

# College Admission Essays

**They are of the utmost importance.**

- Essays are read by the admissions officers *and* the scholarship committees.
- They are looking for a “mind at work.” Make sure your essays are:
  - Well written
  - Interesting or entertaining
  - One page at least, but length is not the issue.

I have several books in my office for much more help and ideas for essay writing.

## WRITING ESSAYS

This is your opportunity to show how unique you are to colleges. Essay questions on applications help admissions officers understand your motivations, creativity, and personality. That's why it is important to start writing your essays as early as possible. Make your essays personal, but stay within the guidelines and carefully answer the questions.

Don't be intimidated by essay questions. Sometimes the best answers are those that you can write quickly because you feel strongly about the question. If you labor for too long, you may be answering the wrong question for you. Remember to strike a balance on time: don't take a month to write an essay, but don't throw something together without thinking about it.

**Writing Tips** To strengthen your essay:

- First make an outline to organize your thoughts.
- Give special attention to creating a strong introduction, supporting arguments, and an appropriate conclusion. Every story has a beginning, middle, and end.
- Revise as necessary. Ask others for their feedback (but don't ask them to write it)
- Proofread the final version before sending it.

## College Essays: Don't Be Bland

College applicants need to show the person behind the test scores and grades. Pomona's admissions dean suggests how. By Bruce Poch *Newsweek* Aug. 21-28, 2006 issue –

For admissions officers, reviewing applications is like final-exam week for students—except it lasts for months. Great applications tell us we've done our job well, by attracting top-caliber students. But it's challenging to maintain the frenetic pace without forgetting these are all real people with real aspirations—people whose life stories we are here to unravel, if they will let us.

The essay is a key piece of learning those life stories. I live near Los Angeles, where every day screenplays are read without regard for human context. The writer's life and dreams don't matter—all that matters is the writing, the ideas, the end product. On the other hand, in reading essays, context does matter: who wrote this? We are driven to put the jigsaw puzzle together because we think we are building a community, not just choosing neat stories. When I pick up a file, I want to know whether the student has siblings or not, who his parents are, where he went to high school. Then I want the essay to help the rest of the application make sense, to humanize all the numbers that flow past. I am looking for insight.

A brilliantly written essay may compel me to look beyond superficial shortcomings in an application. But if no recommendation or grade or test score hints at such writing talent, I may succumb to cynicism and

assume the writer had help—maybe too much. In the worst cases, I may find that I have read it before—with name and place changed—on the Internet, in an essay-editing service or a "best essays" book.

The most appealing essays take the opportunity to show a voice not rendered homogeneous and pasteurized. But sometimes the essays tell us too much. Pomona offers this instruction with one essay option: "We realize that not everything done in life is about getting into college. Tell us about something you did that was just plain fun." One student grimly reported that nothing was fun because in his family everything was about getting into college. Every activity, course choice and spare moment. It did spark our sympathy, but it almost led to a call to Child Protective Services as well.

Perfection isn't required. We have seen phenomenal errors in essays that haven't damaged a student at all. I recall a student who wrote of the July 1969 lunar landing of—I kid you not—Louis Armstrong. I read on, shaking my head. This student was great—a jazz trumpeter who longed to study astronomy. It was a classic slip and perhaps a hurried merging of two personal heroes. He was offered admission, graduated and went on for a Ph.D. in astrophysics. He may not have been as memorable if he had named "Neil" instead of "Louis" in his essay's opening line. Hey, we're human, too.

An essay that is rough around the edges may still be compelling. Good ideas make an impression, even when expressed with bad punctuation and spelling errors. Energy and excitement can be communicated. I'm not suggesting the "I came, I saw, I conquered" approach to essay writing, nor the "I saved the world" angle taken by some students who write about community-service projects. I'm talking about smaller moments that are well captured. Essays don't require the life tragedy that so many seem to think is necessary. Not all admission offers come out of sympathy!

Admissions officers, even at the most selective institutions, really aren't looking for perfection in 17- and 18-year-olds. We are looking for the human being behind the roster of activities and grades. We are looking for those who can let down their guard just a bit to allow others in. We are looking for people whose egos won't get in the way of learning, students whose investment in ideas and words tells us—in the context of their records—that they are aware of a world beyond their own homes, schools, grades and scores. A picture, they say, is worth a thousand words. To us, an essay that reveals a student's unaltered voice is worth much, much more.

## **Tips for Writing College Admissions Essays:**

- Be yourself. Be sincere. Admissions committees are looking for insight into the students' character and background, their experiences and point of view, and their intellectual ideas and curiosity.
- Find your passion. What are you passionate about? Let the admissions committee understand your drive, determination, and heart. Present yourself and your goals clearly and honestly.
- Be creative. Think of the essay as a letter to someone. Be very descriptive and specific in your writing.
- Don't try to include too much in your essay. Choose one specific topic and spend the entire essay describing the topic in detail. Focus on one event or idea rather than trying to cover an entire subject.
- Read superior essays of other writers. Notice how they tell a story. Notice how they draw in a reader.
- Edit it. Rewrite. Chances are you will not write the perfect essay in one sitting. Take time to think deeply and allow yourself time to make revisions.

## **Essay Writing Tips from The University of Texas**

- **Don't tell us what you think we want to hear.** The university's essay readers don't have a perfect essay in mind—as a matter of fact essays that sound like all the rest of them—the essay that is expected—is more likely to be overlooked.
- **Be yourself.** Show us what makes you unique, how you've dealt with issues and problems, what you think about the topic at hand. Good writing teachers tell their students to write about what they know. That's good advice for college essays, too.
- **Use a natural voice and style.** Although it's always important to use proper grammar, spelling, punctuation, diction, etc., don't write to try to impress anyone. Use words and a style that are appropriate for the topic you're writing about, for someone your age, and for someone who's trying to communicate clearly and logically.
- **Don't be overly informal either.** Your essay will be read by an adult professional. In almost all cases, you should avoid using words or phrases that you might use when texting someone or on a social networking site.
- **Develop your ideas.** Although the length of your essay alone technically doesn't matter, developing your ideas completely does matter. If you can do that in a single page of text, that's good; but if it takes you three pages or so, that's all right, too (as long as you're not just adding words to make your essay longer). It's not realistic to assume that you can clearly communicate your unique perspective about anything in a short paragraph or two.
- **Organize your thoughts.** All good writing has a beginning, a middle, and an end. That doesn't mean you should be formulaic in your writing (this isn't a high school exit exam), but you should introduce your idea, provide interesting examples and details in support of your idea, and come to some sort of conclusion at the end.
- **Don't respond to the prompt as though you're answering a question.** Again, we don't have a perfect essay in mind. The prompt is supposed to get your mind churning, to make you want to tell us what you think about something that's important to you. Your essay is your opportunity to do that.
- **Take your time.** Spend plenty of time writing and fine-tuning your essays, and ask for feedback from people you trust before submitting your essays. Remember that your goal is to share important things about yourself while skillfully expressing yourself in writing.

## HOW TO WRITE A COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

- **By Margaret Metzger**
- **Brookline High School, Massachusetts**

- Many colleges require a short essay as part of the application process. The directions for the essay vary from college to college. Most colleges offer some variation of the topic. "Tell us more about yourself."
- Like most students, you might hate this subject and dread writing the essay. You know that it is a crucial piece of writing and that it must be done, but secretly you hope somehow to avoid the task. Like most tasks, the tension created by procrastinating is worse than the work itself—in this case, just sitting down and writing the essay.

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- You can use the college essay to strengthen your application. In fact, your essay can be the strongest part, presenting you as a thoughtful, sincere, interesting applicant. You can use the college essay to explain mistakes of the past-failed courses, low SAT® scores, or few extracurricular activities. Best of all, you can demonstrate that you know how to write well, an ability all colleges value.
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- **FIND A TOPIC**
- Colleges genuinely want to know who you are. Although it is difficult to believe, they do not have an "ideal student" in mind. They want a variety of students. They understand that they can't know everything about you by your grade point average and your SAT scores. They want to know what kind of person you are, what aspirations you have, what struggles you have gone through, what is important to you. They ask you to write an essay about yourself because they want more personal information.
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- Before you write, think about how you may be different from other applicants. What unusual experience would you bring to the college? What interests, activities, travel, struggles, or situations have had a particular impact on you? You are probably thinking, "Nothing is special about me; I'm just an average kid." That's what most students think. Sometimes it helps to ask other people what they think is unique about you. If you know exactly what you want to write about, you are lucky. Use that topic. Be sure to consider the traditional, but appropriate and effective, topics, such as academic achievements, extracurricular activities, travel and work experiences, and life-changing events.
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- Also think of more subtle accomplishments. What kind of student are you? In which class did you learn to think, to study? What do you do with your free time? What have you done for the past two summers? What words would you use to describe your personality? Do you belong to any organizations outside high school? What jobs have you held? What have you learned about organizing your time? Who is your most unusual friend? What magazines, newspapers, columnists, or authors do you like to read? What are some of the failures or disappointments in your life? What kind of plans do you have for the future? Who has been influential in your life?
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- What responsibilities do you have at home? What do you do for other people? What does music (particularly playing or composing) mean to you? How have you changed (besides physically) in the last four years?
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- **BE SPECIFIC**
- Remember that the admissions board is reading hundreds of applications, and you must make yours memorable. Some students resort to gimmicks: 8-inch-by-10-inch glossy pictures of themselves hang gliding, or a videotape or a cartoon book about themselves. You may have heard stories about an ordinary student getting into an exclusive college by taking a creative or startling approach. But gimmicks are high risk. Maybe the admissions board does not have the time or the equipment to play the videotape of your band. Maybe you will seem egocentric or cute or, more likely, as though you are dodging the difficult task that everyone else has done: writing an essay.
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- You can make yourself stand out from the crowd and stress your individuality by a less risky method. Your English teachers have been telling you for years to use specifics when you write.

- Specifics make a piece of writing memorable. This basic principle of good writing applies, as well, to writing the college essay. Be specific. Tell the truth about yourself as specifically as possible. If you claim that you like school, say exactly what you like: "I like biology and got particularly interested in a three-month project I did about algae on the teeth." Always be as specific as possible.

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- **NARROW YOUR TOPIC**

- You have only one-and-a-half to two pages for this essay. You can't write about everything that has ever happened to you. You need one to three topics for this paper. You must pick a few of the most important aspects of your identity. If you cover too much, you will be forced to be superficial. Don't say, "I like school. I am a leader. I play basketball. I've traveled to Sri Lanka, Alaska, Iowa, and South Africa. I play the violin. I work every weekend. I believe in responsibility. I want to be famous." Pick one, two, or at the most, three important things about yourself and concentrate on them.

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- **SHOW, DON'T TELL**

- You need to know and apply the writing principle of "show, don't tell"; Give the readers such convincing evidence that they draw the conclusion you want them to draw. If you provide all the evidence of your fine qualities, you don't have to list them. Besides, the college will be much more likely to consider you sincere if you give examples rather than a list of glorious adjectives about yourself. For instance, you might be embarrassed to say, "I am extremely responsible." Instead you could say, "Last summer, I was put in charge of 12 ten-year-old girls for a three-day hike." When the college admissions board members read your example, they will come to the conclusion, "Ah, some adult must have felt this applicant could be responsible for a dozen children's health and safety for several days. This sounds like a responsible person." Give your readers the evidence and examples, and they will reach the right conclusions.

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- **DESCRIBE WHAT YOU HAVE DONE**

- You don't need a long list of flashy experiences. What you have experienced is not as important as what you have done with the experience. Real maturity depends on how you understand what has happened to you and whether you let your experiences change your perceptions.

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- Colleges want to know how you have reacted to your experiences. For example, many students have failed some test or course. Colleges would like to know what you did with that failure. Did you mope? Blame the teacher? Quit doing homework because you were angry at the failure? Did you see the failure as a warning, an impetus, a challenge? Even if you write about something exotic, you must say what you did and what you learned. One student went to Israel for two weeks; her only observation was that the Israeli women wore longer skirts than the Americans. Her trivial description revealed her immaturity and poor powers of observation. 'When you are explaining what you learned, do not say, "I learned a lot." Be specific. Tell exactly what you learned. You want to show colleges that you will change and grow through a college education.

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- **FOCUS ON YOURSELF**

- If you feel self-conscious writing the essay, you may be tempted to dodge the task of writing about yourself and write, instead, about something related to you, such as a group or an organization you belong to. Avoid this approach.

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- **WORK ON THE FIRST SENTENCE**

- There are two opposing approaches to making a strong opening sentence. The first suggestion is that you spend hours on the first sentence because it sets the tone and direction of the essay. The reasoning is that you need to know where you are going before you begin. The problem with this approach is that students become paralyzed trying to find the perfect beginning.
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- The second suggestion is that you begin anywhere and write the first sentence last. The reasoning is that you need to get started, and you don't know what you will end up saying until you have finished the essay. You may discover that your essay really begins in the middle of the second or third paragraph, and you can cut out all the preliminaries. Then you can start with a sturdy statement. The problem with this approach is that you might begin an essay without a sense of direction and wander too much.
- You may go back and forth between trying to write a perfect beginning and just trying to get started. No matter what you do, when you finish the essay, go back to the beginning and work on the first sentences. Cut out all wordiness. Make it specific. Check the grammar.
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- **FINAL BIT OF ADVICE**
- Millions of students before you have written college essays. They hated the task, too. But it must get done. Of course, it is better to write it long before the deadline. The real problem for most
- students is how to get started, what topic to use, and how to avoid procrastination.
- The solution is simply to begin.