

Writing the College Application Essay

Step One: Brainstorming

The most important part of your essay is the subject matter. Consider the following facts:

- ✚ What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments?
- ✚ Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- ✚ Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- ✚ What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of this difficulty?
- ✚ Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
- ✚ Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- ✚ Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with?
- ✚ Have you ever experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something to which you were previously blind?
- ✚ What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy? How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your admissions essay for you?
- ✚ What have you done outside the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- ✚ What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
- ✚ What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful? What people, things, and accomplishments do you need? How does this particular university fit into your plan for the future?

Step Two: Selecting an Essay topic

You must consider topics that will allow you to synthesize your important personal characteristics and experiences into a coherent whole while simultaneously addressing your desire to attend a specific institution. Remember you need to leave a lasting impression on someone who will probably read 50 to 100 essays a day. Here are some suggested guidelines:

- ✚ Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance to your life, with which you can use vivid personal experiences as supporting details?
- ✚ Is your topic a gimmick? That is, do you plan to write your essay in iambic pentameter or make it funny? Be careful if you select this choice.... almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the admissions committee. Nothing is worse than not laughing or not being amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing.
- ✚ Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? Don't mention GPA's or standardized test scores in your essay.
- ✚ Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should choose a different topic.
- ✚ Can you fully answer the question asked of you? Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit, or will you end up writing a poor summary of something that might be interesting as a report or research paper? Make sure they know you actually understand your topic. Also, be sure you can write to admissions officers and that you are not writing over their heads.

- ✚ Can you keep the reader’s interest from the first word? The entire essay must be convincing — the admissions officer will not devote an hour to your reading.
- ✚ Is your topic overdone? If so make sure you have a unique or convincing answer to a classic topic — this can pay off big.
- ✚ Will your topic turn off a large number of people? The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively! Avoid specific religious and political doctrines and controversial opinions.
- ✚ If presenting a controversial topic, you must acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.
- ✚ Will an admissions officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

After evaluating your topics and making your final decision to write on a personal hardship or tragedy, remember: Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college or graduate school student. You don’t want to be remembered as the pathetic applicant but the one who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. You must use the horrible experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics.

Step three: Writing the essay

Remember your two goals:

1. To persuade the admissions officer that you are extremely worthy of admissions
2. To make the admissions officer aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized test score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality

There is no one step-by-step method to follow to write a good essay. Every topic requires a different treatment since no two essays are alike. The following are some suggested steps to assist with the writing process:

1. Answer the question.
2. Be original.
3. Be yourself.
4. Don’t thesaurize your composition.
5. Use imagery and clear, vivid prose.
6. Spend the most time on your introduction:
 - a. Do not summarize in your introduction.
 - b. Create mystery or intrigue in your introduction – force the reader to continue.
7. Use transition.
8. Conclusions are critical:
 - a. Expand upon broader implications of your discussion.
 - b. Consider linking *your* conclusions to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
 - c. Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
 - d. End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not **TRY** to do this; it should come **NATURALLY**.
 - e. Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
 - f. Remember, your essay need not be so tidy that you can answer why people starve in Africa— you are not writing a “sitcom” – but you should forge some attempt at closure.

9. Give your draft to others: Check for the following:
- a. What is the essay about?
 - b. Have you used active voice verbs wherever possible?
 - c. Is the sentence structure varied?
 - d. Are there any clichés?
 - e. Is transition used properly?
 - f. Is imagery used often and makes for clarity?
 - g. What is the best part of the essay?
 - h. What is the worst part of the essay?
 - i. What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
 - j. What parts of the essay do not support your main argument?
 - k. Is every single sentence crucial to the essay?
 - l. What does the essay reveal about your personality?
 - m. Could anyone else have written this essay?
 - n. How would the following blank be filled in?
“I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more
_____.”

10. **Revise, Revise, Revise:** You are only allowed so many words so use them wisely.

Sample Questions

Kellog--Northwestern

- + Each of our applicants is unique. Describe how your background, values, academics, activities, and/or leadership skills will enhance the experience of other Northwestern students.
- + Outside school I ...

Haas--University of California, Berkley

- + If you could have dinner with one individual in the past, present, or future, who would it be and why?
- + Describe an innovative solution you have created to address a specific change.

Harvard

- + What have you learned from a mistake?
- + How have you experienced culture shock?

Kenan-Flagler--University of North Carolina

- + Describe the major obstacles or challenges you have faced in pursuit of your goals. Tell us how you addressed these challenges and how they have shaped you.
- + Tell us about any international experience you have, either living or working (traveling) abroad. Tell us how it has impacted your global perspective.

Digital Essays – New and innovative use of PowerPoint presentations are beginning to be used by some colleges and universities. Creativity and cleverness are allowed in these digital essays. Slides are limited in number and text, and visuals combine to make the presentation. This shows the school your mastery of technology as well as presenting yourself to them. Schools get a relief from the boring “same ole, same ole” essays they have seen for decades.

Remember: Be original, creative, and honest. Sell yourself to the university.