



PREPARING THE COLLEGE ESSAY

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Writing is hard!

- The essay is a challenging form because of its brevity;
- It can be hard to write about oneself without feeling self-conscious—or worse, self-centered;
- Correct isn't everything;
- The relationship of writer and editor can be challenging for student and parent alike.

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Why do colleges require an essay?

Competition to enter colleges is at an all-time high with many applicants having similar “paper” qualifications

- *SAT/ACT scores*
- *GPA*
- *Course loads*
- *Extracurricular activities*

The essay gives you (the applicant) the chance to do many things in college admission officers’ minds:

- become an individual
- show that you can write an organized, cohesive essay
- show that you can *think*, and furthermore how *deeply* you can think

On that note...here is a note I received this year:

Good Afternoon Ms. Scully,

I recently read your student, (name redacted)'s application to RPI and wanted to reach out to thank you for sharing your recommendation with us. I read many math and science recommendation letters (as that is what we require from students), and it is always refreshing to have someone who teaches English share a different side of a student.

Thank you so much for your insight into (name redacted). I truly appreciate it.

All my best,

(name redacted)

Admissions Counselor, Undergraduate Admissions

PS – I cried reading (name redacted)'s essay, too.

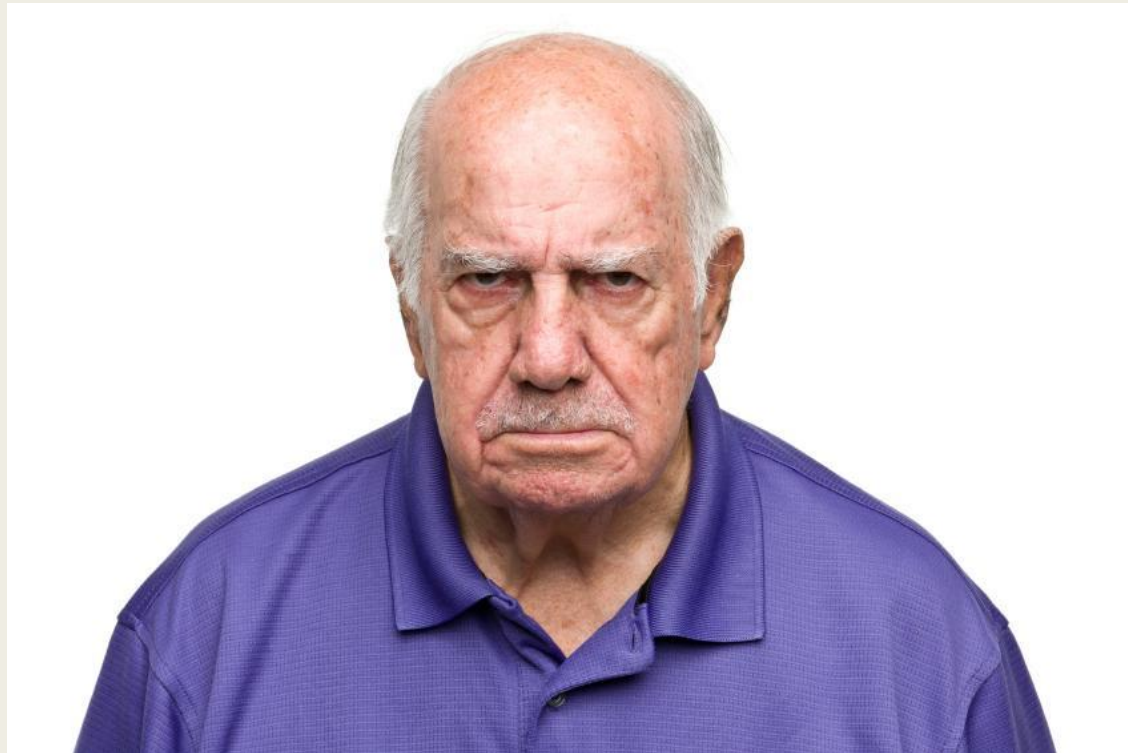
Suggested Mindset

What type of audience should you target and “write to” as you frame your essay?

The “Positive Audience”



The “Negative Audience”



What do college admissions officers love to see?

■ Originality of writing topic

- *Less original topics call for more unique presentations of ideas*
- *Being intellectually adventurous and not overly cautious*

■ It is not just the topic that matters, it's also about how a student writes about it

- *Reflective mature thought*
- *Use of language*
- *Sound writing mechanics*
- *Engagement - from the onset and then ongoing*

What do college admissions officers love to see?

- **Small anecdotes with rich details**
 - *“Show, don’t tell!”*
- **Answering a question in its entirety**
- **Use of dialogue**
- **Essays that show a positive attitude and deserving gratitude**
- **The confession of weakness and error**
- **Genuine voice of a high school student**

What do college admissions officers want you to **AVOID**?

- **Essays that seem to be written to impress an admissions office**
They tend to lack authenticity
- **Trite conclusions**
 - *After my experience, I now realize that...*
 - *“We’re all fundamentally the same.”*
 - *“We’re all fundamentally different.”*
 - *“I should appreciate my own life.”*
- **Essays on “hot topics” that simply restate obvious arguments**
- **A laundry list of extracurricular activities**
- **Essays that rely too heavily on humor.**
 - *Funny essays can be quite effective, but only if there’s substance below the cleverness.*
- **Superficiality. Students write what they have been doing and keep it fact-based but do not bring it to a reflective level.**

What do many college admissions like for you to **AVOID**?

- Misspellings, poor grammar, and typographical errors suggest that students may not be putting much effort into their applications
- The use of profanity, even for “effect,” may be viewed as reflecting poor judgment
- Divisive Ideological issues such as politics and religion
 - *The “Thanksgiving Table Rule”*
- Ingratitude falls flat
- Overcoming adversity with grace is great, but sometimes telling of a horrific case leaves the committee hanging
- Forced creativity, forced humor, and self-consciously trying to be different

Tips for Writing

- **Start early!**
- **Write a draft and then set it aside for a few days before attempting to proofread or revise.**
- **Don't "thesaurize" your essay either. Loading your essay with SAT words makes it sound unnatural.**
- **Show, don't tell!**
 - *Narratives "work" better than lists, especially for questions that ask you to "tell about yourself" or to "talk about someone who has influenced you."*
- **Keep your audience in mind with the knowledge that admissions officers are spending about two to three minutes on your essay.**

Tips for Writing

■ REVISE!

- *Revision is not the same thing as proofreading.*
- *Revision literally means “seeing again”—you should make big changes. (See Tips for Revision)*

■ PROOFREAD!

- *Your essay should be as technically perfect as possible.*

Tips for Writing

- Show your essay to someone you trust to tell you the truth before sending it in.
 - *Avoid the dreaded, “Is it good?”*
 - *Instead, ask:*
 - *“What does this say about me?”*
 - *“What impressions do you get?”*
 - *“What do you think about how it is written?”*

Some additional advice from www.quintcareers.com

- **While you might be proud of overcoming some personal adversity, be very wary of writing an essay that details drinking, drugs, or “partying” because it could very well undermine your goal of acceptance.**
 - *Are you still going through the tough time or have you made your way through it?*

Some additional advice from www.quintcareers.com

- If you are planning on writing an essay about a terrible experience that you went through, you should be careful that your main goal is to address your own personal qualities (not the experience).
 - *Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college student.*
 - *Because you want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances, only use the horrible experience as a lens to magnify your own personal characteristics.*

Tips for Revision

- Spend quality revision time trying out different “hooks” to gain your reader’s interest.
 - *Rhetorical questions, dictionary definitions, and famous quotations can work, but keep in mind that many people use these techniques. Your goal is stand out from the crowd.*

- Be as personal and concrete as you can.
 - *Narratives and specific examples work best.*
 - Are you writing about your trip to Great Adventure or your feelings about overcoming your fear of heights by going on a roller coaster for the first time?

Tips for Revision

- Use vivid, active verbs as often as possible.
 - *Try to get rid of most of your “to be” verbs: is, are, am, was, were, etc.*
- Replace bland nouns with specific nouns.
 - *For example, trade “shoes” for “lime green Nikes” or “lunch” with “half-smushed peanut butter and jelly sandwich”.*
 - *Never use terms such as “things” and “stuff” when you could be more specific.*
- Beware of ambiguous pronouns.
 - *Every pronoun you use should have a clear referent.*
 - *Be especially aware of “it,” “this,” and “that,” which can often be vague or confusing.*

Tips for Revision

- Vary your sentence length and sentence structure.
 - *Intersperse short declarative sentences with longer complex and compound sentences.*
 - *Notice and revise repetitive sentence structures such as subject-verb-object.*
 - *Avoid using “I” over and over again as the first word of sentences.*
- Check for redundancy. And you should check for redundancy. 😊
 - *Don’t use two adjectives in a series that mean the same thing as in “gorgeous, beautiful” or an unnecessary adjective in front of a noun or verb as in “fast sprint.”*
 - *When in doubt, choose a vivid verb or specific noun over an adjective or adverb.*
- Write everything you can think of.
 - *Don’t just stop writing when you reach the word limit or get tired. You can always prune later.*
 - *Your essay needs a powerful ending.*

Tips for Revision

■ Conclusions are very important!

- *Make your last sentence count. A stand-alone sentence can sometimes be the most effective concluding paragraph.*
- *Don't summarize or repeat information; the essay is short enough that the reader will not have forgotten any details.*

■ DO NOT rely on spell check to catch errors.

- *Spell check only notices when a word is spelled incorrectly, not when you have used the wrong word in a given circumstance. There, their, and they're and other common usage problems will not be corrected. Likewise, you may not catch typos like "form" instead of "from".*
- *Reading your essay aloud can help you catch these as can showing it to someone else. A second set of eyes can be invaluable!*

Who should help you?

What is a teacher's role in this?

■ You should help yourself.

- *That said, don't go for help to anyone until you have read through the packet and sketched out some ideas **IN WRITING** at the very least.*
- *Use Appendix 3 — the Self Evaluation Form section included in the packet.*

■ If you are still only at the idea phase (I just can't think of anything to write...), try talking to your friends, parents, siblings, present and former teachers, coaches, and administrators.

■ If you have drafted an essay, you might want a parent, older sibling, friend, your **CURRENT** English teacher, or a former English teacher to read it over and offer suggestions.

- *The first draft is **NOT** the time to edit; it is the time to revise. See the Glossary of Terms for an explanation.*

Who should help you?

What is a teacher's role in this?

- Your **CURRENT** English teacher can be a powerful resource in the writing of your college essay, but remember, this is your application process, not his or her application essay.
- Your English teacher has a caseload of students who need him or her for remediation during 10th period. This is why you should...
 - Ask your teacher if he or she can help you, and
 - **MAKE AN APPOINTMENT** and keep it.
- Your teacher is not responsible for proofreading and editing your paper—that is your job. According to Randy Cohen (The Ethicist/NY Times Magazine), “A teacher may read students essays but not write them” and should “...eschew anything as hands-on as editing or proofreading...”

Structure of Essay

- There is no single structure that works best. This will depend a lot on the question you are answering and on your own writing style.
- A traditional five-paragraph essay may work just fine for an issue-based question.
- A narrative describing a significant experience may include more short paragraphs and dialogue.
- The essay needs to follow a logical progression, must flow, and must stay focused on answering the question at hand.
- No matter what style you write in, you need to introduce your topic, develop it with concrete details, and reflect on it in a conclusion.

Welcome to Syracuse, Grandma!



Sequencing of a Narrative

- Traditionally, many students write their narrative in a chronologically sequential “linear” manner:
 - *I was a camp counselor last summer.*
 - *I had a problematic camper that I needed to work with.*
 - *Together, we made great strides over the summer.*
 - *By the end of the summer, the camper became a team player.*
 - *I learned as much from him as he learned from me.*
- Many students have had very successful revisions by reordering their narrative.
 - *Classically, the essay can begin with “the end” of the story and work its way back. This also allows for a full-circle ending, a great way to frame your essay.*

Please, please, PLEASE DO NOT WRITE ABOUT CAMP!

Idea Generation

■ Where will my ideas come from?

- *Dig out those old photo albums, diaries, and journals to help refresh your memory about seminal events in your life.*

■ Outside the Box:

- *The standard college essay questions can, within reason, be refined by you to become uniquely personal.*

■ Sometimes we don't think to use stories of our pets, or even an inanimate object such as a "blankie" because we are afraid to seem immature or silly. As a young adult, you now have the perspective to see your own growth from these early childhood experiences—this can be very revealing of who you are now.

Idea Generation

■ Write Positively About Something Negative:

- *Are you the kid who used to, or who is known to be, the crayon eater during kindergarten?*
- *Pain and tragedy can reveal character in a “show, don’t tell” way.*
- *Don’t make the thrust of such an essay the pain of the experience, but the insights gained as a result.*

Idea Generation

- **I Have Writer's Block...**
- **If you have an idea about what you want to write about, but can't think of a way to start writing it, grab a recording device and a close friend or family member who remembers the incident and tell that person about the event.**
- **Make sure before you begin recording that the person is prepared to ask probing questions about the event:**
 - *Who else was involved?*
 - *What was the worst/best aspect of the event?*
 - *How did that make you feel?*
 - *What did you learn?*
 - *If you had it to do all over again, what would you do differently?*
- **Listen to the recording and transcribe some or all of what was discussed.**

Popular Application Essay Topics

- **The College Application Essay Guide has a wealth of information concerning the most popular topics students write about.**
- **In “simple terms,” these essays can be categorized as follows:**
 - *The “Tell Us about Yourself” Essay*
 - *The “Influence” Essay*
 - *The “Creative” Essay*
 - *The “Why I Want to Go Here” Essay*
 - *The “Why I Want to Major in _____” Essay*
 - *The “Issue” Essay*
 - *The “How I Will Contribute to Diversity” Essay*

Popular Application Essay Topics

- **Pages eighteen through twenty-three provide details about each of these including:**
 - *How these questions/prompts often appear on applications*
 - *The pros and cons of each choice*
 - *Applicable tips*
- **Pages fifty-five through fifty-eight of the College Application Essay Guide have a number of questions, organized by essay topic, that can assist you with generating ideas.**
- **Pages twenty-four through thirty two of the College Application Essay Guide provide annotated samples of each of these essays.**

Common Application Essay Topics

- **As per the College Board:**
- **We are pleased to share the 2017-2018 Common Application essay prompts with you. The changes you see below reflect the feedback of 108 Common App member colleges and more than 5,000 other Common App constituents, as well as consultation with our advisory committees and Board of Directors.**
- **Students represented the single largest share of constituent survey respondents (59%), followed by school counselors (23%), and teachers (11%).**

Colleges like these prompts:

We were gratified to learn that

91% of members and 90% of constituents agree or strongly agree that the current prompts are effective.

In addition, the narrative comments we received helped us see areas for improvement in three of the prompts. Working in close consultation with the counselors and admission officers on our advisory committees, we revised these prompts in a way that we believe will help students see expanded opportunities for expressing themselves.

You will also notice two new prompts.

Word Count

The word limit on the essay will remain at 650.

Common Application Essay Topics

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story. [No change]
2. The lessons we take from *obstacles we encounter* can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a *challenge, setback, or failure*. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? [Revised]
3. Reflect on a time when you *questioned* or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your *thinking*? What *was the outcome*? [Revised]
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution. [No change]
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or *realization* that *sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others*. [Revised]

New Topics as of 2017:

6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more? [New]

7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design. [New]

Most Popular Prompts

During the 2018-2019 application year, the most popular topic of choice was: “Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.” (24.1%). The next most popular topics were: “Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.” (23.7%), followed by “The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?” (21.1%).

Additional Resources

■ **The College Application Essay Guide contains a number of additional resources to assist you during the writing process:**

- *Pages 34-35 contain an annotated sample of an original draft and a revised draft*
- *Page 36 contains a number of additional print resources*
- *Pages 37-38 contain a number of additional web resources*
- *Pages 39-41 contain a glossary of the key terms*

Additional Resources

- *Page 42 contains paragraphing tips.*
- *Page 43 contains an explanation of Modern Language Association (MLA) Format*
- *Pages 44-49 contain an essay self-evaluation*
- *Pages 50-54 contain an essay peer-evaluation*

Some **Do**s and **Don't**s

- **DO** use your own “voice,” especially when writing your personal statement.
- **DO** write about something that you care about, something that gives us a window into your perspective / experience.
- **DO** take some calculated risks in your essay, and really show your personality.
- **DO** use a reflective tone; go beyond the surface.
- **DON'T** pack in as many SAT-prep words as possible!
- **DON'T** write a laundry list of extracurricular activities—this information is already in the Common Application.
- **DON'T** use slang or otherwise inappropriate language!
- **DON'T** overdo humor!
- **DON'T** forget to proofread for misspellings, punctuation, and usage errors.

Last Words of Advice:

- Take your time THINKING about your essay before you actually start WRITING your essay.
- A good topic (one that you care about) can make all of the difference. You must be passionate and reflective. Note: you may have to look in unusual places. Try memory books, photo albums, your daily routine, etc.
- ~~Proofread~~, ~~proofread~~, proofread!
- Don't be afraid to CUT words, phrases, sentences, and even paragraphs. Longer does not equal better! More precise equals better!
- Remember the PURPOSE of the essay is to make you stand out as an individual, and not just be another Social Security number. BE YOURSELF!
- Don't be afraid to get started. Putting fingertip to keyboard is a necessary, albeit scary, step. Just like a cold pool, it is best to JUMP IN!



**KEEP
CALM
AND
WRITE
THE ESSAY**