

WRITING YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY

Purpose of the Essay

The college essay is extremely important for two major reasons:

1. It enables the college admissions office to evaluate your communication skills. Through your essay they can assess the clarity of your thinking and your ability to convey your thoughts in written form.
2. It enables the admissions office to learn more about you as a person beyond what grades and SAT/ACT scores can convey. A well-written essay can speak worlds about your attitudes, feelings, personal qualities and creativity. For the admissions staff, it adds another important piece to the puzzle because it distinguishes you as an individual, as different from any other student who is applying.

Choosing a Topic

The choice of a topic is frequently not an issue because many colleges and universities will either give you a topic to write about or present several rather specific topics from which to choose. Other colleges may simply suggest broad general topics or give you total freedom to write about something that interests or concerns you. Regardless of whether you must respond to a prescribed topic or come up with one of your own, here are a few general hints about the most effective way to approach your topic:

- Narrow your topic and try to be as specific and illustrative as possible.
- Relatedly, the easiest topic to write about is yourself. No one knows more about you than you. Since one important purpose of the essay is self-revelation, it is no place to be shy or modest, although you should not exaggerate. If you choose to write about yourself, remember that little incidents and facts are often the most revealing of character and outlook.
- Do not be afraid to write about something you think is a little different. A unique topic or approach is often refreshing to a college admissions officer who has been reading applications all day. Further, an unusual or off-beat essay is an excellent way to show your creativity.
- Make all optional essays mandatory.

Preparing to Write

Before actually sitting down to write a first draft of your essay, spend some time organizing your thoughts. Develop a framework for your essay so it will have a smooth and logical progression from one idea or incident to the next. Consider your purpose in writing, what you want to convey, and the tone that you think is most appropriate for the topic. Decide on a style that is comfortable for you, not one that you think the college admissions committee prefers. Finally, remember that organizing your thoughts and deciding on a framework does not mean you must be overly rigid at the start; leave room for flexibility and creativity as you actually begin writing.

Writing the Essay

You do not have to get it right the first time. Instead, write the first draft of your essay with the main focus on content — communicating your thoughts. Set it aside for a day or two then reread it with a fresh perspective and make any necessary changes. This is also the point at which you should consider matters of organization, style, grammar, spelling and tone. Once you have rewritten your first draft, you may ask a parent or teacher to evaluate it. While the final essay should be yours, they may be able to offer helpful suggestions for technical or other improvements.

Within this general outline for writing the essay, there are some do's and don'ts:

DO'S

- Do think small and write about something that you know about.
- 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.

DON'TS

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

Your college essay, along with your high school record, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement, will provide the bases upon which the college makes its admissions decision. A thoughtful, well written essay can affect the final decision in a very positive way.