

Tips for Writing an Effective Application Essay

When you apply to college, you'll need to complete an essay as part of your application. This is your opportunity to show admission officers who you are and to provide information about yourself that didn't fit in other areas of your application. The essay also reveals what you can do when you have time to think and work on a writing project.

The number one piece of advice from admission officers about your essay is "Be yourself." The number two suggestion is "Start early." Check out these other tips before you begin.

Choose a Topic That Will Highlight You

- **Don't** focus on the great aspects of a particular college, the amount of dedication it takes to be a doctor or the number of extracurricular activities you took part in during high school.
- **Do** share your personal story and thoughts, take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren't covered in other parts of the application, like your high school records.

Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

- **Don't** try to cover too many topics. This will make the essay sound like a résumé that doesn't provide any details about you.
- **Do** focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are. Remember that the readers must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask a parent or teacher to read just your introduction and tell you what he or she thinks your essay is about.

Show, Don't Tell

- **Don't** simply state a fact to get an idea across, such as "I like to surround myself with people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."
- **Do** include specific details, examples, reasons and so on to develop your ideas. For the example above, describe a situation when you were surrounded by various types of people. What were you doing? Whom did you talk with? What did you take away from the experience?

Use Your Own Voice

- **Don't** rely on phrases or ideas that people have used many times before. These could include statements like, "There is so much suffering in the world that I feel I have to help people." Avoid overly formal or business-like language, and don't use unnecessary words.
- **Do** write in your own voice. For the above example, you could write about a real experience that you had and how it made you feel you had to take action. And note that admission officers will be able to tell if your essay was edited by an adult.

Ask a Teacher or Parent to Proofread

- **Don't** turn your essay in without proofreading it, and don't rely only on your computer's spell check to catch mistakes. A spell-check program will miss typos like these:
 - "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to get a summer job."
 - "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."
- **Do** ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes. You should also ask the person who proofreads your essay if the writing sounds like you.

8 Tips for Crafting Your Best College Essay

1. Get started by brainstorming

Starting the essay can be the hardest part. Brainstorming about your personality traits and defining your strengths is a good place to begin.

2. Let your first draft flow

After you've gathered your notes, create an outline to organize your essay and decide where you want examples to appear. Now you're ready to write your first draft. Don't worry about making it perfect. Just get your ideas flowing and your thoughts down on paper. You'll fix mistakes and improve the writing in later drafts.

3. Develop three essay parts

- Introduction: One paragraph that introduces your essay.
- Body: Several paragraphs explaining the main idea with examples.
- Conclusion: One paragraph that summarizes and ends the essay.

4. Be specific

Give your essay focus by figuring out how the question relates to your personal qualities and then taking a specific angle. Make sure everything you write supports that viewpoint.

5. Find a creative angle

Katherine, a college freshman, had to describe why she would make a good Reed College student for that school's essay. "I am a huge fan of Beat Generation writers, and many of the West Coast Beat writers attended Reed," she says. "So I related my love for writing and the Beats to why I would be a great fit for the school."

6. Be honest

The essay question might ask you about your best quality, an experience that shaped you or the reason you want to attend a certain college. Don't be tempted to write what you think the admission officers want to hear; answer the question honestly.

7. Get feedback

Show your draft to family, friends or teachers. Ask if it makes sense and sounds like you. Consider their feedback and make changes, but keep your voice. High school senior Dana warns, "Make sure the essay is in your own voice. If at some point you read over your essay and you hear your mother's voice, something is wrong."

8. Proofread and make corrections

Read your essay over carefully to check for typos and spelling and grammar errors. It's best to ask someone who hasn't seen it yet to take a look as well. They're likely to see mistakes you won't catch.