

## **WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY**

### **PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY**

Your GPA, SAT Reasoning Test, SAT Subject Test or ACT scores are all important to a college admissions officer in assessing your academic abilities. But they are all numbers; they have no personality. What can make your application really stand apart from the others are your personal essays. Essays provide the admissions officer reading your application with a means to look beyond the numbers and to see you as a person. A well-written essay should convey your thoughts, attitudes, personal qualities, imagination, sense of humor or creativity. The essay should let the admissions officer know **WHO YOU ARE**.

### **WRITING THE ESSAY**

Give yourself plenty of time to write your essay; you do not have to get it right the first time. Write the first draft of your essay with the main focus on content. Only be concerned with getting your thoughts down on paper in a loose paragraph form. Then, set it aside for a day or two, rereading it later with a fresh perspective, making any necessary changes. At that point you can begin to consider matters of organization, style, grammar, spelling and tone. Once you have the first draft you may wish to try it out on family, friends or an English teacher. They may be able to offer helpful suggestions for improvement, but the final product needs to be yours—don't let a helpful editor remove *your* voice from the page. The key to success with writing an essay is giving yourself enough time to really do some thinking, writing, editing, and more thinking. The more time you give yourself for your essay and the more you work on the essay, the better it will be.

### **DO'S**

- 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 help to bring it to life for the reader.
- Do write in your own “voice” and style.
- Do tell the truth.

### **DON'TS**

- Don't write what you think the admission staff 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, sentence structure).
- Don't ramble—say what you want to say and conclude.

## **CHOOSING A TOPIC**

The topic is often not in question, as many colleges or universities will give you a topic to write about or list several topics from which you can choose. Still other colleges may suggest broad subjects that allow you to write about something that interests you or is of concern to you. If you are using the Common Application, you may even write about a topic of your choice.

## **TELL US ABOUT YOURSELF...**

The most common prompt, especially when only one essay is required, lets you decide how you want to describe yourself. It may be phrased in various ways. Here are some samples of questions from past years:

“In reading your application we want to get to know you as well as we can. We ask that you use this opportunity to tell us something more about yourself that would help us towards getting a sense of who you are, how you think, and what issues and ideas interest you most.” (Brown)

“Tell us one story about yourself that would best provide us, either directly or indirectly, with an insight into the kind of person you are...The possibilities are unlimited (well, almost so). You choose. Just relax and write it. Remember, the Gettysburg Address was only 272 words.” (Princeton)

## **TELL US ABOUT AN INTEREST OR IDEA...**

Some colleges focus their essay questions on your academic and extracurricular interests, or pose certain subjects to challenge your thinking:

“Given the scope of the world’s problems, from political conflict and environmental decay to drug use, disease, and poverty, it may seem that we can not reasonably expect solutions. Choose an instance that proves to you that change in the *status quo* is possible.” (Amherst)

“Science and technology seem to give with one hand even as they take away with the other; we receive benefits that other generations hardly dared hope for, but all too often at the cost of dangers they never had to fear. Use your own acquaintance with modern advances to discuss a particular instance of balancing of advantages and disadvantages.” (Bryn Mawr)

“What particular book, play, film, dance performance, musical composition, or piece of visual art has affected you deeply in the past three years? Describe your reaction. If you choose a book, please select one that you have read outside your high school curriculum.” (Amherst)

“Discuss something you have read that has special significance to you.” (Bryn Mawr)

“Consult the Bryn Mawr/Haverford course listings in the prospectus. Choose one or two courses you would like to take and why.” (Bryn Mawr)

Sometimes the quotation or statement is provided to stimulate ideas:

“Discuss the following quotation from Shakespeare’s *As You Like It*: ‘Sweet are the uses of adversity.’” (Colby)

“To learn to think is to learn to question. Discuss a matter you once thought you knew ‘for sure,’ that you have since learned to question.” (Bryn Mawr)

## **YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY CHECKLIST**

Is the essay interesting?

Will it stand out because it shows who I really am?

Is it about something important to me?

Do I analyze, conclude, offer observations or theories?

Do I show that I can ‘think’?

Do I get every bit out of an issue, story, and experience?

Is my presentation logical?

Do I support my contentions?

Is there a good transition between separate ideas?

Is all the information relevant rather than just related?

Is everything stated as clearly and effectively as possible?

Did I make a conclusion rather than end with a summary?