

Writing the College Essay: A Compilation of Advice

- Types of essays
 - Common App essays
 - school-specific essays/supplements
 - scholarship essays
 - longer essays
 - short-answer answers
 - free response/personal statement
 - prompt
- If you are given a prompt, make sure you answer the question.
 - “Recycle” an essay only if it truly answers the question.
 - Don’t try to fit a square peg into a round hole!
 - Be especially careful of this with the “Why Us?” prompt.
- The essay(s) alone can’t gain you admission if you don’t have “the numbers” or aren’t close to “the numbers”; however, the essay can be crucial if you are on the “bubble” or if you are applying to a highly selective school where virtually all the applicants have “the numbers.”
- If a college says sending an essay or personal statement is optional, always send one.
- Purpose of the essay
 - indicates how well you write (content, style, mechanics)
 - shows who you are, how you think, and what’s important to you
 - provides insight into your personality, interests, values, and passions
 - fills in gaps/explains what the numbers/grades can’t
 - provides an opportunity to stand out from the pack
 - breathes life into an application that can otherwise be impersonal
- Depending on how many applicants a college has, your essay might get 2 minutes of attention; it could be one of 80-100 read that day by an admissions officer.
- Effective essays
 - are authentic--your true voice and personality come out (have a natural prose)
 - choose depth over breadth (a snapshot, a glimpse, a slice of life, a single incident that provides a window; avoid vague, broad topics such as “my childhood” or “how I want to change the world”)
 - present ordinary experiences in a unique way
 - are framed as a story
 - show instead of tell and make the reader feel as if he or she is really there
 - have an immediate hook (but one that is not over-the-edge or just for shock value)

- emphasize what you've learned and how you've changed and grown (self-reflection is critical)
 - use clear examples and specific details
 - have strong action verbs, vivid adjectives and adverbs, precise nouns
 - are clear and concise
 - reveal something about you that can't be found elsewhere in your application
 - are well edited
- Do . . .
 - write from the heart
 - stay focused on you (don't get so caught up in describing the scenery or the event that there is no time to reflect on its impact)
 - consider your audience (admissions officers tend to be young professionals)
 - make it a Google doc and share it
 - paragraph
 - follow directions for length, font, etc.
 - be careful with humor--make sure it works (you don't want to be misunderstood as crass, cruel, intolerant, etc.)
 - have others give you feedback--revise, revise, revise
 - proofread it yourself and have it proofread by others
- Don't . . .
 - let anyone else write the essay (admission officers are great at distinguishing between the voice of a parent and the voice of a teenager)
 - plagiarize (admission officers will check)
 - type directly into the application box (instead, make it a separate document and then copy and paste it in)
 - exceed the word/character limit
 - recap your resume
 - thesaurus-ize your essay
 - use overly formal language
 - use too much slang or abbreviations (u r not texting)
 - write what you think colleges want to hear
 - write a "McEssay" (if you can think of others who could write about the same topic and say the same things, then you need to rethink your topic)
 - Ex: the mission trip/trip abroad and how it changed you
 - Ex: how playing a sport is a metaphor for life
 - Ex: how community service made you realize how fortunate you are
 - let the essay be only about someone you admire; it must reveal who you are (don't just describe the person admired--you need to focus on the person's influence on you)
 - have a vague intro and redundant conclusion (this is not a 5-paragraph essay; instead, jump right in)
 - rely solely on spell check

- Other topics to avoid/be wary of
 - alarm clock/day-in-the-life essay
 - description of your room
 - young love
 - drug/addiction issues
 - dealing with divorce
 - “my way or the highway” opinion pieces on controversial social/political issues
 - complaints and/or excuses
 - the play-by-play travelogue (especially luxury trips that might cast you as over-indulged or out-of-touch)

- Helpful self-reflection questions (courtesy of *College Admission from Application to Acceptance, Step by Step*)
 - Why is this important to me?
 - What did I learn from this?
 - How did it shape my beliefs and values?
 - What was the biggest stumble?
 - When did I first learn how to do this?
 - What was I like before this came into my life?
 - How did it change me or who I think I will become?
 - What was I feeling?
 - What was I experiencing in my life at that time?