

How to write a college application essay

By Margaret Metzger
Brookline High School, Massachusetts

Many colleges require a short essay as part of the application process. The directions for the essay vary from college to college. Most colleges offer some variation of the topic. “Tell us more about yourself.”

Like most students, you might hate this subject and dread writing the essay. You know that it is a crucial piece of writing and that it must be done, but secretly you hope somehow to avoid the task. Like most tasks, the tension created by procrastinating is worse than the work itself — in this case, just sitting down and writing the essay.

You can use the college essay to strengthen your application. In fact, your essay can be the strongest part, presenting you as a thoughtful, sincere, interesting applicant. You can use the college essay to explain mistakes of the past — failed courses, low SATR scores or few extracurricular activities. Best of all, you can demonstrate that you know how to write well, an ability all colleges value.

Find a topic

Colleges genuinely want to know who you are. Although it is difficult to believe, they do not have an “ideal student” in mind. They want a variety of students. They understand that they can’t know everything about you by your grade point average and your SAT scores. They want to know what kind of person you are, what aspirations you have, what struggles you have gone through, what is important to you. They ask you to write an essay about yourself because they want more personal information.

Before you write, think about how you may be different from other applicants. What unusual experience would you bring to the college? What interests, activities, travel, struggles or situations have had a particular impact on you? You are probably thinking, “Nothing is special about me; I’m just an average kid.” That’s what most students think. Sometimes it helps to ask other people what they think is unique about you.

If you know exactly what you want to write about, you are lucky. Use that topic. Be sure to consider the traditional, but appropriate and effective, topics, such as academic achievements, extracurricular activities, travel and work experiences, and life-changing events.

Also think of more subtle accomplishments. What kind of student are you? In which class did you learn to think, to study? What do you do with your free

time? What have you done for the past two summers? What words would you use to describe your personality? Do you belong to any organizations outside high school? What jobs have you held? What have you learned about organizing your time? Who is your most unusual friend? What magazines, newspapers, columnists or authors do you like to read? What are some of the failures or disappointments in your life? What kind of plans do you have for the future? Who has been influential in your life? What responsibilities do you have at home? What do you do for other people? What does music (particularly playing or composing) mean to you? How have you changed (besides physically) in the last four years?

Be specific

Remember that the admissions board is reading hundreds of applications, and you must make yours memorable. Some students resort to gimmicks: 8-inch-by-10-inch glossy pictures of themselves hang gliding, or a videotape or a cartoon book about themselves. You may have heard stories about an ordinary student getting into an exclusive college by taking a creative or startling approach. But gimmicks are high risk. Maybe the admissions board doesn’t have the time or the equipment to play the videotape of your band. Maybe you will seem egocentric or cute or, more likely, as though you are dodging the difficult task that everyone else has done: writing an essay.

You can make yourself stand out from the crowd and stress your individuality by a less risky method. Your English teachers have been telling you for years to use specifics when you write. Specifics make a piece of writing memorable. This basic principle of good writing applies, as well, to writing the college essay. Be specific. Tell the truth about yourself as specifically as possible. If you claim that you like school, say exactly what you like: “I like biology and got particularly interested in a three-month project I did about algae on the teeth.” Always be as specific as possible.

Narrow your topic

You have only one-and-a-half to two pages for this essay. You can’t write about everything that has ever happened to you. You need one to three topics for this paper. You must pick a few of the most important aspects of your identity.

If you cover too much, you will be forced to be superficial. Don’t say, “I like school. I am a leader. I play basketball. I’ve traveled to Sri Lanka, Alaska, Iowa and South Africa. I play the violin. I work every weekend. I believe in responsibility. I want to be

famous.” Pick one, two, or at the most, three important things about yourself and concentrate on them.

Show, don’t tell

You need to know and apply the writing principle of “show, don’t tell”: Give the readers such convincing evidence that they draw the conclusion you want them to draw. If you provide all the evidence of your fine qualities, you don’t have to list them. Besides, the college will be much more likely to consider you sincere if you give examples rather than a list of glorious adjectives about yourself.

For instance, you might be embarrassed to say, “I am extremely responsible.” Instead you could say, “Last summer, I was put in charge of 12 ten-year-old girls for a three-day hike.” When the college admissions board members read your example, they will come to the conclusion, “Ah, some adult must have felt this applicant could be responsible for a dozen children’s health and safety for several days. This sounds like a responsible person.” Give your readers the evidence and examples, and they will reach the right conclusions.

Describe what you have done

You don’t need a long list of flashy experiences. What you have experienced is not as important as what you have done with the experience. Real maturity depends on how you understand what has happened to you and whether you let your experiences change your perceptions.

Colleges want to know how you have reacted to your experiences. For example, many students have failed some test or course. Colleges would like to know what you did with that failure. Did you mope? Blame the teacher? Quit doing homework because you were angry at the failure? Did you see the failure as a warning, an impetus, a challenge?

Even if you write about something exotic, you must say what you did and what you learned. One student went to Israel for two weeks; her only observation was that the Israeli women wore longer skirts than the Americans. Her trivial description revealed her immaturity and poor powers of observation.

When you are explaining what you learned, do not say, “I learned a lot.” Be specific. Tell exactly what you learned. You want to show colleges that you will change and grow through a college education.

Focus on yourself

If you feel self-conscious writing the essay, you may be tempted to dodge the task of writing about yourself and write, instead, about something related to you, such as a group or an organization you belong to. Avoid this approach.

Work on the first sentence

There are two opposing approaches to making a strong opening sentence. The first suggestion is that you spend hours on the first sentence because it sets the tone and direction of the essay. The reasoning is that you need to know where you are going before you begin. The problem with this approach is that students become paralyzed trying to find the perfect beginning.

The second suggestion is that you begin anywhere and write the first sentence last. The reasoning is that you need to get started, and you don’t know what you will end up saying until you have finished the essay. You may discover that your essay really begins in the middle of the second or third paragraph, and you can cut out all the preliminaries. Then you can start with a sturdy statement. The problem with this approach is that you might begin an essay without a sense of direction and wander too much.

You may go back and forth between trying to write a perfect beginning and just trying to get started. No matter what you do, when you finish the essay, go back to the beginning and work on the first sentences. Cut out all wordiness. Make it specific. Check the grammar.

Final bit of advice

Millions of students before you have written college essays. They hated the task, too. But it must get done. Of course, it is better to write it long before the deadline. The real problem for most students is how to get started, what topic to use and how to avoid procrastination.

The solution is simply to begin.