

University Application Essay Writing Tips

Write an Effective Application Essay

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 the 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.

Do:

Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

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

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

Prove It

Develop your main idea with vivid and 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 Humphrey Bogart, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

Be Specific

Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and 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 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his 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't:

Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of failure, 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 Resume

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.

"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 Five 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 not a neat person."

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 check. 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."

Choosing a College Essay Topic

What You Write About Says Something About You

Underlying all essay questions is choice. The essay question may be direct and ask you to choose something about yourself to discuss, or it may be indirect and require you to write about something such as an event, book, or quotation.

Sample College Essay Questions

What Do Colleges Want to Know?

Generally, there are three types of questions: The "you," the "why us," and the "creative." Here are tips and actual sample questions for each type. Don't assume that the questions are currently being used by a college (most colleges adjust questions annually).

The "You" Question

Many colleges ask for an essay that boils down to, "Tell us about yourself." The school just wants to know you better and see how you'll introduce yourself. For example:

"Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application." (James Madison University)

"How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?" (Bates College)

(Simmons College)

"Describe the most challenging obstacle you have had to overcome; discuss its impact, and tell what you have learned from the experience." (Guilford College)

Your Approach

This direct question offers a chance to reveal your personality, insight, and commitment. The danger is that it's open-ended, so you need to focus. Find just one or two things that will reveal your best qualities, and avoid the urge to spill everything.

The "Why Us" Question

Some schools ask for an essay about your choice of a school or career. They're looking for information about your goals, and about how serious your commitment is to this particular school. For example:

"Why is UVM a good college choice for you?" (University of Vermont)

"Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study."
(Westfield State College)

Your Approach

The focus is provided: Why did you choose this school or path? This should be pretty clear to you, since you probably went through some kind of selection process. Make sure you know your subject well. For example, if you say you want to attend Carleton College to major in agriculture, the school will be able to tell how carefully you've chosen (Carleton doesn't have an agriculture major).

The "Creative" Question

Some colleges evaluate you through your choice of some tangential item: a national issue, a famous person, what you would put in a time capsule, a photograph. Here the school is looking at your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge and education. For example:

"Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others." (Denison University)

"Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence."
(Common Application)

Your approach

Again, you have something to react to, a way to show yourself and write about your real views. Just don't forget the importance of writing an informed essay. For example, don't write about a fantasy lunch with a famous writer and get the titles of her novels wrong. Also, when thinking about how creative to get, use common sense. Being creative to the point of wacky is a risk you may not want to take.

Why Your Choice of Essay Matters

The college regards your choices as a way to evaluate your preferences, values, mental processes, creativity, sense of humor, and depth of knowledge. Your writing reflects your power of persuasion, organizational abilities, style, and mastery of standard written English. Your essay topic reveals your preferences.

Here is what colleges look for:

Your Preferences: Your essay topic reveals your preferences. Are you an arts person or a hard-facts science type? Certainly, there is a difference between the person who'd like to talk about the Cold War with Machiavelli and someone who'd like to get painting tips from Jackson Pollock.

Your Values: Choice also reflects values. The person who drives a beat-up, rusty, 1971 Volkswagen is making a statement about how she wants to spend her money and what she cares about. We say, "That dress isn't me" or "I'm not a cat person." In choosing, you indicate what matters to you and how you perceive yourself.

Your Thought Process: Choosing shows how you think. Are you whimsical, a person who chooses on impulse? Or are you methodical and careful, a person who gathers background information before choosing? Questions about you and about career and college reflect these choosing patterns. Even a question about a national issue can show your particular thinking style, level of intelligence, and insight.

Think About Topics

The topic you select for your essay can also reveal much about who you are. Yale's application instructs: "In the past, candidates have used this space in great variety of ways.... There is no 'correct' way to respond to this essay request...." No answer is wrong, but sloppy, general, insincere, or tasteless responses can hurt your cause.

Some of the best essays—the memorable and unusual ones—are about very similar, just more focused, topics. Essays about your family, football team, trip to France, or twin can be effective as long as they're focused and specific.

* Based on information found in *The College Application Essay*, by Sarah Myers McGinty.