

# Writing a Good College Application Essay

## Most Important

- Think about your audience.  
Ask yourself, “How will this essay motivate them to admit me?” ◦
- Analyze – do not just describe a situation or tell a story. Self-awareness is key. ◦
- Do not write about a common experience unless your take on it is unique. ◦
- Do not just repeat information that is already in your application. ◦
- Make sure the essay is about you no matter what the prompt is. ◦
- Use details to show – do not just tell. ◦
- Proofread every word. ◦

## Deciding What To Communicate

### Examples of things they would like to read about:

These are just suggestions to get you going – feel free to write about something else.

- A lesson you learned  
(Avoid determination, gratitude, perseverance, and self-confidence – they are very common topics.)
- Something that is distinctive or interesting about you (Ask family or friends.)
- Your fears and how you deal with them (Stay positive.)
- Something you hope to learn in college or in life
- An impact you would like to have on society
- Your values and/or how they have changed
- A discovery you made about yourself
- Where you see yourself in 10 years
- Your hopes and dreams

**If you're stuck, think about what the following might reveal about you:**

You don't have to write about them, but they might give you some ideas.

- A member of your family whom people say you resemble (Make sure this essay is really about you.)
- A situation where you felt inadequate and how you handled it
- An unusual nickname, if you have one, and how you got it
- Something you want to do before you die and why
- Your relationships with your family members
- A situation where you felt uncomfortable
- A small experience that had a big impact
- Your proudest moment (Don't brag.)
- Your most embarrassing moment
- An unusual hobby or pastime
- Things that makes you smile
- Things that make you angry
- A dilemma you faced
- A phobia

**Choosing A Topic**

1. Before you respond to the prompt, think about what you would like to communicate about yourself.
2. Write about something that the admissions officers may not learn from the rest of your application. For example, if you have done a lot of community service, you can tie your essay into that, but don't just write about how much you enjoy helping people – that is obvious.
3. If you write about an interesting experience, make sure it shows something appealing about you. Think about a revealing moment and not just a broad story.
4. DO NOT WRITE ABOUT A MISSION TRIP OR A BOOK THAT EVERYONE READS .
5. Consider a creative approach to a standard prompt:  
Someone who has influenced you – a literary character or a historical figure  
A work of art – a classic car or a beautiful building

<b>Do not write about a common experience unless you have a unique situation or creative perspective. Essays on the following topics usually sound the same:</b>	
Community Service/Mission Trip: gratitude, primitive conditions, joy of giving, materialism	Getting a job: responsibility, independence, self-confidence, future career
Sports: teamwork, overcoming injury, "practice makes perfect," demanding coach	Someone who overcame illness or adversity: inspiration, determination, giving something back
Eye-opening travel: new perspectives, courage, different kinds of people, common bonds	"Harry Potter," "The Great Gatsby," Miley Cyrus songs
Moving/Transferring to a new school: self-reliance, personal growth, intellectual challenge	Global warming – unless you have a <u>specific</u> plan to address it

Hints:

- Consider the essay prompts from all the schools you're applying to and see whether you could write an essay that would work for more than one prompt – make sure it truly addresses both questions.
- You can add humor if it comes naturally, but do not just tell a funny story.
- If one of the options is “A topic of your choice,” feel free to write about something unrelated to the other prompts. You can also submit an essay that you wrote for another school as long as it's the right length and doesn't mention the other school.  
**Do not do this for a prompt that asks why you want to go a specific school.**
- Don't reuse an essay you wrote for class unless the assignment was to write an admissions essay.
- Don't criticize political views, religious beliefs, or other schools.

## Suggestions For Common Topics

### Your reasons for choosing your major

- Discuss related activities or hobbies to show you have pursued your interests in high school.
- Describe what you like about that department at the school you are writing for.
- Suggest a field you might want to study – they will not hold you to this.
- Do not spend more than two sentences describing your childhood interest in the subject – they are not planning to admit you at age 10.

### Why you want to go to a specific school

- *Do not write a generic essay that would apply to all schools.*
- Explain how the students, professors, or programs at that school seem different.
- Identify professors you would like to work with and explain why.  
(The research focuses of the professors in your major may be listed on the school's website.)
- Do not write about anything obvious like Carolina's basketball program or Appalachian State's beautiful location – these are very common topics.

### A current issue you would like to address

- *The essay should be about you – do not just describe the issue and its importance.*
- Consider an issue that ties into an activity or interest mentioned in your application. For example, if you have attended engineering camps, consider an issue with an engineering solution.
- Do not write about a common issue like global warming or obesity unless you have a specific, innovative plan to address it – make sure to mention your plan in the introduction.

## Writing the Essay

1. Write in a style that “sounds” like you. The essay should reflect your personality.

2. **Introduction** – Start with a “hook” to capture your reader’s interest. A “hook” can be:

- An unusual or unexpected statement

(Note: make sure you explain how this strange statement is related to your thesis.)

*“Cockroaches, unite” was my battle cry.*

- An unrealistic, contradictory, or apparently nonsensical statement

*I opened the jar of mayonnaise as carefully as if I were defusing a nuclear warhead.*

- A thought-provoking question

*Why do teenagers think that all advice that comes from parents is wrong?*

- A confession or admission

*Sometimes I think that I have xanthophobia: fear of the color yellow.*

- If you start by describing a scene or setting, make sure it is interesting and intriguing.
- Be careful about starting or ending your essay with a quote, statistic, or definition. This is common and only stands out if it is done exceptionally well.
- Do not begin with an overused sentence like  

*From \_\_\_\_\_ experience, I learned \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.*
- Do not use more than ¼ of the word limit.

**3. Tell the reader something about yourself even if the prompt just asks about an activity or opinion.**

Good: *Teaching autistic kids to swim last summer, I learned to measure success by how hard I work and not how much I achieve.*

Bad: *Last summer I taught autistic kids to swim and helped them succeed.*

**4. Give specific, detailed explanations and examples.**

Good: *If my mother had not forced me to eat all those new foods, I might not be so eager to study in a country where I don’t speak the language.*

Bad: *Without my mother, I would not be who I am today.*

**5. Use details to show – do not just tell.**

Good: *Because of the student-faculty forums I suggested, students can now study teenage psychology instead of just memorizing the areas of the brain.*

Bad: *Because of my programs, students have more input in the school and can make the curriculum relevant to themselves.*

<p><b>6. Use vivid images instead of generalities.</b></p>	<p>Good: <i>After sleeping on the rocky ground for two weeks, our simple cabin seemed like a palace.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>When we finished backpacking, the cabin seemed very comfortable.</i></p>
<p><b>7. Be concise – a good example does not need to be explained.</b></p>	<p>Good: <i>As my manager glowered at me, I realized I had only seconds to explain why the \$100 dollar bill was in my hand. (It is obvious that this made the writer look guilty.)</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>As my manager looked at me with a frown on his face, I could see that he was angry. Having the valuable \$100 dollar bill in my hand made me look guilty. I knew I had to come up with an explanation that would satisfy him quickly. (This explanation of the example is a waste of words.)</i></p>
<p><b>8. Avoid clichés – they are shortcuts for real thought.</b></p>	<p>Good: <i>Ellen taught me to build relationships based on shared experiences.</i></p> <p>Bad: <i>Ellen pulled me out of my shell.</i></p>

Hints:

- Write an essay within 50 words under or over the word limit. If no length is suggested, aim for 500 words for the main essay and 200-300 words for smaller ones.
- Make sure every sentence in your essay adds to what you are telling the admissions officers about yourself. Do not add extra details just because they occurred to you.
- Don't use the words "I" and "me" too much.

**Finishing It Off**

1. Proofread every word. Don't offend the admissions officers with grammar or punctuation errors or misspelled words. Spell Check and Grammar Check can create errors.

2. Important errors to proofread for:

- Singular/Plural Pronoun Agreement

*If a person wants to get into a good college, they need a high GPA.*

Error: "a person" is singular, "they" is plural

Correction: *A person who wants to go to a good college needs a high GPA.*

- Unclear Pronouns

*When I got into my first-choice college, it was very exciting.*

Error: "it" does not refer to anything

Correction: *Getting into my first-choice college was very exciting.*

- Passive Voice:

*It is the lure of leaving home that makes me want to go to college in California.*

Error: the construction using a "to be" verb is awkward

Correction: *The lure of leaving home makes me want to go to college in California.*

3. Have someone knowledgeable proofread your paper for clarity, grammar, and content, but do not let that person change your writing style. Admissions officers can spot sentences written by adults.

Original: *When the elephant charged toward me, I was terrified. My brain was filled with panic and the fear of being trampled.*

Good Edit: *When the elephant charged, I was terrified by the fear of being trampled.*

This is more concise but keeps the original structure and word choice.

Bad Edit: *Seeing the elephant hurtling across the savannah, I was petrified of being trampled.*

This is also more concise but has a different sentence structure, advanced vocabulary, and detail added by the editor – it does not reflect the writer’s original work.

**Note:** If you have a teacher proofread, ask what the essay tells her about you. Teachers sometimes approve well written essays that don’t reveal very much about the writer.

4, When finished, ask yourself:

- How will this make the admissions officers want to admit me?
- What image of me does this present?
- Does this add information that is not in the rest of my application?
- Does this sound like me?
- Is it interesting?