

## Writing a great college application essay

It may be only 500 words, but the admissions essay(s) portion of a college application can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. How you write your personal essay shows the admissions committee why you are different from everybody else. It provides information about you that test scores, grades, and extracurricular pursuits just cannot.

You can use the essay to describe a favorite activity, to tell a story about yourself, or even a story about your dog, but make sure to really *use* it -- in a way that captures the reader's attention and shows that you are exceptional.

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, **so take the time to do a good job on it.** Check out these tips before you begin and don't forget to make an appointment with your English teacher...they LOVE helping students write.

DOs

### Keep your focus narrow and personal

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader should be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask someone to read just your introduction to see what he or she thinks your essay is about.

Essays that attempt to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee members what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—but about showing them who you are.

### Prove it

Develop your main idea with vivid, specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests.
- **Better:** During that night, I sang the theme song from *Casablanca* with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gallbladder operation.

### Be specific

To avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing, use vivid, specific details.

- **Okay:** I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others.
- **Better:** My mom and dad stood on plenty of sidelines until their shoes filled with water or their fingers started to freeze or somebody's golden retriever signed its name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders.

DON'Ts

### Don't tell your readers what you think they want to hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

### **Don't write a résumé**

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

■ **Overloaded:** During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory.

### **Don't use 50 words when 5 will do**

Eliminate unnecessary words.

■ **Okay:** Over the years, it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world.

■ **Better:** I'm a slob.

### **Don't forget to proofread**

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell-checker. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

■ After I graduate **form** high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer.

■ From that day on, Daniel was my best **fried**.

### **Check out these additional links:**

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html>

### **Sample College Application Essays:**

- [Princeton sample essay](#)
- [Cornell sample essay](#)
- [Wellesley sample essay](#)
- [Harvard sample essay](#)
- [Stanford sample essay](#)

*Source:* [www.collegeboard.com](http://www.collegeboard.com), based on information from *The College Application Essay, rev. ed.*, by Sarah Myers McGinty (New York: The College Board, 2004).