

Writing the College Essay

The purpose of ANY application essay is to tell a story with a clear message that showcases who you are to an admissions committee.

Ask yourself: Will an admissions officer remember your essay—in a *good way*—after a day of reading hundreds of essays?

“A growing number of schools are looking for kids who are *authentic* rather than *ideal*.” Eliza Gray, *Time Magazine*, April 7, 2016

College Essay/Personal Statement Writing Tips

Writing DO's

- **Be unique. Stand out.**
- Create a strong intro that grabs the reader's attention.
- Write honestly about yourself. Be real. Be authentic, not perfect.
- Demonstrate and reveal your personality.
- Show don't tell. You are telling a meaningful "story."
- Be original.
- Be specific; focus on a single topic.
- Personal imperfections are fine to discuss if addressed in an interesting and creative way.
- Be reflective and thoughtful.
- Have a few people—but not too many—read your essay.
- Vary sentence length and structure.
- Come full circle; connect back to your opening if possible.
- QUADRUPLE CHECK SPELLING, PUNCTUATION, AND GRAMMAR.
- Do MULTIPLE drafts, and take some time off between drafts to give yourself a fresh perspective.
- Be aware of the values of the school (e.g., independent thinking, experiential learning).

Writing DON'T's

- Don't use the wrong school name!
- Don't pick an overdone topic such as camp, sports, service project trip, etc., unless you can make it truly unique!
- Avoid clichés.
- Don't offend the reader or preach. Avoid controversial topics.
- Don't "thesaurize" your essay.
- Don't whine or complain.
- Don't make generalizations.
- Don't begin with "As long as I can remember. . . ."
- Don't end with phrases like "in conclusion" or "in closing."
- Don't have ANY spelling or grammatical errors!

TOPIC IDEAS

- **Think small. A single moment or a single incident can sometimes make a powerful essay.**
- **Whatever it is you write about, be sure to *show why* and *how* it is important!**
- a special, unusual, or distinctive characteristic or skill or interest. Quirky is good! something that is not addressed in any other part of your application
- a book, character, or type of music you love
- a favorite childhood toy
- a passion you have
- a struggle or difficult experience
- an interesting or important experience
- something or someone you love
- an accomplishment
- an academic or personal goal
- an unusual job you've had or have
- an epiphany you've had
- a friend, relative, neighbor—someone you know well or that you had a chance encounter with—who impacted you
- something you witnessed that had a profound influence on you (a sunrise, a performance, a baseball game, a kid on a swing)

TOPICS TO AVOID

The following topics are overused. But if you are powerfully drawn to and are able to write about these topics in an especially unique, inventive, amusing and/or colorful way, feel free to do so.

- your trip to Europe
- your Outward Bound trip
- your service trip
- camp
- sports
- controversial issues
- tales of success (winning the big meet, winning the big election)
- tales of failure (losing the big meet, losing the big election)

COMMON APP 2017-2018 Essay Prompts

Word count requirement: 250-650

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]
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]

from commonapp.org

REMEMBER TO VISIT US IN THE ARC IN THE FALL IF YOU NEED HELP!