

## **College Application Essay Tips**

It's time to discover yourself. It's time to take a leap of faith with just a keyboard and memories. It's time to convey in one brief response what you have discovered with pride and eagerness. It's time to write your college admissions essay.

Many students view the college admissions essay as a stressful, defeating experience and are at a loss of what to write or how to write it. College admissions officers, however, hope these students have fun while writing their essay just as much as they hope they have fun reading it.

### **How Important Is My College Admissions Essay?**

Most schools hold an important mission to evaluate every student in detail. Still, admissions officers read at times more than 2,000 essays each year and have a limited time to complete them. Students should keep in mind that admissions officers from across the world have expressed that great essays get read and good essays get skimmed. With an average of just two minutes spent on each essay, it's no question that the college essay should showcase your unique voice in the first sentence.

Each college and university will look for something different when it comes to the admissions essay. Some colleges use the essay as a deciding factor for whether the student is to be admitted during a final round of evaluations, while others see the essay as having only a small effect on the final decision. Take some time to research how important your college admissions essay is to your school and why it is so important.

Ask yourself:

- Does the school use the essay to see if you will be a good fit for their campus and curriculum?
- Does the school want to see the student's creativity and originality that separates him from other applicants?
- Do they hope to admit students who have overcome challenges, showed leadership skills, or found themselves and their career path?

### **Where Do I Begin?**

Begin with yourself. College admissions officers read your essays to find the person behind the GPA and SAT scores. Use this opportunity to reveal and highlight who you are and why you would be a unique asset to their university. Take some time brainstorming how you can best convey your personality, interests and stories to the admissions officers.

The following three questions can help inspire your essay. See how each question can go into detail and reveal who you are, then practice these brainstorming techniques to find a good foundation for your essay.

### 1. What is important to you?

**Answer:** Teaching middle school and junior high school students

**Why:** Because I want these students to understand the potential they hold and begin to make a difference within the younger generations.

**How:** I found my passion for teaching through a mentorship program at my high school. During this program, I helped a student named Christopher who struggled with an academic inferiority complex. By the end of his seventh grade year, he was on the honor roll and was inspired to become a teacher. After this experience, I knew I wanted to become a teacher to help more students like Christopher.

This student now has a good starting point for writing an admissions essay. He can write his essay about his experience with the mentorship program, telling a story about his experience mentoring Christopher and how that began a new journey in his life to become a teacher. The story will keep the admissions officer's attention while also showing the student's ability to lead and work toward a career goal. More importantly, the essay will share with the officers what is important to the student and who that student is while making an emotional connection.

### 2. What makes you a good fit for this college?

**Answer:** I have a similar culture to the journalism students at the college while still holding a unique perspective.

**Why:** I have been raised in a variety of cultures and understand the value of everyone's voice. I feel as though the journalism students at this college also hold onto this belief and will be able to welcome a new student who can bring even more fresh ideas for the newspaper.

**How:** While I was touring the college, I overheard a group of students discussing an article in the newspaper about whether or not vegetarian eating was healthier and cost effective for college students. I was able to chime in and was welcomed for my new perspectives and listening abilities.

This student can write her essay about why she feels she is a good fit for the college, starting the essay with an anecdote of the time she visited the school and felt welcomed by the other students on campus through the sharing of new ideas.

### 3. What experience has had an impact on you?

**Answer:** Working on a 1988 Camaro with my grandfather

**Why:** Through this experience I was able to talk to my grandfather and learn more about his life. One day he talked about how he would make grandma happy by cooking tortilla soup. He shared the recipe with me that day.

**How:** His stories inspired me to open up my own restaurant so I could make my grandma and her town happy.

The experience you write about in your essay doesn't have to be super exciting. Admissions officers will appreciate a genuine story that changed you in some way. Admissions essays are not limited to these three topics. Some schools will have a specific question for you to answer. Taking the time to brainstorm the answer to the question, why the answer is that answer and how the answer came about will help you get started on an essay that shows the admissions officers who you are rather

## **How Do I Write The Essay?**

Before writing your essay, make sure you understand the guidelines from the school you are applying to. These guidelines may include:

- Word count
- Spacing/Formatting
- Specific question to respond to (prompt)
- Information to include
- Tone/style
- Deadline

### **Writing Within Limitations**

Most schools will have very little restrictions for your essay. They want you to be unique and free to answer the question in a way that shows your personality. However, most schools will have a word count and a deadline. Make sure that you write at least as much as the minimum word count, but no more than the maximum word count. Also, make sure you turn in your essay on time. Many admissions officers will struggle to get to an essay that has been sent to them late. If your school asks you a specific question to answer in your essay, do not deviate from that question. Schools want to know if you are able to follow directions and instructions well.

### **Your Introduction Matters**

You should spend the most time on your introduction, as this will usually determine whether the admission officer will read your essay or skim over it. Start your essay with a unique voice that is your own. Telling a story or anecdote can also be a good beginning to your essay.

### **Think About The Tone And Your Flow**

Continue your essay with the voice you established in your introduction and go into more detail about the topic you chose to write about. Don't worry about writing flowery words or including large vocabulary words. Admissions officers would rather you be yourself in the essay than write what you think they want to hear. Keep the reader engaged by using active voice and descriptive language.

### **Finish With A Strong Conclusion**

Conclude your essay strong and concise. Make sure by the end of your essay that the reader understands the main goal of what you wanted to communicate in the essay.

### **Revise, Reread, and Get An Extra Opinion**

Once you have completed the essay, step away from it for some time and let others read it and critique it. Then, go back on your own and read it again to see if there is anything you would like to reword or rearrange. Make sure there are no misspellings or grammar mistakes. Submit your essay using the preferred method of the school you are applying to before the deadline.

Writing the essay should be a fun opportunity to share with the admissions officer who you are. Give yourself enough time to brainstorm, write, and edit your essay. Remember that you can add a needed presence to the school you are applying to. Don't be afraid to talk about yourself and let the admissions staff know how you could be a valuable asset to their higher education facility. It's time to discover yourself. It's time to take a leap of faith with just a keyboard and memories.

## Choosing a Topic for Your College Essay

Every year, an admissions officer reads hundreds, even thousands of application essays. After reading a plethora of essays about dreams, visions, academics and athletics, the content inevitably begins to sound redundant and painfully ordinary.

If you want to stand out against the thousands of applicants with similar test scores and GPAs, writing a college essay that is memorable and proficient is the best way to do so. Usually an application will offer a very broad topic with which you can do almost anything, or they will allow you to write about whatever topic you would like. In this case, choosing your topic plays a pivotal part in the success of your essay.

### Wrong the Wrongs So You Can Write the Right

Before you start writing your essay, here are a few topics you should avoid:

#### **Don't be repetitive.**

If you have already included information in another area of the application, you do not need to relay this information again. Your admissions officer already knows you were president of the Beta Club, fed giraffes in a volunteer retreat and graduated tenth in your class. Your essay should not reiterate these accomplishments. If it does, your essay will sound redundant, uninteresting and leave little room for new information.

#### **Don't be negative.**

Even if you have overcome some problems in your life such as drugs, alcohol, crime, abuse, or depression, your college essay may not be the best place to reveal your life's roadblocks. If not handled well, it can result in an uncomfortable, emotional essay that may leave the admission officer questioning whether or not you are ready for college.

#### **Don't be one-sided.**

Think about topics that are taboo at the dinner table: politics and religion. Though you can write a great article about subjects in these areas, many times they can come off as closed-minded and offensive to anyone who may hold a different belief, and you risk being perceived as arrogant. If you choose to write about a touchy or controversial subject, be mindful and careful when handling the essay.

#### **Don't overestimate or underestimate your writing skills.**

Some people shy away from certain topics because they feel they will not be able to execute it. Other students feel that they can write a brilliant essay on a brilliant topic, and end up overstressing themselves. When brainstorming college essay topics, be honest with yourself about your writing style, your strengths and weaknesses, and the topics at which your writing capabilities can excel.

#### **Don't forget to research your school.**

You will most likely be applying to more than one school, and if you are going to be writing separate essays on a similar topic for each application, do not forget to do some research on each school. This way, you can ensure that each essay is unique, and ties in the strengths of that particular university. Remember to proof-read; you do not want to make the mistake of writing a university's name and then forgetting to change the name when applying for a different school, or applying for a college that you say has "small class sizes," and then try to use the same essay for a college that has large class sizes. The school will know whether or not you took the time to understand the atmosphere, programs and faculty at the school before applying, and colleges love to see that students have a specific interest in their school. If you research the school first and include your research in a personal way, you will have a better chance of being accepted.

## Potential College Essay Topics

Creativity, originality, and memorability are the most important aspects to keep in mind when choosing college essay topics. Before writing your college essay, you should take the time to plan, brainstorm and discover ways you can make your essay fresh and personal.

### Stories

Stories can be a spectacular way of letting your personality, beliefs and challenges show through while also keeping the admissions officer interested and engaged. To successfully write a college essay as a story, you need to be a strong writer with developed skills in storytelling. The essay should not simply be a story, but rather an outlook on life, a perspective of the future, something deeper hidden within the story that will help you stand out and get your point across in a delicate and appealing way

### Evaluations

For these topics, your essay should detail very specifically an experience, obstacle, achievement, or other life event that have changed you or your life in some way. You can incorporate elements from the storytelling genre of essay writing, including anecdotes, to inject more personality into your essay. If you have had any significant moment in your life that you feel you can effectively detail in your college essay, or if you have grown or matured in a way that you feel would be useful for the admissions officers to know, this topic may be the best for you

### Influences

This topic can be very broad, but also enlightening for admissions officers. What influences you to reach your goals, aspire to become more, or take a stand for something you believe in? It could be a cause, a person or an organization. Whatever it may be, these essays can be extremely personal, showing your compassion, vulnerability, and concerns. Keep in mind that although the focus on the essay is a cause, person or organization, the essay should still be about you and what you can offer to the school to which you are applying. Don't get wrapped up in everything that the person, cause or organization has done, but instead write about how that affected you and what you have done to follow in those footsteps

### Diversity

If you are an international or minority student, you are already bringing diversity to the school. Highlighting your diversity farther can give the admissions officers an idea of what unique gifts you can bring to the school. Before you begin writing an essay on this topic, make sure that you understand what diversity means to you. Diversity delves beyond that of race, and the more diverse a community is, the more it can come together and grow in unity, embracing the different strengths and weaknesses as gifts

Writing a college essay can be a daunting task at first, but understanding how different topics of college essays work may benefit you in the future. Know your writing style and what you are trying to communicate to the admissions officers. Your college essay is your first impression to the school to which you are applying. You want your first impression to be one of intelligence, endurance and motivation. Though there are plenty topics of college essays that many admissions officers tell students to avoid, as well as topics admissions officers will encourage students to write, it is a very personal and specific decision. If your college does not give you a certain topic for your admissions essay, get to know yourself and get to know your school. If you pair this knowledge with good writing skills, spell and grammar checks, peer reviews, and editing, you are sure to make a good impression with the school. **Don't lie and don't exaggerate; just be yourself. The admissions officers will see that and admire your authenticity.**

# 10 Tips for College Admissions Essays

In the admissions process, colleges and universities generally use three criteria for determining which students to accept and which to reject:

- **Previous coursework** – your college preparatory work and grade point average (GPA)
- **Standardized test scores** – SAT and ACT are the two most respected.
- **Admission/Entrance essays**

Of the three criteria, the college entrance essay provides you with the greatest opportunity to distinguish yourself from your competition and show off the person behind the statistics. This information will help in writing a college essay and help you boost your chances of being accepted.

## Section 1: Planning Your Essay

### Tip #1: Understand the Admissions Board Psychology

When you have compiled all the pieces of your application and sent it to the college/university of your dreams, all of your hard work gets placed in a pile with hundreds of other applications. Then a small group of admissions officers will review each application, looking over the scores and coursework and reading the college application essays.

The key to convincing the admissions officers is in understanding what they are looking for. They want students who will:

- Succeed once they are admitted;
- Contribute to the educational experience of other students; and,
- Bring honor and prestige to the university once they graduate.

In your college admissions essay, you want to portray yourself as a student who will meet those needs. Of course, the specifics of what qualifies as “succeed” or “bring honor” will depend a bit on the particular university, but all admissions officers share these three goals.

Before you write your college admissions essay, take a few minutes and jot down some answers to the following questions:

- How can I reassure the admissions board that I will succeed in their school?
- How will I show that I am determined and ambitious; that I will not get poor grades or drop out?
- How can I contribute positively to the educational experience of other students?
- How might I bring honor and prestige to the university?
- What are my long-term goals? Might I win an award someday, or start a business, or improve a scientific process?

### Tip #2: Determine Your Essay Goals

Along with the three questions above, you should contemplate how you want the admissions officers to perceive you. After reading your college admissions essay, what should they think of your personality and activities?

Most students want the college admissions board to view them as responsible, dependable, and academically ambitious. These are excellent essay goals, but you should also consider the essay in relation to your class work. If your class work already shows that you are studious and determined

(because you have taken a wide variety of advanced classes), then you may want to highlight another feature of your personality.

Along with developing an image of your character, writing the college admissions essay allows you to feature other aspects of your life that are not reflected in your pre-college coursework. Some aspects to consider:

- Have I worked at an interesting or relevant job?
- Do I belong to any clubs or organizations?
- Have I demonstrated leadership or teamwork?
- Have I demonstrated compassion or community-responsibility?

### **Tip #3: Distinguish Yourself from the Other Applicants**

This bit of strategic thinking should be fairly easy. If you are a minority, you can reference the strengths of your culture. You don't need to elaborate at length; a sentence or two should be enough to ensure that the admissions board pays attention to you.

Remember that you are more than just a student; you are a complete person with a lifetime of experiences. You should take some time to think about what else makes you different from most the other hundreds of students writing college admissions essays. Add those features (plays piano, excellent at football, speak five languages) to your growing list of essay goals.

### **Tip #4: Contribute to the University**

Remember that one of the goals of the admissions board when reading college admissions essays is to find students who will enhance the educational experience of other students. In other words, how can you contribute to other students' learning?

One of the general goals of education is to broaden people's experiences, so that they come to realize the limits of their own intellect, and then grow beyond those limits. You have so more to contribute to the campus social and learning environment than just your academic ability.

Take a few moments to consider what else you may contribute.

- Maybe you are excellent at study groups or other forms of collaborative work.
- Maybe you will join a student organization or athletic team.
- Maybe you will write for a student newsletter or blog.

*Whatever you feel you can contribute, add that to your list of essay goals.*

### **Tip #5: Understand and Answer the Essay Prompt**

At this point, you've come up with more ideas than you can possibly fit into one essay. Now you need to focus your goals to only three or four ideas – the ones that will make you the most attractive to the college admissions board. No matter what the prompt asks, you want to ensure you include those three or four ideas in your college admissions essay.

The concept is to present a few ideas very well, rather than list all your ideas poorly. A narrowly focused essay will be much more effective than a general, vague one.

Reading and answering the prompt may seem a bit obvious, but it's often the obvious that people ignore. You should take the time to read and re-read the essay prompt, so you can answer it fully. Don't be intimidated; unlike some college exams, the college application essay prompt is not designed to trick you. However, you must demonstrate that you can read and follow directions. Think of that great pile of applications. The admissions officers are looking for a reason to disregard candidates. Don't let them reject you because you hastily overlooked a sentence in the essay prompt.

On the other hand, the prompt is designed to give you some freedom for creativity, which will allow you to work in those three or four key ideas that you have developed through tips 1 through 4. You are encouraged to find novel ways of answering the prompt, so long as you do indeed answer the questions provided.

## Section 2: Writing Your Essay

At this stage in the college admissions essay writing process, you have considered the goals and psychology of the college admissions board. You have produced a list of ideas/attributes/details about yourself that colleges will find appealing. You have narrowed that list to the three or four most important ideas – the ones that will get you into your preferred college/university. Now it is time to actually write the essay.

### Tip #6: Write with Specific Details

The key to excellent and memorable writing is to write in fine detail. The more specific your essay, the stronger an impression it will make on the admissions board. If you are trying to show that you are a dedicated scholar, don't write: "I never missed an assignment deadline, no matter how poorly I was feeling the night before." Instead you write: "In my junior year, I came down with a terrible case of pneumonia. Despite having a 103 degree fever and being required to stay in bed, I still completed my draft speech on the possible impacts of global warming on agriculture." The latter will make a stronger impression; and people vote for the people they remember.

As you are writing your essay, ask yourself:

- Is there a specific instance or example that shows this?
- Can I add imagery (colors, shapes) to make it more interesting?
- Can I replace general nouns ("class" or "car") with something specific ("Honors Geometry" or "Honda Civic")?

You may be thinking, "I don't really like to boast about my personality; I prefer to let my record speak for itself." While you should try to avoid sounding too arrogant, the college application essay is not the time for modesty. The admissions officers are expecting you to celebrate yourself, to underline your strengths and personality, so they can make a quick, accurate judgment about you.

### Tip #7: Demonstrate College-Level Diction

Diction (word choice) is the fundamental structure of writing. Your word choice reveals a great deal about your personality, education and intellect. Furthermore, if you are a bi-lingual student, you want to assure the college admissions board that you have an excellent command of the English language (remember: they want you to succeed; they need to know that you can actively participate in English-only instruction).

With this in mind, you should replace lower-level words (bad, sad, thing, nice, chance) with higher-level words (appalling, despondent, phenomena, comforting, opportunity). You might consider looking up SAT/ACT vocabulary words and working a handful of those into your essay.

You should also remove any slang or casual diction; the university is not interested in casual language in their admissions essays.



### **Tip #8: Demonstrate College-level Style**

As the proverb states, “Dress for the job you want, not the job you have.” In other words, you want to present yourself as being ready for the next job. In this instance, you want to show that you already have college-level writing skills.

So, in writing your college application essays, you should write with the following features in mind:

- Write primarily in complex sentences, rather than simple or compound sentences;
- Include figurative language such as a metaphor, a simile, personification; and
- Include a trope or scheme, such as chiasmus, oxymoron or anaphora.

As with tip #7, this serves two functions:

1. it distinguishes your essay from those that are poorly written; and
2. it reassures the admissions board of your excellent command of written English.

### **Tip #9: Have Someone Proofread Your Essay**

This is one of the most important tips on this list. Everyone who writes knows that the words in your head don’t always make it onto the page the way they should. Because you know what it should say, it’s easy to trick yourself into thinking the essay says something that it doesn’t.

For this reason, you should ask your mentor (or an English teacher) to look over your essay and check:

- **Grammar:** did you write in complete sentences? Do all your subjects and verbs agree?
- **Diction:** are all the words used properly for the target audience?
- **Organization:** have you grouped sentences together coherently?

### **Tip #10: Pay Attention to Deadlines**

College admissions essays require a tremendous amount of work. As you work and rework the essay, pay attention to the admission deadlines and requirements. Every school has their own system for how and when to file your application. Do not assume that, because one school uses e-mails and PDFs, that another school does as well.

The best way to stay organized through the college admissions process (and at the university when courses begin) is to rigorously maintain a calendar/spreadsheet that includes:

- Final deadlines
- Reminders of upcoming deadlines
- Process deadlines (breaking larger tasks into smaller steps)

### **Bonus Tip: Post, but Don't Panic!**

At some point, you will file your college admissions application. After you post it, please don’t panic. With these tips, and your determined intellect, you have an excellent chance of being accepted to a college or university.