

Writing an Effective College Application Essay

Application essays are a prime opportunity to stand out with well-composed essays about what makes you a truly special candidate -- your passion, personality, character, personal achievements, background, special talents, sense of humor, inner resilience, writing ability as well as your reasoning for choices you have made.

Colleges look for articulate, well-written, thoughtful essays providing insight into your personality, values, and goals.

Admissions officers have varied criteria for evaluating candidates and determining which students to admit. In general, they seek a diverse and balanced student body of motivated, involved, and qualified students with genuine interests, impressive achievements, interesting talents & experiences, sound character and real personalities – all with the potential to “fit in” and be an asset to the school. Admissions officers respond positively to their perception of passion, intellectual curiosity, maturity, leadership, commitment and energy.

The admissions committee looks for authentic “surround sound” evidence of these qualities and achievements in the application, essays, interviews, recommendations, and extracurricular activities. These components paint a picture of the candidate that the admissions people use to compare and contrast with other qualified applicants.

Resist the temptation to run off and start writing. Experts will tell you that up-front planning of your essays is well worth the time invested. Not only will the quality of your essays be much higher, you’ll probably end up saving time in the long run!

Read this STRATEGIC advice about writing effective essays in a time-efficient manner:

1. Take a hard look at your College Admission Resume. If you don’t have one, take out a piece of paper and put together a draft -- list your activities awards, honors, community service hours, leadership positions, “hook”, “wow factor” etc. along with your GPA, HPA, entrance exam scores, list of impressive courses, etc. Basically, these are your “assets” - what you have to offer to a college.
2. Consider The Colleges on Your List -- Think about what your choice colleges might find attractive about you (your assets) or about a niche area at that particular college that you are interested in pursuing (e.g. female interested in engineering, male interested in nursing). If you’re considering a niche area, double check to make certain that the college offers that course of study!
3. Review ALL the application essays prompts for ALL the colleges that you are considering, including the Common Application.

- Look for essay opportunities to showcase your “assets” in a manner that colleges will appreciate.
 - Look for good opportunities to recycle (re-use elements) in ways that retain their value and such that they don’t appear recycled.
4. Admissions officers read your essays to learn about YOU – to help them gauge the person you are and to decide if you’d be a worthwhile addition to the school. Select essay topics and respond to prompts with that in mind!

Consider this TACTICAL as you plan, write, edit, re-write and review your essays:

1. Start EARLY - give yourself plenty of time!
2. Read & follow the instructions.
3. Answer the question or respond to the prompt.
4. Plan and outline your essays before you write them. Remember: substance, structure, relevance, appeal.
5. Brainstorm with others. Don’t be afraid to think creatively. Don’t be afraid to reject ideas!
6. Don’t stress if an essay appears too short. Lincoln got his points across succinctly in the Gettysburg address -- in less than 275 words.
7. When in doubt, don’t recycle an essay.
8. Don’t fall in love with the thesaurus, strive to be a sesquipedalian, or come across as a pedantic fop!
9. Take your time. Write, Review, Sleep on it, Review Again, Get Input, Re-Write, Review etc.
10. Focus on style, tone and substance. Make it your best work!
11. When in doubt leave it out – avoid risky topics such as: drugs, alcohol, politics, sob stories, etc.
12. Ask several people to review your drafts and offer comments and suggestions.
13. Take comments and suggestions seriously – behind every good writer is at least one good editor!
14. Check for grammar, spelling and word substitution (e.g. replace all “Harvard” with “Princeton” (sic)).

15. Be yourself – your essays should be consistent with your recommendations, application, etc.
16. Write it yourself – do your own work.
17. Be positive.
18. Be genuine.
19. Show a "can do" attitude.
20. Stay focused and on point – don't ramble.
21. Keep introductions brief.
22. Be concise – tighten it up.
23. Be likeable, but not saint-like.
24. Try not to be boring!
25. Show passion, when appropriate.
26. Show maturity – don't overdo the humor or write about something dumb!