

Part I: College Essays – Planning What to Write

Writing an essay for a college or trade school is a very challenging and stressful thing to do. Knowing a little about why you are doing this will help you to plan your thoughts. Sometimes a college will give you a specific topic to write about, sometimes they will give you a choice. The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision, and spirit to the admissions committee. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts.

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.

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.

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?
- **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. Here 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.

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.
- 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**.
- Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.
- 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.

Prove it – show your evidence

- Develop your main idea with vivid facts, events, examples, details, and reasons.

Be specific

- Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing
- Eliminate unnecessary words – don't use 50 when 5 will do

Overall, there are three basic types of essay questions:

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 what you think about yourself.

- **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.

- **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

The "Creative" Question

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

- **Your Approach:** Again, you have something to react to, a way to show yourself and write about your real views. 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.

Part II: Writing Your Essay

To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you'd use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

Step 1: Prewriting

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself. Here are several strategies you can try if you have writer's block:

- **Brainstorm:** Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics.
- **Discover Your Strengths:** Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline:** Now, next to each trait, list evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections:** Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store?

Step 2: Drafting

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. Don't get hung up on spelling, grammar, and punctuation and let it ruin your creative flow. Get your ideas and thoughts out on paper, everything else can be fixed in the editing stage.

- The **introduction** gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise.
- The **body** presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- The **conclusion** can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

Types of Essay Styles: There are three basic essay styles you can consider:

- **Standard Essay:** Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence.
- **Less-Is-More Essay:** In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.
- **Narrative Essay:** A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two narrative paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

Step 3: Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool:** Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?
- **Feedback Time:** Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- **Edit Down:** Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- **Proofread Two More Times:** Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way. 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.