselves to one another then and there and decided to keep up a relationship after Andover.

Even then, I was not sure which had been the lie, my immediate rejection or my moment of bravery. Now I think that everything I said may have been true when I said it. But I'm still not sure.

I learned, that night, that I could be close to someone. I also realize, now, that it doesn't matter whether or not I am considered an outsider or if that person is a misfit; the only important thing is sharing the feeling, the closeness, the connection. As long as there is something between two people - friendship, love, shared interests, whatever else -- it is a sign that there can be some reconciliation with fear, some "fit" for misfits. And it shows that fear need not always win, that we can grow and change, and even have second chances.

I am still seeing her.