

## WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY

### PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY

Your GPA, class rank, SATI and SATII scores are all important to a college admissions officer in helping to assess your academic abilities. But they are only numbers – they have no personality. What can make your application stand apart are the personal essays. The college essay will allow an admissions officer to look beyond those numbers and see you as a person. A well-written essay should convey your thoughts, attitudes, personal qualities, imagination, sense of humor and creativity. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from other applicants. In the end, it is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so it is important to take the time to do your best work.

### WRITING THE ESSAY

To write a college essay, use the same three-step process that you would use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. Taking the time for this process will help you to identify a focus for your essay and gather details you'll need to support it.

**Prewriting:** To start, you need to organize potential ideas for the main points of your essay. Since the purpose of the essay is to share more about you with the admissions dean, begin with YOU.

**Brainstorm** for a few minutes, making a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on your strengths of personality, not your accomplishments (i.e., you are responsible, not “an Eagle Scout;” committed, not “a three-year starter for the basketball team”). Your accomplishments are important, but more appropriate for the activities section of the application. **Discover your strengths** by doing a little research about yourself. Ask friends, parents and teachers what they see as your strengths. **Create an outline**, listing several pieces of evidence from your life next to each of the strengths that you have discovered to prove your point. **Look for patterns and connections** in the information that you have brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together in logical ways (i.e., was basketball more about the sport or about the friendships? Does your passion for numbers show itself in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store?).

**Drafting:** Getting started is often the hardest part of essay writing. Use the information that you have learned about yourself in the prewriting phase to jump-start the process. While drafting, your job is to further organize this information into a typical essay with an introduction, the body of the essay, and conclusion. **The introduction** gives your reader an idea of the essay’s contents and can be short when you need to be concise. Often a vivid sentence is sufficient, such as “My favorite science project was a complete failure.” **The body** presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and details about the incident to show rather than tell. **The conclusion** can be brief as well, with a few well-selected sentences that tie together the events and incidents that you’ve described and solidify the meaning they had to you.

**Editing:** After your draft, allow yourself time to make improvements: find and correct any errors, strengthen your focus if need be, and get feedback from another reader. Remember, this is *your* essay, making you your own best editor. No one can tell your story. Your words and ideas are the best way to go.

**Let it cool;** take a break from the work for a few days before beginning an edit. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud? **Seek feedback** from someone you like and trust (but someone likely to be honest about your writing). Ask them to tell you what they think the essay is really about. Did they get it right or do you need to do

another edit? **Edit even more**, making your language simple, direct and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Most colleges set word limits for each essay, so every word counts (say, “now” instead of “in today’s society”). **Proof read** at least two times before thinking that you are done. Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable – for all of the wrong reasons.

#### **DOs:**

- Do think “small” and write about something about which you know.
- Do reveal yourself in your writing.
- Do show rather than tell. By giving examples and illustrating your topic, you bring it to life.
- Do write in your own voice and style.
- Do tell the truth.

#### **DON'Ts:**

- Don't write what you think the admissions officer wants to read.
- Don't exaggerate or write to impress.
- Don't use a flowery, inflated or pretentious style.
- Don't neglect the technical part of your essay (grammar, spelling, and sentence structure).
- Don't ramble – say what you have to say and conclude.

### **SAMPLE COLLEGE ESSAY QUESTIONS**

**What do the Colleges want to know?** Generally, there are three types of questions on college applications: The “who are you,” the “why us,” and the “be creative.” Here are some actual questions and some tips for each type. Please note that many colleges will change their essay topics every year so be sure to check before beginning to write any essay.

**The “Who are you?” question** is asked by many colleges and, basically, boils down to “tell us about yourself.” The school wants to know you better and see how you choose to present yourself. For example: “Please complete a one page personal statement and submit it with your application.” (James Madison University); “How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?” (Bates College).

**Tip:** These direct questions offer a chance to reveal your personality, insight, and commitment. The danger is that it is often open-ended, so you need to find a focus. Find one or two things that will reveal your best qualities and avoid the urge to tell all.

**The “Why Us?” question** asks for you to discuss your choice of college or career. They are looking for information about your goals, and about how serious your commitment is to this particular school. For example: “Why is UVM a good college choice for you?” (University of Vermont); “Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study.” (Westfield State College).

**Tip:** The focus is provided. Why did you decide to apply to this school or to focus on this particular career path? This should be clear to you, since you no doubt went through some kind of selection process. Make sure that you know your subject well! For example, if you say that you want to attend Smith College to major in dance, the school will be able to tell how carefully you have chosen (Smith doesn't have a dance major).

**The “Creative” question** is used by colleges to evaluate you through your choice of some tangential item: a national issue, a famous person, what you would put in a time capsule, a photograph. Here the school is looking at your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge and education. For example: “Do you believe there’s a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others.” (Denison University); “Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.” (Common Application).

**Tip:** Again, you have something to react to, a way to show yourself and write about your real views. But do not forget the importance of writing an informed essay and the significance of your audience. For example, do not write about a fantasy lunch with a famous writer and get the titles of her novels wrong. Also, when thinking about how creative to get, use common sense. Being creative to the point of being wacky is a risk that might not be in your best interest.

[Many thanks for Sarah Myers McGinty and her book *The College Application Essay*, on which this information is based.]