

THE COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY



TIPS AND ADVICE FROM THE EXPERTS AT
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WRITING YOUR COLLEGE ADMISSION ESSAY: STEP-BY-STEP

It may be only 500 words, but the admission essay portion of a college application can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. How you write your personal essay shows the admission committee why you are different from everybody else. It provides information about you that test scores, grades, and extracurricular pursuits simply 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.

STEP ONE: BRAINSTORMING

You should expect to devote about one to two weeks simply thinking up possible essay subjects. From this process of brainstorming, you may find a topic you had not thought of at first. Here are some questions to consider:

What Are You Like?

- What is your strongest personality trait? Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your admission essay for you?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something to which you were previously blind?

What Have You Done?

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments?
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful? Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?

Where Do You Want to Go?

- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with?
- What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful?
- How does this particular university fit into your plans for the future? Why do you want to spend two to six years of your life at a particular school?

STEP TWO: SELECTING AN ESSAY TOPIC

As these thoughts start to solidify into an essay topic, think about execution. What sounded like a good idea might prove impossible in the writing. Most importantly, think of how you can make the subject matter original. Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. With an essay question in mind, think over the following questions:

- Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPAs or standardized test scores in your essay.
- Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should probably choose a different essay topic.
- Will an admission officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

Choose a Story

The best essays tell a story about the applicant. The essay does not have to be the story of your whole life, but rather a small glimpse of it, one that is rich with meaning and alive with imagery. It often helps to think about the impact that past events have had on you. In one admission essay written by a student who was accepted to Harvard, Princeton, Dartmouth, and Stanford, an ordinary story is told in a unique and captivating way.

In this narrative about hiking up a mountain, the student also conveys a deep appreciation for science, as well as a dedication to the hard work required to fully understand the universe:

Although the first few miles of the hike up Mt. Madison did not offer fantastic views, the vistas became spectacular once I climbed above the tree line. Immediately, I sensed that understanding the natural world parallels climbing a mountain. Much like every step while hiking leads the hiker nearer the mountain peak, all knowledge leads the scientist nearer total understanding.

Entitled "Hiking to Understanding," this essay tells the story of one hike, but at the same time, gives a complete idea of the author's values, interests, and philosophy. Thus, the essay presents run-of-the-mill subject matter in an out-of-the-ordinary way.

STEP THREE: WRITING THE ESSAY

You must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade the admission officer that you are extremely worthy of admission and to make the admission officer aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality. But before you can convince an admission officer of this, you must first grab his or her attention.

The Introduction

Most admission officers spend at most 2 minutes reading your essay. With this reality in mind, spend the most time on your introduction. One technique is to create mystery or intrigue in this first paragraph. At the very least, you should not give away the whole story right at the beginning. Give the admission officer a reason to keep reading.

As an example, the first sentence of the “Hiking” essay reads as follows:
Surrounded by thousands of stars, complete silence, and spectacular mountains, I stood atop New Hampshire’s Presidential Range awestruck by nature’s beauty.

This first sentence sets the mood for the essay, it draws the reader into the scene, but it does not state the author’s argument or even the plot of the story to follow. The reader has to continue reading in order to learn what happens next.

The Body

After the first paragraph has been perfected, you must ensure that the body paragraphs relate to the introduction. It helps to have a theme or phrase that runs throughout the entire essay.

In “Hiking to Understanding,” the author uses the mountain as a unifying image:
Some people during their lives climb many small hills. However, to have the most accurate view of the world, I must be dedicated to climbing the biggest mountains I can find. Too often people simply hike across a flat valley without ascending because they content themselves with the scenery. The mountain showed me that I cannot content myself with the scenery.

Also notice that the author uses simple language. Many students think that big words make good essays, but powerful ideas are often best expressed in simple and elegant prose.

Another way to impress an admission officer is by using specific examples and evocative touches of imagery that stay clear of cliché. The application essay lends itself to imagery, since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details.

Successful essays stick to the mantra, “Show, don’t tell.” Here’s one example from the “Hiking” essay:

When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away.

This passage shows how description of the stars and cold can make us both imagine the scenery and understand the author’s point of view. It tells us what the author feels and thinks, more so than if the author had spelled it out for us.

Finishing Up

The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.

The “Hiking” essay does this successfully, both expanding on the description of the scene as well as on the scene’s meaning for the author:

When observing Saturn’s rising, the Milky Way Cloud, and the Perseid meteor shower, I simultaneously felt a great sense of insignificance and purpose. Obviously, earthly concerns are insignificant to the rest of the universe. However, I experienced the overriding need to understand the origins and causes of these phenomena.

Don’t be surprised if the writing process takes many days. Few writers can dash out a quality essay in just a few sittings. It takes awhile to find the perfect structure, wording, and imagery. If you have the time, spend a week away from your draft; when you return to it, you will read it with fresh eyes. Ask friends and family for help. Other readers will find small mistakes that your brain has ceased to recognize, and they will answer the essential question, “What makes this essay memorable?”

STEP FOUR: REVISE, REVISE, REVISE

You are allowed only so many words; use them wisely. If Thoreau couldn’t write a good essay without revision, neither can you. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Are your introduction and conclusion more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?

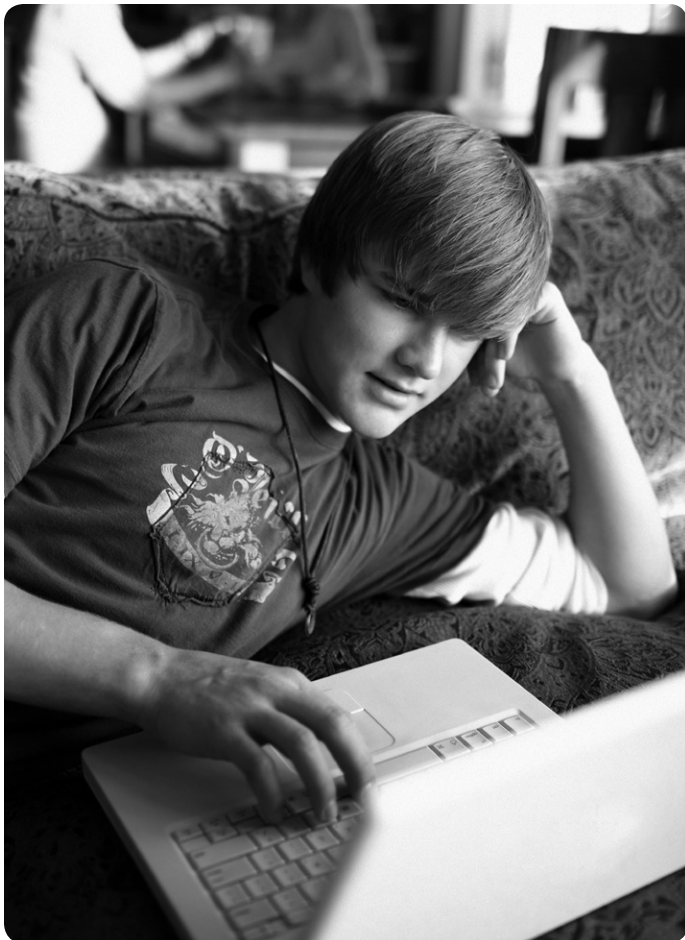
Seek the Advice of Others

Get an objective opinion of your essay by asking others to read it. Here’s a checklist for them to keep in mind as they read:

- Have I answered my question?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or all short sentences?
- Are there any clichés such as cutting edge or learned my lesson?
- Do I use transition appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What’s the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This must be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

Have Your Essay Professionally Edited

If you want another critical eye, work with a professional essay editor who will help you make your essay the best it can be and let your personality and accomplishments shine through. Find the help of Harvard-educated editors at EssayEdge.com.



PRACTICE WRITING WITH SAMPLE QUESTIONS

The Common Application™ is used to apply to 298 selective colleges from Amherst to Yale. Even if your college doesn't accept The Common Application, it is likely that the questions will be similar. Use the questions below as practice in the four steps of writing your essay.

This personal statement helps us become acquainted with you in ways different from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself. We are looking for an essay that will help us know you better as a person and as a student. Please write an essay (250-500 words) on one of the topics listed below.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
3. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
4. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

TOP TEN ADMISSION ESSAY TIPS

Unlike every other aspect of the application, you control your essay. Make sure that the glimpse you give the admission committee into your character, background, and writing ability is the very best possible.

Keep the following in mind as you write:

1. Do answer the question.

Many students try to turn a 500-word essay into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they fail to answer the question. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to answer the question.

2. Don't bore the reader.

Do be interesting. Admission officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. They're not looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you, the applicant.

3. Use detailed and concrete experiences.

Specific, clear details provide strong support to your arguments. Too often, an essay with an interesting story will fizzle into a series of statements that tell rather than show the qualities of the writer.

4. Do be concise.

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but it also can confuse the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct.

5. Don't "thesaurus-ize" your essay.

Do use your own voice. Admission officers can tell Roget from a high school senior. Big words, especially when misused, detract from the essay, inappropriately drawing the reader's attention and making the essay sound contrived.

6. Don't use slang.

Write an essay, not an e-mail. Slang terms, clichés, contractions, and an excessively casual tone should be eliminated.

7. Do vary your sentences and use transitions.

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like nevertheless, furthermore, or consequently.

8. Do use active-voice verbs.

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the verb to be, such as was or were. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

9. Conclude effectively.

Avoid summary. The conclusion is the last chance to persuade admission officers or impress upon them your qualifications.

10. Revise, revise, revise.

A SAMPLE SUCCESSFUL ESSAY

Applicant Admitted to Harvard

For Educational Purposes Only. Do Not Plagiarize.

A Visit to Rural Kenya

At the end of July of '95, I boarded a plane that would take me from my home in Cincinnati, Ohio, to Nairobi, Kenya. My parents had always wanted to take our family abroad, but when my mother signed a contract to work for the U.S. Agency for International Development in Kenya, plans materialized, and we were soon on our way to an exotic year in Africa.

Besides the farewells I had to make to my friends at home, I had few reservations about living abroad. What made it easy for me to come to Africa was my eagerness to immerse myself in a new culture. I knew that I might never get such an experience again, so I was determined to learn all I could about the language, the history, and the people, of that far-off place.

During the first few months of our stay, my family took various trips around the country. We watched zebra and wildebeest migrate across the Serengeti, saw hippos floating like rocks in Lake Victoria, marveled at flamingos balancing knee-deep in a salt-lake. We climbed an extinct volcano in the Rift Valley. We snorkeled in the Indian Ocean and fed fish from our fingers. We hiked 17,000 feet above sea level to the peak of Mt. Kenya. And we studied Swahili, the local language, every evening after dinner. But in late October my aunt came to visit for a month. She romanced us with stories of her experiences in rural Africa working in the Peace Corps. The sharp contrast between the simple lifestyle she described and the one I was leading shocked me as to how un-African my life was. I went to an American school every day with mostly Europeans and Asians, which, despite being a unique experience itself, isolated me from the larger Kenyan community. I was also living in a city, where shopping malls, Italian restaurants, late-night discos, and movie theaters were all available close at hand. Was this really what I had come to see? My daily activities were almost the same as the ones in the United States. I typed English essays late at night on a computer; I showered with hot water every day after soccer practice; I dined on fried chicken or fish fillets or hamburgers. I was in the midst of a swarm of expatriates who had formed a community so tight that I could live with all the luxuries of a technologically-modern lifestyle. I saw my problem: I had wound myself so tightly in the routine of my school life that I was no longer seeing Kenya or even Kenyans. I yearned to know some of the African culture, but I didn't know how that could be achieved without a drastic break in my academic progress, which I wasn't willing to sacrifice.

After talking over this issue with my parents, I stumbled upon the perfect solution. [name] is the son of [name] and [name], with whom my mother lived twenty years ago when she came to Kenya as a volunteer nurse. [name] was living with us while he attended [name] College, but he was going back to his home village to visit his family over the Christmas holidays. I could go with him and stay with his family there.

This excursion proved to be the most rewarding ten days of my entire stay in Africa. In that short period, I learned more about Kenyan culture than I had in the five months prior to that time. First of all, I witnessed how different the female role is in Kenya than in America. The women—young and old—did about twice the work the men did. They had to cook the meals, get the milk, sweep the house, chop the

firewood, take care of the children; the list goes on and on. The men did some work on the farm, but mostly they enjoyed a laid-back lifestyle. And it is not uncommon for a man to have more than one wife. [Name] has had a total of three women as wives. What seems unheard-of to a Westerner is commonplace to a Kenyan.

I also saw an intense restlessness for change. When the men sat around the dinner table (women weren't allowed to eat with them), they would not merely discuss the weather or the latest gossip of the village. No, they debated the problems and merits of Kenya and what could be done to improve their country. They voiced their apprehension of the government, their fear that if they openly opposed the established authority, their family could be persecuted by the president's special agents. They talked of the A.I.D.S. epidemic spreading through the working class like wildfire. They expressed their anger at the drug abuse of their nation's youth. But these men were unwilling to accept the obstacles they faced and instead looked toward solutions—education, fairer elections, less corruption, and others. I also saw that a primitive life is not necessarily a painful one. Theirs is a simple life—one without running water, or electricity, or telephones, or cars. But being simple did not mean it was a pleasureless life. It meant fetching water every day from a well. It meant cooking over a fire and reading by a lantern. It meant walking to school instead of driving. But it also meant no expensive phone bills, no wallet-straining car repairs, no broken washing machines. A simple life had its hardships, but it also avoided the hassles that Americans face in their complex modern lives. In the village, we ate good food, children screamed and shouted with joy, we laughed while playing card games, we flipped through old photo albums. Their lifestyle was vastly different from mine, but they still had the same goals that I did: to have fun, to get a good education, to be comfortable. After the New Year, when I returned to my home in Nairobi, I went back carrying in my mind a vivid picture of rural Kenya, but also satisfied that I had learned something that could not be found in Nairobi's American expatriate community.

Comments by Admission Officers

This essayist benefited from having had an unusual travel experience and from knowing how to write about it using lots of colorful detail. Two officers mentioned that the writer could have improved the essay by making her conclusion more reflective. "What do these things mean?" asked one. "In the conclusion, the all-important self-reflection is absent... Remember, if you want to write an essay about your immersion in a foreign culture, you must be able to articulate how you've grown from the experience; a mere recounting of events is not enough."

"This is very well written. I especially like the vivid descriptions of the African scenes. It shows us a young woman who is extremely open to new experiences, who wants to immerse herself completely in whatever new situation comes her way. She would be a valuable addition to an entering class."

"Solid all-around essay from beginning to end. This is one of those essays that you hope more students would write. This student knows what it takes to compose a quality essay. It is told in an expressive way that allows you to envision the experience yourself. Excellent form and writing. This student has a keen sense for details and how to tell a story."

Sample Essays

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- Insights to help you become a better writer

JUST HOW IMPORTANT IS THE ESSAY?

Number of admission essays written in 2006:

500,000

Average percentage of time an admission officer spends on the essay part of your application:

One-third

Average number of hours spent writing the admission essay:

10 hours

Average percent of applicants rejected by the top 50 schools:

70 percent

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