

# Tips for Writing the College Essay

- ◆ **Start Early:** The more time you have, the less stress you will have. And you will have plenty of time to give the essay your best effort.
- ◆ **Be Yourself:** Do not write what you think others want to hear. Those essays are boring to write and to read. Write rather about an issue, event, or person that really had significance for you.
- ◆ **Turn Weaknesses into Strengths:** If you are going to explain a low GPA in an essay you are going to write, don't just explain the reasons. Tell what you learned as a result. Admission officers aren't looking for perfect applicants; they are looking for how students approach the changes that life throws at them.
- ◆ **Be honest:** WRITE YOUR OWN ESSAYS!!!

College admission officers read hundreds-even thousands-of essays. They are masters at discovering any form of plagiarism. Adapting an email story, buying an essay from some Internet site, getting someone else to write your essay-admission people have seen it all. Don't risk your college career by taking the easy way out.

- ◆ **Take a risk:** Don't settle for the essay someone else is writing. Imagine an admissions officer up late, reading the fiftieth essay of the day-yours. Do you want that person to nod off because he/she has already read ten essays on that topic? Ask your friends what they are writing-and then don't write about that!
- ◆ **Keep in focus:** This is your chance to tell admission officers exactly why they should admit you. Unfortunately, some students try to list every single reason-their stellar academic record, their athletic prowess, their community service-all in a page or two. When that happens, the essay looks like a grocery list.

Instead, read the essay question carefully and jot down a few ideas. Then choose the one that looks like the most fun to write about. Stick to that main theme throughout the essay. You don't have to list all your achievements-that's what the rest of the application is for. Use the essay to help the admission officers to get to know you as a person.

- ◆ **Write and rewrite:** For your first draft, write anything that comes to mind about your topic. Don't worry too much about grammar or spelling. Just get it down on paper (or computer screen). Then let it "rest" for a few hours or a few days.

- ◆ **Get a second opinion:** Even best-selling novelists ask other people to read their manuscripts before they are sent to the publisher. When you have rewritten the essay to your satisfaction, find someone who can give you advice on how to make it even better. Choose a person you respect and who knows something about writing-a favorite English teacher, a parent, a friend who writes for the school paper, your counselor. Ask them to tell you what they like best about your essay-and what you can do to improve it.

Criticism of your writing can be tough to hear, but try to listen with an open mind. You don't have to make every change suggested-after all, it's your essay and no one else's-but you should seriously consider each suggestion.

- ◆ **Proofread:** Finally, you're ready to send your essay. Not so fast! Read it over one more time, looking for those little errors that can creep in as you write or edit. If you're using a computer, it can be difficult to catch minor typos-you have read the essay so many times that you see what should be there rather than what is there. To make sure you catch everything, try reading your essay out loud or having someone else read it out loud to you.
- ◆ **Don't confuse applying online with sending email:** Applying online is just as serious as applying "the old-fashioned way." It may feel like you're sending email, but you are not.

Students who apply online typically submit sub-par essays. Essays submitted online tend to be much shorter than those submitted on paper. In addition, students often use email language-no capitalization, or abbreviations such as BTW or "thanx"-which are not appropriate to a formal document. Make sure that you put as much effort into an online essay as you would if you were sending it snail mail.

- ◆ **Don't expect too much from an essay:** The application essay is important, but it is not the only thing that is considered.

That's because admission officers look at the whole package-your academics, extracurricular activities, standardized tests, and other factors. A great essay rarely makes up for a weak academic record. On the other hand, a mediocre essay won't necessarily consign your application to the "deny" list. So make your essay as well-written as you can, but don't put so much pressure on yourself that the rest of the application fades in importance.



## Your College Essay Should Be Personal and It Should Be Written in the First Person.

### Do's

- ♦ **Narrow your focus** - Your 8 week summer travels across Europe cannot be captured in a 500-word essay. Pick one incident or an interesting encounter that made you think hard about something and expand it into an essay.
- ♦ **Be unusual** - Take an everyday incident and pick one aspect that was truly earth-shattering.
- ♦ **Convey your curiosity** - Admissions officers are looking for intellectual curiosity. Trace an intellectual interest, recount a hobby or fascination with something.
- ♦ **Write about something that is meaningful and interesting to you** - Avoid a huge political or philosophical topic.
- ♦ **Consider your audience** - This is the time to stand out, not blend in with the pack and put your audience (admissions officers) to sleep.
- ♦ **Be specific when recounting events** - Give the reader that you-are-there feeling—be vivid!
- ♦ **Eliminate almost every adjective and adverb** - These are crutches. Rely on sharp description and spare dialogue.
- ♦ **Spell-check and proofread your essay** - Also have a friend look it over.

**Focus on one small aspect of your life and expand it into an essay. It should give some insight into what you are like as a person, how you think, how you approach problems, and what you are interested in. It should communicate passion and a sense of initiative.**

### Don'ts

- ♦ **Don't be shy** - This is not the time to be detached. This essay should come straight from the heart and take the admissions officer right into your life. How does your voice sound? How are you different from other students?
- ♦ **Clichéd essays need to be avoided** - Examples: The Outward Bound essay (retelling of a harrowing experience); Death of a relative essay (tells admissions little about the student himself); The community service "I helped save the world" essay; The "I dived and caught the ball and we won the game" essay.
- ♦ **Biggest Pitfalls** - Students talk about anything but themselves and talk about themselves in a most impersonal, English-class, third-person way.
- ♦ **Lose the weak connector "and"** - Ex: Because I studied...I got an A."

# The Warm-up Essay

*Why bother writing a 250-word essay on your most meaningful intellectual experience if it's not required? Three reasons:*

- ◆ It's hard enough to communicate all your interests in the compressed format of the application, so this kind of essay adds another dimension to your profile.
- ◆ Because you will be judged roughly 70 percent on your academic profile and only 25-30 percent on your extracurricular activities, it's a good idea to emphasize your academic strengths.
- ◆ This essay can easily be adapted into the most common supplemental question found on applications, "Tell us why you want to go to X school."

Admissions officers are looking for: passion and depth of involvement. This is the time to focus on a subject or academic area you love, not necessarily one that you are good at.

## Ideas:

- ◆ Think back to any major research papers you have written. Have you done any experiments, research, or out-of-school projects that reflect a major interest?
- ◆ Rather than just saying you like English class because you love reading, talk about how you discovered a love of words and books and what types of works you read.

## THINK PASSION and INTELLECTUAL DEPTH!

- ◆ Be brief, vivid, and to the point.
- ◆ Give as many details as you can.
- ◆ Avoid all clichés about the subject.
- ◆ Either pick an unusual subject or pick one aspect of a subject so your essay doesn't read like the standard "I love numbers ergo I like math" essay.
- ◆ Before adding some specific sentences about the college's department, do research to find out if that department is strong.

