

THE COLLEGE ESSAY

Most college-bound students approach the task of writing a personal essay for college admissions with some trepidation and a few questions: How important is the essay? What do colleges look for? How is it used? Who reads it? If you are such a student, a few facts and tips may put the essay into perspective and help you produce your best effort.

First of all, the essay is important - to you and to the college. According to one admissions director, "It makes the facts in the student's folder come alive for us. Because it is the student's personal statement, no single piece of admissions evidence gets as much attention and provokes as much discussion."

The essay is your opportunity to take charge of the information the college receives about you, and to provide information that does not appear in grades, test scores, and other materials. It allows you to reveal your intelligence, talents, sense of humor, enthusiasm, maturity, creativity, expressiveness, sincerity, and writing ability - traits that count in the admissions evaluation.

WHAT DO COLLEGES LOOK FOR?

Generally speaking, the admissions staff will evaluate your application essay on three levels:

- **LEVEL 1:** Your ability to use standard written English that is correctly written, typed, punctuated, and contains correct grammar, usage, and syntax.
- **LEVEL 2:** Content, substance, and depth of insight, reflecting your ability to think about yourself and to convey your true feelings or opinions about a topic.
- **LEVEL 3:** Creativity and originality. "It is at the level," according to a dean of admissions, "that students can position themselves as unique - - as individuals who would bring a freshness of vision and viewpoint to the college that will enhance the quality of its academic and social life."

Start your essay now and have it proofread. Be sure to type your name and Social Security number on each page.

IN THE ESSAY DIRECTIONS, A COLLEGE MAY ASK YOU TO DO ONE OR MORE OF THE FOLLOWING:

DESCRIBE your unique qualities as a person, or tell something about yourself that can't be learned from other information in your application.

DISCUSS something that has contributed significantly to your growth.

COMMENT on your goals and aspirations and tell how you expect the college to help you meet them.

EXPRESS your imagination, originality, opinions, or feelings on a specific topic.

Whatever the topic, the care and attention you give it will express the level of your motivation and how much you care about the college.

Here are a few tips for developing an essay that conveys your personal qualities:

- Plan your essays early in your senior year. Allow yourself enough time for all the steps below and write an individual essay for each college.
- Be sure you understand the college's topics, directions, and deadlines, and look in its catalog or guidebook for descriptions on the personal qualities it is looking for. One selective college,

for example, seeks "candidates whose qualities of intellect, initiative, and energy demonstrate desire for both intellectual and personal fulfillment." An essay for that college should demonstrate and persuade the institution that you have those qualities.

- Before you start your essay, jot down your aspirations and how you think the college will help you meet them. Then develop a personal inventory. Make lists of your civic and school activities, your travels, awards, honors, other accomplishments, work experience, any academic or personal shortcoming you are trying to overcome, and the personality traits you value about yourself. To focus your essay, develop a one-sentence theme from your inventory.
- Think about the form you might use to convey your information. Straight prose is fine ,but if your theme lends itself to another approach, try it.
- Now write a draft. Set the draft aside for 24 hours, then read it to spot clichés, triteness, vagueness, dullness, grammatical errors, and misspellings. Is your essay focused on your theme, or does it ramble? Is it confusing or boring? Does the introduction "grab" the reader?
- Rewrite your essay based on this evaluation and repeat step 5 as often as necessary, to sharpen your essay.
- Ask someone whose opinions you respect to read your essay and give you his or her candid impressions. Ask for specifics but do not let this person rewrite your essay. "Tell me what you think I'm trying to say. How do I come across as a person? What parts confuse you? Where do I need more details? What parts bore you? Tell me the parts you like best."
- If necessary, go back to steps 3, 4, or 5. If this draft is the best you can do, polish it by checking again for spelling and grammatical errors, awkward phrasing, inaccurate usage, unnecessary words, or anything else that does not sound right to you. Read your essay out loud to locate the rough spots.
- Type your essay - unless the college requires a handwritten version - and proofread it to catch typographical errors and any other errors you may have missed.
- Mail your essay on time and relax. If you have done all the above, you can be relatively sure that your efforts will be noted with appreciation.