

Personal Narrative/College Application Essay

English 12

Heinrich/Mahony

The personal narrative essay gives the reader a verbal picture of “who” you are beyond your vital statistics. It allows the reader to get to know you, what is important to you, and, in a good essay, the reader gains insight into your passions, ambitions, goals, attitudes, and values. Below are several sample topics taken from the Common App. **You will be writing an essay of no fewer than 300 words but no longer than 650 words.** Read through the topics and the tips for essay writing. By Tuesday, Sept. 3, you will hand in the required items found at the end of this packet.

#1. Some students have a background or story that they believe is so central to their identity that this application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

#2. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

#3. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?

#4. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there and why is it meaningful to you?

#5. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or an idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

Tips for a good essay

1. You aren't just describing something; the best essays will **explore the complexity of an issue**. When you examine the "impact on you," you need to show the **depth of your critical thinking** abilities. **Introspection, self-awareness and self-analysis are all important here.** And be careful with essays about the winning touchdown or tie-breaking goal. These sometimes have an off-putting "look how great I am" tone and very little self-evaluation.

2. Be careful to keep the "importance to you" at the heart of an essay about moral or ethical issues. It's easy to get off track with a personal narrative essay topic and start ranting about global warming, Darfur, or abortion. The admissions folks want to discover your character, passions and abilities in an essay; they want more than a political lecture.

3. A good essay on a person who influenced you does more than "describe." Dig deep and "analyze." Handle a "hero" essay with care. Your readers have probably seen a lot of essays talking about what a great role model Mom or Dad or Sis is. Also realize that the "influence" of this person doesn't need to be positive.

4. In college admissions essays, **wordiness is by far the most common stylistic error**. In most cases, students could cut one-third of an essay, lose no meaningful content, and make the piece much more engaging and effective. Wordiness comes in many forms with many different names -- deadwood, repetition, redundancy, BS, filler, fluff -- but whatever the type, those extraneous words have no place in a winning college admissions essay.

5. Watch out for **vague and imprecise language** in your college application essay. If you find that your essay is filled with words like "stuff" and "things" and "aspects" and "society," you may also find that your application ends up in the rejection pile. Vague language can be removed easily by identifying what exactly you mean by "things" or "society." Find the precise word. Are you really talking about all of society, or a much more specific group of people? When you mention "things" or "aspects," be precise -- what exact things or aspects?

6. **Clichés have no place in a college admissions essay**. A cliché is an over-used and tired phrase, and use of clichés makes prose unoriginal and uninspiring. With your essay you are trying to get the admissions officers excited about you and your essay topic, but there is nothing exciting about clichés. Instead, they diminish the essay's message and reveal the author's lack of creativity.

7. The most common verb in the English language is "to be" (is, was, were, am, etc.). Without doubt you will use the verb "to be" multiple times in your admissions essay. However, if the majority of your sentences rely on "to be," you're sapping your essay of energy.

8. Most college admissions essays are first-person narratives, so they are obviously written in the first person. For this reason, the very nature of application essays raises a particular challenge: you are being asked to write about yourself, but an essay can start sounding both repetitive and narcissistic if you use the word "I" twice in every sentence. Look at your sentences and try other ways of saying the same thing without "I".

9. Passive voice is not a grammatical error, but overuse can lead to essays that are wordy, confusing and unengaging. To identify passive voice, you need to map out a sentence and identify the subject, verb and object. A sentence is passive when the object takes the position of the subject. The result is a sentence in which the thing performing the action of the sentence is either missing or tacked onto the end of the sentence. Here are a few simple examples:

- Passive: The window was left open. (we are left wondering *who* left the window open)
- Active: Joe left the window open. (now we know that Joe is the one performing the action)
- Passive: The ball was kicked into the goal by Wendy. (Wendy is the one doing the kicking, but she isn't in the subject position in the sentence)
- Active: Wendy kicked the ball into the goal. (note that the active form of the sentence is shorter and more engaging)

10. In general, an expletive construction begins with the empty word "there" or "it" (sometimes called a filler subject). In an expletive construction, the word "there" or "it" is not functioning as

a pronoun. That is, it has no antecedent. The word does not refer to anything, but is simply an empty word taking the place of the sentence's true subject. The empty subject is then followed by the uninspiring verb "to be" (is, was, etc.). Phrases such as "it seems" produce a similarly uninspiring function in a sentence.

The resulting sentence will be wordier and less engaging than it would be if written with a meaningful subject and verb. Consider, for example, these sentences with expletive constructions:

- **It was** the final goal of the game **that** determined the state championship.
- **There were** two students at my summer camp **who** had severe psychological problems.
- **It is** Saturday **when** I get to spend time at the animal shelter.

All three sentences are unnecessarily wordy and flat. By removing the expletive constructions, the sentences become far more concise and engaging:

- The final goal of the game determined the state championship.
- Two students at my summer camp had severe psychological problems.
- On Saturday I get to spend time at the animal shelter.

Note that not all uses of "it is," "it was," "there is," or "there are" are expletive constructions. If the word "it" or "there" is a true pronoun with an antecedent, no expletive construction exists. For example:

- I have always loved music. It is one of the most important parts of my life.

Due on Tuesday, Sept. 4:

1. Evidence of brainstorming (we'll do a brainstorming session in class, but feel free to do as much as you need).
2. Topic sentence or idea outline.
3. Rough draft with evidence of editing

Due on Friday, Sept. 6:

Final Typed Essay.