

THE COLLEGE ESSAY WRITING PROCESS

STEP ONE: BRAINSTORM FOR IDEAS AND TOPICS

Think about:

- Experiences or moments in your life that have shaped your character
- Your achievements and what you had to do to succeed
- Risks you have taken and their impact on you
- Ethical dilemmas you have faced and why you resolved them as you did
- Your hobbies and interests and why they are important to you
- Books, people, or events that have greatly influenced you. How and why?
- Interests you want to pursue in college and your career goals
- Your commitment to public service
- The importance of diversity in education and in your own life. How would you contribute to the mix of intellectual interests, personal perspectives and life experiences in a college community?

Brainstorming aids:

- Talk to your parents and other relatives about special memories of your childhood
- Look at old photo albums, yearbooks, and scrap books
- Review your diary or journal
- Speak with teachers and friends
- Think about your favorite books, songs, and travel experiences

Evaluate the information you collect:

- Which memories reveal something important about you?
- Which stories do you want the admissions committee to hear?
- Does the information you collect relate to the application essay question?

Tips:

- Choose an essay topic that shows your best attributes.
- Choose an essay topic that you can adapt easily to different colleges' questions.
Caution: Don't put the wrong college's name on your essay!
- Choose a topic that you know well and are enthusiastic about.
- Choose a topic that opens a window into your life, but is not a summary of it.

STEP TWO: GATHER AND SELECT DETAILS

Sensory images:

- Sight, sound, taste, smell, and tactile details make your story come alive.
- Sensory images help you to show, not tell, your reader why what you are writing about is important to you.
- Sensory images elicit emotional responses from your reader and help him/her identify with you.

Metaphors and similes:

- Insightful, creative and original comparisons are best
- Avoid commonplace comparisons and expressions

Techniques for gathering details:

- Visual brainstorming
- Listing
- Free-writing

Choosing the details to use in the essay:

- Details which are appropriate for your audience
- Details which are appropriate for the essay topic
- Details that help to describe an experience or illustrate your ideas
- Details that help make your story vivid and memorable
- Unique and distinctive details that relate to the essay's main idea or theme
- Details that make the reader feel that he/she is living the experience

Tips:

- Avoid using repetitive details
- Avoid weak and vague adjectives

STEP THREE: CHOOSE A STRUCTURE FOR YOUR ESSAY

Story and interpretation:

Example: "Homecoming Night" reprinted in *College Admission Essays for Dummies*, pp. 81-82

Description and interpretation:

Example: Toothbrush essay reprinted in *College Admission Essays for Dummies*, p.84.

Pros and cons of an issue:

Comparison and contrast:

Declaration of viewpoint with supporting evidence:

STEP FOUR: PREPARE AN OUTLINE; USE THE OUTLINE TO WRITE YOUR ROUGH DRAFT

The purpose of the outline is to help you organize your essay. Create an outline that:

- follows the structure you have chosen for your essay
- puts your thoughts in a logical and effective order
- includes details that strengthen each main point
- connects your ideas with smooth and appropriate transitions
- keeps you focused on the theme of the essay
- ensures that every section and idea of the essay is important to the purpose of the essay

Tip:

- It is okay to be flexible and to deviate from your outline when you are writing your essay. The outline's purpose is to serve as a helpful guide.
It should not restrict you from including new ideas that may come to you as you write your essay. You can use the revision process to fit these ideas into the structure of your essay.
- When you are writing your first draft, do not stop to:
 - correct word usage, grammar, punctuation, or spelling
 - change sentence structure or style
 - check if paragraph breaks are logical

These issues will be addressed in the revision process.

STEP FIVE: THE REVISION PROCESS

Checking the message:

- Does the essay answer the essay question completely, concisely, clearly, and effectively?
- Is the essay focused on a principal theme or single topic?
- Do all parts of the essay relate to the central issue and serve the essay's purpose?
- Is the essay interesting and likely to hold the attention of the reader?
- Does the essay show, not tell, the reader something important about you?
- What general impression does the essay make? Is this the impression you want to give the reader?

Checking the overall structure:

- Is there a recognizable beginning, middle and end?
- Is the conclusion both logical and memorable? Does it tie up loose ends and, if appropriate, place your essay topic into a broader context?
- Are there smooth and logical transitions between ideas?
- Is the essay arranged in the most clear and effective order?

Checking paragraph structure and order:

- Are paragraph breaks logical?
- Does each paragraph logically lead to the next paragraph?

Checking sentence structure and order:

- Are there effective topic sentences?
- Have you used varied sentence structures?
- Does each sentence logically lead to the next sentence?
- Are sentences precise and clear?
- Are there sentences that do not serve any purpose?

- **Did you avoid fragments and run-on sentences?**

Checking the effectiveness of expression:

- Are there extraneous or incorrectly used words?
- Does the first sentence and paragraph grab the reader's attention and make him/her want to continue reading?
- Have you used specific details, distinctive adjectives, and sensory images, if appropriate?
- Are strong verbs and nouns being used?
- If there is a title, does it fit the essay and interest the reader?
- Is the style natural and sincere?
- Does the essay sound like it flows easily and makes sense when you read it aloud?

Checking for correct grammar, spelling, and punctuation:

- Have you checked spelling using a dictionary and not relied solely on your computer's spell check feature?
- Does each sentence end with the correct punctuation?
- Have you checked verb tense, subject/verb agreement, pronoun usage, and punctuation marks with a reliable grammar guide and your English teacher?

Tips:

- The revision process may require numerous rewrites.
- It is not only permissible but also a good idea to ask your English teacher, parent, or other qualified adult to review your essay. They may not rewrite the essay for you but may give you general suggestions on ways to improve the essay or point out errors in grammar, spelling, word usage, and punctuation that you need to review and change.

TEN THINGS YOU SHOULD KNOW

1. Do not write what you think the admissions committee wants to hear.
2. A college essay does not always need a title.
3. Unless you meet automatic admission criteria, do the optional essay.
4. The most valuable essays express something important about your character, beliefs, or values that you want the admissions committee to know. Do not forget to interpret the story, event, or issue you write about to show why it has meaning for you.
5. The admissions committee can tell when you are not being yourself. Do not try to write from an adult perspective, do not rely on a thesaurus to locate four syllable words, and do not write something that contradicts the information on the rest of your application.
6. Start early in writing your college essay so that you can produce your very best piece of work. Starting early will lessen the stress you feel, help stimulate your creativity, and give you ample time to revise and improve your essay.
7. College admissions personnel understand that you are a teenager and may not yet have found the cure for diabetes or written a best selling novel. Do not worry. Some of the best essays have been written about the most commonplace topics. They have succeeded because they revealed the writer's personality in an original and creative way.
8. It is fine to use humor, but be sure that it is done appropriately and effectively. Have a teacher and your parents review your humorous essay to see if it hits the right note.
9. If you plan to write about controversial political, social, or religious issues, it is best to do so from the perspective of first-hand experiences that have shaped your views (i.e. community service, a study abroad program, or travel experiences).
10. Novel ideas, such as expressing yourself through poetry, songs, or dialogues, can work if they are done well.

TEN THINGS TO AVOID IN WRITING COLLEGE ESSAYS

- 1. Cliches and gimmicks.**
- 2. Slang or technical language (unless it is appropriate for the dialogue or the specific subject).**
- 3. Offensive language such as profanity or sexist expressions.**
- 4. Exaggeration or lies.**
- 5. Making your essay a laundry list of accomplishments and activities already included in other parts of your application.**
- 6. Pretentious vocabulary, cynical language, and incorrect word usage.**
- 7. "Unnecessary words, irrelevant or redundant description, repetitive or one dimensional sentence structures.**
- 8. Announcing what your essay is about.**
- 9. Failing to give credit for language and ideas that are not your own.**
- 10. Arrogance or boasting.**

TEN ESSENTIALS IN WRITING COLLEGE ESSAYS

- 1. Answer the essay question.**
- 2. Speak in your own voice.**
- 3. Be positive (even if you write about a difficult experience, what did you learn that has made you a better person?)**
- 4. "Show" your self-confidence, personal attributes, vision, and spirit. Use specific, vivid details to develop and prove your main idea.**
- 5. Be honest.**
- 6. Be involved. Share your personal feelings and thoughts.**
- 7. Give credit for language or ideas that are not your own.**
- 8. Observe grammar, spelling, and punctuation rules.**
- 9. Edit your essay, making sure that the language is direct, clear, and effective.**
- 10. Follow the directions on the college's application - word limits, page count, format instructions. Include your name and identification number on every page of the essay and indicate the essay question to which you are responding.**

THE IMPORTANCE OF THE COLLEGE ESSAY

- **The essay gives the college admissions committee an opportunity to learn something unique or noteworthy about you that is not revealed by other information in your application.**
- **The essay is the only part of your application over which you still have total control.**
- **The essay can be the deciding factor when colleges are comparing candidates with similar GPAs and standardized test scores.**
- **The essay is an important window into your writing skills.**
- **The essay provides an opportunity to explain weaknesses in other parts of your application.**
- **If the person who reads your essay wants to learn more about you, the essay will bolster your application.**