

The College Essay

The Writing Process

1. Brainstorm. A lot. Then do it again. Keep a notebook of observations and potential topics. Write down every idea, even the dumb ones. They could turn into something great.
2. Write a letter to the admissions committee. Sometimes the letter format is an easier way to start writing. You shouldn't necessarily use the letter format in your final essay, but this is a way to strike up the right conversational tone in your piece.
3. Turn off your self-criticism. Write now, revise later. Start anywhere, get it all out, and then make sense of it afterward. Try one of these techniques to get the creativity flowing:
 - o Stream-of-consciousness (start with an idea and write without stopping about everything that comes to mind.)
 - o Free association (start with an object, event, or memory, write a list of all things you associate with that thing-this can be fun with a partner or group.)
 - o Grousing (write for 15 minutes about something that has changed for the worse during your life-this can be serious or humorous.)
 - o "Boring for fun" (write for 10 minutes about the most boring thing you do in the course of the day. Be as detailed as possible and don't try to show boredom by creating it ...instead make the reader understand the boredom with lively writing.)
 - o Ranting (Ernest Hemingway instructed, "Write hard and clear about what hurts." Start there and write from your angriest self for ten minutes.)
4. Don't outline until after you have a first draft. Outlining is an academic exercise, and the college essay is not an academic piece of writing. It should flow naturally. You are not proving anything. You are telling a story. However, outlining helps once you have a draft essay because it can illustrate movement of the storyline. It can show you where your essay is disjointed or off-track.
5. Show, don't tell. If you have to say "It was really funny," or "I learned a lot from that experience," or "she made a big difference in my life," your writing has not yet fulfilled its potential. Often it is easiest to start essays with this kind of statement. Don't be afraid to cross out the first few lines of your essay after you've written it...that's where the garbage usually makes an appearance, so the good stuff can show up later in the essay.
6. End your essay, don't kill it. It feels good to wrap up your essay with a nice little "they all lived happily ever after"...but watch out! This is another place where those "I learned a lot from that experience" statements pop up. Write them down in the first draft, cross them out in the second draft.
7. Revise, revise, revise. Make sure your essay is both coherent and cohesive. Coherent means that every sentence makes sense and is easily understood. Cohesive means all the sentences fit together to form a whole. It's okay to throw parts away. It's okay to start over. In fact...
8. Start over. Two essays are better than one, three are better than two, and so on. Many colleges ask for more than one essay, and different schools have different questions. You may want to tailor each essay to fit the school where you are applying.

9. Discover your best voice. Good writing moves back and forth between formal language and informal language, but still maintains a sense of consistency. When revising, be alert to shifts in your writing style-are these shifts for a purpose, or are they accidental? Be careful when writing in a formal academic style. This is a very difficult style to master and maintain. The reverse is also true' be wary of using too many colloquialisms. You are looking for balance.

First Steps

Beginning can be the most difficult part of writing the college application essay.

Here are some things to think about before you start writing:

- Don't ask what "they" want to hear. Write about something that interests you, that is part of your life, and that says something about you. You want to write about the travesty of world hunger? You had better a) have some evidence in the rest of your application that you have taken action in your own community and b) find a way to personalize the large nebulous issue so that the essay says something about you.
- Know what you write about. You are looking for significant details, not necessarily big moments. Understand that difference and understand what you are writing about.
- There are no good or bad topics. There are only good or bad essays. Let's say you decide to write about world hunger after all. It is possible to do it well. It just might be more difficult. Some essay topics that are difficult to write well include:
 - the big issues (abortion, pollution, AIDS, etc.)
 - the autobiography
 - the trip/summer vacation
 - the death of a pet
 - the "sports taught me a moral value"
 - the "my mother/father/teacher/Martin Luther King Jr./JFK is my hero"
 - tales of success (aka "the time I won that award/race")
 - the philosophical/literary brain flex

If you feel that your take on one of these topics is particularly compelling, you shouldn't rule it out. However, admissions officers read many many essays on these topics, so it is challenging to write one that stands out from the crowd.

Find a reader, or readers that you trust. You are writing for readers, and having someone read your essay is the best way to judge whether or not your essay is enjoyable from the audience's point of view. Find someone who will give you honest, constructive comments on your writing. Your parents love you too much-they may not understand that the essay isn't about "selling yourself" or listing your accomplishments-so don't depend solely on their opinions.

The college essay is an informal essay. Don't think of it as school-related writing. This is not a structured, five-part essay. It should be a natural, cohesive, polished piece of writing that sounds like you.

Entertain the reader. You don't have to be hilarious. You don't have to be fluffy. You don't have to be the smartest. You just have to sustain a voice that interests the reader. If someone picked up a magazine and flipped to your college essay, would they read it in entirety? That is the level you should be aiming for. It doesn't have to be a magnificent piece of literature, but it should be readable, genuine, and engaging.

DO ...

1. Start early
2. Read the question and directions carefully. They can hold valuable clues to a successful essay.
3. Choose your topic wisely. If you have a choice of topic, pick the one that you can write best.
4. Tell the truth about yourself.
5. Have a narrow focus rather than a general one.
6. Express anxieties if you have them.
7. Tie yourself to the college.
8. Speak positively.
9. Let your essay evolve.

DON'T ...

1. Repeat information that is elsewhere on the application.
2. Use the personal statement to make excuses.
3. Use clichés
4. Stop writing once you've started
5. Neglect your revisions
6. Forget that you are a unique and special person!
7. Write the final draft by hand--use a typewriter or computer unless the school specifically asks for the response to be hand-written.

The Writing Sample

Some schools ask for an academic essay to accompany the personal statement. Choose a strong performance paper. Don't send a 15-page paper or a book summary. A short essay on a book, poem, incident in history, or your personal life is a good choice. Send the original paper (make a copy for yourself) if it is in good condition. If possible, choose a paper with a fair amount of teacher comments that is about 3-5 pages in length.

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