Writing Your College Essay

If you are like most students, you see the college essay as another hurdle that you must jump on the way to being accepted at the college of your choice. In fact, the essay is not a hurdle but a *rare opportunity;* it is a chance for you to "talk" directly to the college's admissions committee and to help them "see" you as a thinking and feeling person, rather than simply a set of impersonal statistics. Except for the interview, it is your only chance to share your thoughts, insights, and opinions; to highlight your accomplishments; and to convey your maturity and outlook on life. If you see the college essay in this way – as an opportunity – then it is clearly worth the effort to put some extra time, thought, and energy into writing it.

Purpose of the Essay

The college essay is extremely important for two major reasons:

1. It enables the college admissions office to evaluate your communication skills. Through your essay they can assess the clarity of your thinking and your ability to convey your thoughts in written form.
2. It enables the admissions office to learn more about you as a person, beyond what grades and SAT scores can convey. A well-written essay can speak worlds about your attitudes, feelings, personal qualities, imagination, and creativity. For the admissions staff, it adds another important piece to the puzzle because it distinguishes you as an individual, different from any other student who is applying.

Choosing a Topic

The choice of a topic is frequently not an issue, because many colleges and universities will either give you a topic to write about or present several rather specific topics from which you must choose. Other colleges may simply "suggest" broad general topics or give you total freedom to write about something that interests or concerns you. Regardless of whether you must respond to a prescribed topic or come up with one of your own, here are a few general hints about the most effective way to approach your topic:

- Narrow your topic and try to be as specific and illustrative as possible.
- Relatedly, the easiest topic to write about is yourself. No one knows more about you than you. Since one important purpose of the essay is self-revelation, it is no place to be shy or modest, although you should not exaggerate. If you choose to write about yourself, remember that little incidents and facts are often the most revealing of character and outlook.
- Do not be afraid to write about something you think is a little different. A unique topic or approach is often refreshing to a college admissions officer who has been reading applications all day. Further, an unusual or off-beat essay is an excellent way to show your creativity.

Preparing to Write

Before actually sitting down to write a first draft of your essay, spend some time organizing your thoughts. Develop a framework for your essay so it will have a smooth and logical progression from one idea or incident to the next. Consider your purpose in writing, what you want to convey, and the tone that you think is most appropriate for the topic. Decide on a style that is comfort- able for you, not one that you think the college admissions committee prefers. Finally, remember that organizing your thoughts and deciding on a framework does not mean you must be overly rigid at the start; leave room for flexibility and creativity as you actually begin writing.

Writing the Essay

You do not have to get it right the first time! Instead, write the first draft of your essay with the main focus on content – communicating your thoughts. Then set it aside for a day or two, reread it with a fresh perspective, and make any necessary changes. This is also the point at which you should consider matters of organization, style, grammar, spelling, and tone. Once you have rewritten your first draft, you may wish to try it out on your family, friends, English teacher, or guidance counselor. While the final product and final "voice" should be yours, they may be able to offer helpful suggestions for technical or other improvements.

Within this general outline for actually writing the essay, there are some "do's" and "don'ts" which I would like to highlight:

Do's

- Do think "small" and write about something that you know about.
- Do reveal yourself in your writing.
- Do show rather than tell. By giving examples and illustrating your topic, you help bring it to life.
- Do write in your own "voice" and style.

Don'ts

- Don't write what you think others want to read.
- Don't exaggerate or write to impress.
- Don't use a flowery, inflated, or pretentious style.
- Don't neglect the technical part of your essay (grammar, spelling, sentence structure).
- Don't ramble – say what you have to say and conclude.

Your college essay, along with your high school record, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement, will provide the bases upon which the college makes its admissions decision. A thoughtful, well-written essay can affect in a very positive way that final decision. Keep this in mind and take full advantage of the opportunity which the college essay affords you.

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THIS ARTICLE MAY BE REPRODUCED

- Supplemental Questions

Selective colleges may also request students write supplemental essays. This will be noted on the Common Application form. The writing supplements typically consist of three required short response questions. Questions may be "Why do you want to go to our college?" or "Please reflect on something you would like us to know about you that we might not learn from the rest of your application." Students should make certain to review each college's supplement requirements.

College Interview

The interview is an excellent way to determine if a college will really "fit" you. Admissions counselors at the college can answer most of your questions. In some cases, an interview may make the difference in whether you are admitted or not. If you believe you may be a "marginal" candidate for admission to a specific college, request an interview. However, do your homework before you go. Have good questions and be sure you can explain why that college is attractive to you. Review the sections on interviews within the Big Future website on how to prepare for an interview with an Admissions Counselor.

Deadlines

It is extremely important to meet college deadlines especially when it comes to financial aid. Review the chart on the next page to learn what your responsibilities are to complete the application and what CHS will complete on your behalf. Use whatever organizational tool works best to ensure that you meet all deadlines. Use the timelines and checklists included on this site as a guide.

THE COLLEGE APPLICATION-WHAT IS INCLUDED AND WHO IS RESPONSIBLE FOR EACH PART

Contents of the Application File

Application Form
Application Fee
Test Scores
Academic Record (Transcript)
Counselor Letter of Recommendation
Secondary School Report Form, as appropriate
School Profile
Teacher Letter of Recommendation(s), if required

Student

Application Form – includes biographical information, activities, and sometimes one or more essays. This document should be typed or printed neatly.

The "Common Application" form is available to use to apply to over 500 public and private colleges. The names of member schools are listed on the application which is available online at www.commonapp.org as well as from participating colleges. **Please note** that there is a difference between a school being a member of the common application and whether you elect to use that form in order to apply. See the insert on the common application for additional information.

Application Fee – this may range from a waived fee to $85. to cover processing costs.

Test Scores – You may be required to take the College Board's SAT Reasoning Test or the ACT for admission consideration. Some colleges also require SAT Subject Tests. Make certain to check the requirements and deadlines for each college as this varies. You are responsible for ensuring that you have your test results sent to the colleges that require them.

Special Note: Because some colleges no longer require admission tests and the score choice options, the high school transcript will **NOT** include admission test scores.

Letters of Recommendation

Teacher Recommendations – It is up to you to identify and ask the teacher or teachers you would like to write a reference for you (the required number and any parameters will be stated within the application). Always ask face to face first. Please see the additional information on what teachers may need to complete your request.

The School Letter – Your school counselor will write a letter of recommendation if you request it and sign the appropriate release and privacy notice. This letter will be an overview of your performance and will be forwarded to institutions you designate on the ***Transcript Request Form*.** Please allow the counselor adequate time (a minimum of 10 school days) to prepare this credential for you. Also, make certain to have submitted your personal recommendation information and the completed Senior Parent Questionnaire before requesting the letter from your counselor.

Release Forms – Since your school record contains confidential information, release forms **must** be signed when you want records sent from school. If you are under 18 years of age, a parent release is required in addition to, or instead of, one from you.

CHS

Transcript – The transcript reports the courses you have taken, grades earned, credits and grade point average (GPA). As indicated previously, you need to complete a transcript request for each institution or agency needing your records. The Transcript Request Form is set up to allow for multiple requests for transcripts. In the case of transcripts needed for college applications, you are asked to complete Section 1 of the form and clearly print the complete name of the college or university, the type of application including early decision, early action, regular or rolling, the application deadline date (actual not when you hope it to arrive), whether or not you used the common application versus the school's own form and if you have submitted your part of the application. You would then complete Section III of the form that includes your signature and a date. A high school student may sign this form himself/herself provided that the parent has already signed a release form.

School Counselor Letter of Recommendation – See section on School Letter in the middle column.

School Profile – This document is updated annually and provides an academic overview of the school's curriculum and recent graduates' performance. It allows the transcript and counselor letter to be read in context.