

Preparing a College Essay

Writing an Essay That Sets You Apart

Project Summary: The college essay is one of the most stressful tasks in the stressful senior year of high school. Colleges usually select essay topics that are difficult, requiring a philosophy of life or at least a major insight into one, and the pressures from parents, counselors, and friends can make the stress that comes with college applications seem even greater. Nonetheless, the essay is an opportunity to add a significant piece to your college application that you can control completely while improving your writing skills. The key to success is planning and preparation. As you will see from this assignment, most of the steps need time—not a lot of concentrated time (all Sunday, for example)—but time over days, for thinking, drafting, reflecting, editing, and polishing. This assignment requires you to write a college essay.

If you know where you'll be applying and can get a copy of the application, use one of the essays on the application to complete this assignment. If you are not sure where you'll be applying or cannot get a copy of the application, select one of the sample college essay topics.

Purpose: The college essay has two purposes. The first purpose is to prove you can write. This purpose is manageable. Time constraints should not be a problem if you plan well, and you can use dictionaries, spell checkers, writing guides, and editing assistance. The trick is to find these resources and use them. The second purpose, which is more demanding, is to use the essay to show yourself as special—to stand out from the crowd because of your wit, insight, experience, or voice. Worry first about your content—have something to say—then give yourself enough time to get the writing right.

Writer's Role: Although it may seem obvious that the writer's role is that you will be writing as yourself, the stress created by the college essay sometimes causes students to write in a voice that is not their own. Use the language and sentence structure that you would normally use, then have a friend or friends read it over and respond to the question, "Does it sound like me?"

Audience: Your audience is the college admissions' committee, a group of sincere folks who wrote college essays just as you are doing now and probably hated the task as much as anyone. They see the essay as a chance to learn something about you that your GPA, SAT scores, and activities cannot tell them. Remember, the conventional wisdom is that an admission committee never accepts or rejects a candidate based solely on the essay, but the essay can be the deciding factor for a candidate who is on the edge. A second bit of conventional wisdom is that the more selective the college, the more important the essay.

Form: Read the essay topic and directions carefully. Does the college require a specific form or is there room to be creative? Essays that make it on the Internet or into *Essays That Worked* stand out because they broke the four-to-eight-paragraph, topic-sentence mold. Essays written in the form of dialogue, diary, entry, short story (very short story), play—anything but the expected multiparagraph essay—might give your application a boost.

Focus Correction Areas: 1. Specificity (Use specific examples or details to support your main ideas. The details are what makes your essay stand out.)

2. Voice—Speak to the Readers Directly (Your essay should not sound as if it could have been written by any other candidate.)
3. Conventions (No mistakes in spelling, grammar, or punctuation!)

In addition to the three FCAs, review your previously graded compositions to determine your pattern of errors. Do you make the same mistakes repeatedly? Be especially alert to these errors as you edit. Need another reason to keep those old compositions? Some colleges are asking students to submit a graded high school course paper along with their essay.

Procedures:

- Begin early. Write away for college applications. Most applications are available on request in August or early September.
- Start an essay idea file. Do not hope to be inspired the weekend before the essay is due. Some essay topics will benefit from background information. The “issues of importance” or “problems to solve” type of questions can be made easier if you have a file of clippings or notes with background information. The college essay is not a research paper, but one great quote or startling fact can make your essay stand out.
- When you are happy with the content, go through all the steps on the College Essay Editing Checklist.
- After the final draft, keep your essay a week before you send it out. Then read it one more time. Problems that were invisible right after you finished writing will jump off the page at you when seen with a fresh, rested eye.

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- Try a vivid description.**
Go back over your essay and look for a person, place, or thing. Then try to describe it so well the reader could draw it. The description need not be long, but it should be vivid.
- Check your paragraphing.**
Paragraphs are big punctuation marks. They organize and emphasize your content. When in doubt, use shorter paragraphs. Remember, your readers have to read many essays. Shorter paragraphs make your essay easier to read.
- Write at least two alternative beginnings and endings for your essay.**
Beginnings and endings are the most memorable parts of every essay. Begin with action, conversation, a question, a description, or in the middle—but never begin with, “This essay is about.” In fact, avoid the word “essay” in your essay.
- Don’t fill your essay with boastful information.**
Most important information about your achievements is already available elsewhere in your application. Also don’t use your essay as therapy. It is not your personal diary. It’s being read by adults who want to create a vibrant community—not a psychiatric hospital.
- When you are finished with your final draft, re-read the question.**
Did you answer it? Or did you lose your way during the writing process?
- Count the number of words in each sentence.**
Put that number over each end mark. Do your sentences have a mix of sentence lengths?
- Underline the first three to four words in each sentence.**
Do all the sentences begin the same way? Are you happy with the pattern?
- Watch for the “thesaurusized essay.”**
If you’ve used the same word a few times, it helps to look for a synonym in the thesaurus if one does not come naturally, but do not select the longest, most obscure word from the list as your replacement.
- When you have your next-to-final draft, count the number of words.**
Try to eliminate five to ten percent. This will help you eliminate clichés and redundancies.
- Have others read your essay out loud to you.**
This is probably the best single way to determine if your essay is what you hoped for.
- Read your essay backwards by sentence.**
Read the last sentence first, second last sentence next, and so on. This will help you proof read for errors that tend to get missed when you read from beginning to end.