Name: Period: Date:

College Essay Assignment

Many of you will be asked to write a personal essay this year either for admission to a college/university or for consideration for a scholarship. Typically, these assignments force you to focus on **yourself**, **your values and beliefs**, the **experiences and people who have influenced you**, and **your personal and professional goals**.

If you have not already done so, go online to the school(s) to which you expect to apply and check out the required essay topics. If your school does not have essay requirements or you do not plan to attend college, choose from the topics included in this packet. Your essay should be **250-500 words**, and you should adhere to standard MLA format. In your final draft, you are to use the topic as your title and put the name of the college in parentheses. **PLEASE NOTE** that adherence to the topic is worth **20 points** of the overall 100. If I don't know your topic; you can't earn those points!

EXAMPLE:

Discuss something you secretly like but pretend not to, or vice versa. (UVA)

What is the purpose of college essays?

Since the goal of college admissions is to select students who will be able to both benefit from and contribute to the educational experience at the school, the admissions officer looks for indications that the student is mentally prepared, interested in learning, and has ideas and energy to help him or her meet the challenges of college. The admissions officer looks for essays that seem genuine and that provide a real sense of who the student is. And since it may be difficult to choose among many qualified applicants and many similar admission essays, he or she keeps an eye out for any characteristic of an essay that makes the student stand out as a candidate—whether an ingenious opening, well chosen details, anecdotes about past experience that are especially appropriate, or persuasive language.

Grading Rubric

Did you answer the question appropriately?	20 points
Did you use intentional and vivid language choices that make your voice rich, personal, and honest and very distinctive? (It is devoid of clichés, vagueness, and laziness with language. It directly aids in achieving the essay's purpose.)	20
Did you use a clever and effective hook?	10
Did your content relate back to a central purpose of selling yourself and your talents for the university? Did you include appropriate transitions? Does your information flow in a logical progression?	20
Did you use a dynamic and effective "clincher" statement/paragraph?	10
Did you follow the length requirements?	5
FORMAT: font, margins, front-page header, page-number headings, centered title, etc.	5
STYLE, GRAMMAR, MECHANICS: spelling, punctuation, usage, word choice, sentence structure, etc.	10

Deadlines

A **hard copy** of your essay is due at the beginning of class on _____. An **electronic submission** through turnitin.com is due by class time on the same day.

Potential Topics—Please note that some of these are no longer current!

Potential Topics from the Common Application, *for an essay that "helps [admissions officers] become acquainted with you as a person and a student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself."*

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.

Potential Topics from Wake Forest, *designed to give "insight into your character and intellect."*

6. "In the republic of mediocrity, genius is dangerous." ~Robert Ingersoll / How are you dangerous?
7. "Have you learned the lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside for you? Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced themselves against you, and disputed passage with you?" ~Walt Whitman
8. "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know." ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

If you would like to complete a different essay prompt from those listed here, you must receive prior approval from Mr. Sabolcik first!
For all essays, you should include the essay question/prompt below your MLA header and above your title.

Essay DOs and DON'Ts

SHOW! Don't tell. Allow the reader to experience what you experienced, rather than just recalling information. **Showing**: His eyes are closed, and he's cradling the guitar in his arms like a lover. It's as if he's trying to hold on to something that wants to let go. **Telling**: He sits on the couch holding his guitar.	Never express cynicism about the point of writing an essay.
Write several rough drafts.	Never write about how you couldn't figure out what to write about.
Answer the question asked.	Never write something witty that says nothing about what's important to you.
Tailor your essay to each college or university you apply to.	Never rely solely on a spellchecker.
Include specific details that make the experience yours and no one else's.	Never break the rules about length, topic, or format.
Develop a structured essay—draw the reader in with an enticing opening, develop your ideas logically, and end smoothly.	Never let parents, teachers, or friends get so involved that the essay stops being about you.
Write plainly, and with correct spelling and grammar.	
Write something you'd like to read. Remember, your essay is being read by other human beings, not machines.	

More Suggestions for Writing Admissions Essays

(David Graves, Senior Associate Director of Admissions at UGA)

- **Make it unique to you**. For several years, one of UGA's essay questions asked the applicant to share an experience from their high school years where they gained respect for intellectual, social, or cultural differences. Our rough estimate is that more than 20% of the replies focused on their high school and the wide range of backgrounds and ideas that encompassed their last four years. They would list the range of cultures, languages, clubs and thoughts, but there was a lack of specific details about the individual student and an actual experience. While many of these essays were technically very strong and showed great passion and love for their school, they lacked the concept of uniqueness. If ten or more people can write the exact same essay, then it is time to rethink that essay. When we say unique, though, we are not focused on a clever or one-of-a-kind idea, but instead your own individual story in all its wonderful detail.

- **Show and Tell**. Do you remember when you were in elementary school, and it was time for show and tell? The boy with the blonde crew cut from the second row slowly stood up, holding carefully to a small, brown paper bag. When he got to the front of the class, he gently opened the bag and eased out a long, flat almost paper like object, and everyone made an oooh sound. A snakeskin that he had discovered in his backyard next to his dad's tool shed. The class listened to him speak, but their minds were on the snakeskin, with its crinkly feel and wild designs. Wasn't the show part just a little more exciting than the tell part? Nothing against the telling, but there is just something about the "show" that allows us to use all our senses. That is how it is with admissions essays. You need to be able to draw the reader out beyond the straight text, and use words and images that trigger all the senses. Of course, I do not want thousands of snake skins sent to my office, or any other foreign objects. The difference between showing and telling is in the details. Strong essays focus on specific details over basic statements. When admissions counselors read essays, Details are the lifeblood of the story; otherwise there is no "show" in show and tell.

- **Avoid Thesaurus.com**. It is advantageous to eschew the employment of extravagant language options. In other words, use common English. Remember, it is not just the words that you use, but more importantly, how you use them. Admissions offices want you to tell your own story in your own voice. While big words and grand phrases might seem impressive, they generally do not read well in an essay. In addition, there are always essay writers who believe that more is always better. Wrong. Stay within the specific word requirements of each essay, and use enough words to tell us your story. One of the best essays I read this year was less than thirty words, but it made me laugh for five minutes straight.

Even MORE Essay Advice!

- Use the essay to elaborate on something that is not otherwise evident in reading your application (i.e. a talent, interest, political view, or achievement).

- Address your weaknesses by making them implicit strengths.

- If two schools have similar topics, proofread carefully to verify that your comments are generic or you have changed the specifics. (“My blood runs true blue” wouldn’t work for State or Clemson. “I feel most energized in the cool of the mountains” won’t work well for UNC-Wilmington.)

- Generally speaking, the admissions office is looking for evidence of a) ability, b) motivation, c) creativity, d) self-discipline, and e) growth potential.

- Don’t be too grave, but don’t be too cute either. This is not the time to attempt a comedy routine unless you have some experience and success with humor.

10 Tips for Writing the College Application Essay

By JEREMY S. HYMAN, LYNN F. JACOBS
September 15, 2010

No subject is more fraught with anxiety for the high school senior than the essay on the college application. Whether it is as bizarre as the University of Chicago's "How do you feel about Wednesday?"; University of Pennsylvania's "You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217."; or Tufts University's "Are We Alone?"—or whether it is a more mundane question about a formative experience you've had in your life, or about some controversial social or political issue, students tremble at the very thought of writing the essay and being judged on it.

We wondered what tips could be offered to ease the pain. For advice, we turned to visiting blogger Jonathan Reider, director of college counseling at San Francisco University High School, who before that was the senior associate director of admissions (and humanities instructor) at Stanford University. He should know; he's been on both sides of the high school/college door. Here are his 10 best tips.

1. Be concise. Even though the Common Application main essay has only a suggested minimum of 250 words, and no upper limit, every admissions officer has a big stack to read every day; he or she expects to spend only a couple of minutes on the essay. If you go over 700 words, you are straining their patience, which no one should want to do.

2. Be honest. Don't embellish your achievements, titles, and offices. It's just fine to be the copy editor of the newspaper or the treasurer of the Green Club, instead of the president. Not everyone has to be the star at everything. You will feel better if you don't strain to inflate yourself.

3. Be an individual. In writing the essay, ask yourself, "How can I distinguish myself from those thousands of others applying to College X whom I don't know—and even the ones I do know?" It's not in your activities or interests. If you're going straight from high school to college, you're just a teenager, doing teenage things. It is your mind and how it works that are distinctive. How do you think? Sure, that's hard to explain, but that's the key to the whole exercise.

4. Be coherent. Obviously, you don't want to babble, but I mean write about just one subject at a time. Don't try to cover everything in an essay. Doing so can make you sound busy, but at the same time, scattered and superficial. The whole application is a series of snapshots of what you do. It is inevitably incomplete. The colleges expect this. Go along with them.

5. Be accurate. I don't mean just use spell check (that goes without saying). Attend to the other mechanics of good writing, including conventional punctuation in the use of commas, semi-colons, etc. If you are writing about Dickens, don't say he wrote Wuthering Heights. If you write about Nietzsche, spell his name right.

6. Be vivid. A good essay is often compared to a story: In many cases it's an anecdote of an important moment. Provide some details to help the reader see the setting. Use the names (or invent them) for the other people in the story, including your brother, teacher, or coach. This makes it all more human and humane. It also shows the reader that you are thinking about his or her appreciation of your writing, which is something you'll surely want to do.

7. Be likable. Colleges see themselves as communities, where people have to get along with others, in dorms, classes, etc. Are you someone they would like to have dinner with, hang out with, have in a discussion section? Think, "How can I communicate this without just standing up and saying it, which is corny." Subtlety is good.

8. Be cautious in your use of humor. You never know how someone you don't know is going to respond to you, especially if you offer something humorous. Humor is always in the eye of the beholder. Be funny only if you think you have to. Then think again.

9. Be controversial (if you can). So many kids write bland essays that don't take a stand on anything. It is fine to write about politics, religion, something serious, as long as you are balanced and thoughtful. Don't pretend you have the final truth. And don't just get up on your soapbox and spout off on a sensitive subject; instead, give reasons and arguments for your view and consider other perspectives (if appropriate). Colleges are places for the discussion of ideas, and admissions officers look for diversity of mind.

10. Be smart. Colleges are intellectual places, a fact they almost always keep a secret when they talk about their dorms, climbing walls, and how many sports you can play. It is helpful to show your intellectual vitality. What turns your mind on? This is not the same thing as declaring an intended major; what matters is why that subject interests you.

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