

ESSAY WRITING TIPS

Essays are as diverse as the writers themselves and do not conform to a specific pattern like sonnets or lab reports. However, most essays are some sort of a defense of a writer's opinion or point of view. The opinions can be anything from "Shakespeare's plays all deal with the restoration of order" to "Madonna is the most innovative rock personality around today." The essay tries to convince the reader that an opinion, theory, or interpretation is correct. The college essay, too, presents a thesis – a view of the applicant – to the college admission board, and persuades them of its truth.

THE GOOD NEWS

The good news is you're already the world's leading expert on the college essay topic: YOU. Plus, you've just spent 12 years learning the skills to write it. After all, the skills required for an essay on **The Great Gatsby** are the same as the skills needed for an essay on the "great you." You know that a good essay needs:

- **A main idea, a claim, or thesis:** "My summer job taught me new skills and a few new attitudes."
- **Specific evidence to support your thesis:** "Eight weeks on the front fryer at Burger Heaven made me see French fries and four-year-olds in a new light."
- **Organization:** A clear beginning, a middle, and an ending.
- **Coherence:** A clear and persuasive point.
- **Correctness:** No misspellings, typos, or grammatical errors.

In short, the application essay is familiar territory.

THE PROCESS

All writing is a process. (Well, good writing that is!) Here are the stages and steps to follow:

Prewrite

- Begin by brainstorming. Write down anything that pops into your mind that is related to your topic.
- Review your brainstorming notes. Look for connections or connectable ideas.
- Look at the groups and clusters of ideas and try to state them as a theme.
- Reorganize your brainstorming notes into a preliminary list of points that support your thesis.

Choose a Thesis

- Start by looking inside first. Who are you? What do you value? What interesting qualities can you offer a college? Curiosity? Determination? A sense of humor?
- Choose a major personal characteristic (curiosity, wit, patience) – one that won't be clear from the rest of your application. Make it your essay's driving force.
- Then choose an event (or a book or a day or an activity) to show off that quality.

Write a Draft

- Create an introduction that makes your thesis clear.
- Choose points that validate your thesis and work them into the body of the essay.
- Conclude with a summary.
- Keep your style simple. Stress logical transitions from one idea to another.

Revise

- Do it yourself. Then, get a second opinion.
- Read your essay aloud, listening for coherence, logical development of ideas, and proper grammar.
- Proofread the final copy of your essay at least three times.

Polish

- Relax. This is a personal essay, so the “rules” aren’t quite as strict here. You can use “I,” you can start fast with minimal introduction, you can use a little humor.
- Write simply: If you’re tempted to write, “I entered onto the scene of this terrestrial sphere on an autumnal evening in 1981,” don’t. Consider, “I was born on October 7, 1981,” instead.
- Think small. Undertake a manageable bit of narration or reflection. Don’t try to tell everything.
- Be specific. Write vivid, detailed, and specific prose. “My mom has always been there for me: is not as persuasive as, “Even after we had the conference title sewn up, mom stood on the sidelines (and happily got soaked to the skin) as we beat Springfield and West County.”
- Proofread. “If there is one word that really described me, that word would have to be perfectionist.” Whoops!

GENERAL RULES

Here are a few more guidelines you should follow when you write your application essay:

- Start with yourself. Look inward before you look out.
- There are no right answers to application essay questions. What you want to provide are answers that support your application and convey a sense of you to the admission office. Avoid bland “homogenized” responses.
- Read the questions carefully. Directions to the answers are often in the questions.
- Use wit and humor, but don’t try for a stand-up comedy routine unless you’re applying to a clown college.
- When you’re having trouble expressing an idea, say it as simply as possible. Use short sentences and simple words. Don’t rely on a thesaurus.