

The Power of the College Essay

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How are the essays used?

Admission

- At the majority of colleges, an essay does not usually determine whether or not a student is granted admission, unless it is extremely poor, or the student is not a strong candidate. However, at highly-selective institutions or if a student is a very marginal applicant, it can!
- It is still important because it allows the admissions staff to learn more personal information about the student. The more we know, the better we can counsel that student on whether or not our institution is a good fit.

Scholarships

- An essay definitely comes in to play through the scholarship process.
- It can help set one student apart from another with similar academic credentials.

Placement

- Some colleges may use the essay to determine placement in first-year English courses.

Who is the audience?

- Students should get to know their admissions counselor. That person is usually the first “reader” on the student’s file.
- The more selective the school, the more admissions counselors and/or faculty members may review the file.

What are we looking for?

- Insight in to the student’s personality and sense of self.
- Information that cannot be found elsewhere in the application.
- Anything that will set the student apart from the many other applicants with equally good academic credentials and recommendations.
- Assurance that you can think logically and analytically. We want to see that you can effectively articulate your thoughts on paper. Not to mention, that you can effectively answer a question.

Common Mistakes to Avoid

- Don’t tell us what you think we want to hear; it probably isn’t!
- Don’t try to be too academic in your approach. This is not an essay you would write for an AP English assignment.
- If humor does not come easily to you, don’t try to be funny in your essay.
- Don’t avoid controversial topics.
- Try not to write about common life experiences such as death of a loved one, religious experiences, etc. Remember that you are one of thousands of applicants to these schools and there is only so much that you can experience in 18 years.

Tips:

- BE GENUINE!
- Brainstorm. Ask your friends and family to describe you. Jot down what they say—an awesome essay topic may be lurking!
- Let your personality shine through. If you have a great sense of humor, don't be afraid to make your essay funny. Alternatively, if you are not funny, don't fake it!
- It is ok to be different.
- Choose a topic that you feel passionately about, even if it is controversial.
- The essay is to be about YOU!!! You need to be proud of it as the only representation of your personality to admissions committees.
- Finally, proofread, proofread, and proofread again!

2014-2015 Common Application Essay Prompts

1. *Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.*
2. *Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?*
3. *Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?*
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. *Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.*

Actual instructions from Common Application

The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. *What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores?* Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. **Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so.**

(The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)