

The Admissions Essay

A Help Packet

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This packet contains:

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Tips on Writing the Admissions Essay

It may be only 500 words, but the admissions essay portion of a college application can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. Without the essay, admissions officers would have to choose arbitrarily between two (or even two hundred) applicants with identical profiles. Your personal essay shows the admissions committee how you are different from everybody else. It provides information about you that test scores, grades, and extracurricular pursuits just cannot. You can use the essay to describe a favorite activity or to tell a story about yourself or even your dog, but make sure to really use it--in a way that captures the reader's attention and shows that you are exceptional.

Step One: Brainstorming

You should expect to devote at least a week to brainstorming possible essay topics. To help you select a topic, you can view over 100 sample college admissions essays at EssayEdge.com or take the free essay help course. Reading successful essays and completing free brainstorming exercises at EssayEdge.com should help you to select a final topic. Consider these helpful brainstorming questions:

What Are You Like?

- What is your strongest personality trait? Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
- How would your friends characterize you? What would they say if they were writing your admissions essay for you?
- Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
- Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if you suddenly realized the essence or meaning of something?



What Have You Done?

- What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments?
- What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you and why?
- Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful? Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
- What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?

Where Do You Want to Go?

- Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Whom, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with?
- What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful?
- How does this particular university fit into your plans for the future? Why do you want to spend two to six years of your life at this particular school?

Step Two: Selecting an Essay Topic

As these thoughts start to solidify into an essay topic, think about execution. What might have seemed like a good idea could prove impossible to write in under 500 words. Consider how you can make the subject matter original. Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. With an essay topic in mind, answer the following questions:

- Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPAs or test scores in your essay.
- Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot fill supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, choose a different essay topic.
- Is your topic too broad or too technical? Remember, you are not writing a research paper but an admissions essay. Do not bore the reader with the details of your science project.
- Will an admissions officer remember your topic after reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you?
- Does your essay sound like an emotional ploy? If you are planning to write on your immigration to America, your mother's death, your father's kidnapping, or another emotional topic, be careful to use the experience to illuminate your own personal characteristics. Emphasize your response to the adversity and not the adversity itself.
- Is your topic a gimmick? If you think you might write a humorous essay or use a "creative" approach like writing the essay in iambic pentameter, think again. Almost always this is done poorly and is not appreciated by admissions officers.
- Is your topic controversial? If you write on a political or religious issue such as abortion, you risk alienating your reader. A controversial topic can be successful, but it must be done sensitively so that a reader with an opposite opinion can relate to your essay.
- Is there more than one essay in the application? If so, consider that admissions officers will read the entire set of essays. There should not be any contradictory or repetitive information. Use the essays to showcase different elements of your personality.

Choose a Story

The best essays tell a story about the applicant. The essay does not have to be the story of your whole life, but rather a small glimpse of it--one that is rich with meaning, alive with imagery, and clear in purpose. It often helps to think about the impact that past events have had on you. As an example, find near the end of this packet the admissions essay written by a Middlebury applicant. She tells the story of her grandfather's funeral in a unique and captivating way. Through her essay, she communicates her love for her grandfather, her introspective personality, her admiration for her cousin, and her inner strength. The essay, however, never *tells* the reader these things directly; instead, it *shows* the reader through concrete experiences.

Step Three: Writing the Essay

You must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade admissions officers that you are extremely worthy of admission and to make them aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized test score--that you are a real-life, intriguing personality. If you need more help with your essay, please visit EssayEdge.com, where you can browse a comprehensive essay-writing help course and seek assistance from Harvard-educated editors.

1. Answer the Question

You can follow the next nine steps, but if you fail to answer the essay question, you will not be admitted to any institution.

2. Start with a Creative Lead

Remember that admissions officers will probably spend no more than a few minutes on your essay. In the first two sentences, you must capture their interest. The first lead below does not engage the reader. A boring introduction will cause the reader to skim the essay, and the essay will not be memorable. In contrast, the second introduction's use of detail makes the experience personal and draws the reader into the story. By also leaving out key details, the second lead creates intrigue, forcing the reader to find out: Who is this child? How and when did his parents die? How will the author help?

Before: I volunteer as a Big Brother to a little boy. He lost his parents in a car accident a few months ago. From this experience, I hoped to help him cope with his loss and open up his personality by spending time with him after school on certain days.

After: While the other children played outside, eleven-year old Danny's sad eyes focused on the white wall in front of him. He sat alone in silence--a silence that had imprisoned him since his mother and father died in a tragic accident.

3. Use Detail and Concrete Experiences

Too often, an essay with an interesting story will fizzle into a series of statements that *tell* rather than *show* the qualities of the writer. As a result, the essay succumbs to the usual clichés: *the value of hard work and perseverance, learning from mistakes*, etc. This example helps explain the difference:

Before: I developed a new compassion for the disabled.

After: The next time that Mrs. Cooper asked me to help her across the street, I smiled and immediately took her arm.

The first sentence is vague and could have been written by anybody. But the second sentence evokes a vivid image of something that actually happened, placing the reader in the experience of the applicant.

4. Be Concise

Use the allotted space wisely and do not exceed word limits. Make sure you omit irrelevant details, clichés, and undeveloped ideas. Do not distract the reader with repetition or extra words. The second passage does not need the cliché "hit me like a ton of bricks" because it expresses the same thought through forceful, concise writing.

Before: After Mike left, his loss hit me like a ton of bricks, out of which, when I was finally able to crawl, I had to come to terms with the difficult fact that best friends may come along only once in a lifetime, and it was unlikely I would find such a close friendship again since lightning doesn't strike twice.

After: When Mike left, I lost the best friend I ever had, and I lost him forever.

5. Pay Attention to Transition and Sentence Variety

The best essays contain a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph. Also, remember that transition is not limited to words like *nevertheless*, *furthermore* or *consequently*. Good transition flows from the natural thought progression of your argument.

Before: I started playing piano when I was eight years old. I worked hard to learn difficult pieces. I began to love music.

After: I started playing the piano at the age of eight. As I learned to play more difficult pieces, my appreciation for music deepened.

As an exercise to improve sentence variety, label each sentence “short” (under 10 words), “medium” (under 20 words), or “long” (20 or more words). A poor paragraph might have short, short, medium, short, short, while a good paragraph might have long, short, long, medium, short.

6. Use Active Voice Verbs

Passive-voice expressions are verb phrases in which the subject receives the action expressed in the verb. Passive voice employs a form of the word *to be*, such as *was* or *were*. Overuse of the passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting.

Before: The lessons that prepared me for college were taught to me by my mother.

After: My mother taught me lessons that will prepare me for college.

7. Don't Thesaurize your Essay

Put your thesaurus away when writing your application essay. Big words, especially when misused, detract from the essay, inappropriately drawing the reader's attention and making the essay sound contrived.

Before: As a neophyte in music, I attended myriad lessons.

After: As a young musician, I took many lessons.

8. Conclude Effectively

The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the admissions officers or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary; the reader does not need to be reminded of what you wrote 500 words before. Also, do not use stock phrases such as *in conclusion*, *in summary*, *to conclude*, etc. You should consider the following conclusions:

- Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
- Link your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases or ideas.
- Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
- End with a famous quotation that is relevant to your argument. Do not *try* to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
- Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.



9. Give Your Draft to Others

Ask readers to keep these questions in mind:

- Have I answered the question?
- Does my introduction engage the reader? Does my conclusion provide closure?
- Do my introduction and conclusion avoid summary?
- Do I use concrete experiences as supporting details?
- Have I used active-voice verbs wherever possible?
- Is my sentence structure varied, or do I use all long or all short sentences?
- Are there any clichés such as *cutting edge* or *learned my lesson*?
- Do I use transition appropriately?
- What about the essay is memorable?
- What's the worst part of the essay?
- What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
- What parts of the essay do not support my main argument?
- Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This *must* be the case.
- What does the essay reveal about my personality?

10. Revise, Revise, Revise

Revise, Revise, Revise. You are allowed only so many words; use them wisely. If Thoreau couldn't write a good essay without revision, neither can you. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Are your introduction and conclusion more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?

Have your Essay Professionally Edited. You take SAT Prep courses and spend hours with college counselors; consider showing the same care with your admissions essay by submitting it to a professional editor.

Common Questions and a Successful Essay

The common application is used to apply to over 220 selective colleges from Amherst to Yale. Even if your college does not accept the common application, it is likely that the questions are similar. Below are the common application's instructions and questions.

The Common Application's Essay Topics

This personal statement helps us become acquainted with you in ways different from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself. We are looking for an essay that will help us know you better as a person and as a student. Please write an essay (250 - 500 words) on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
3. Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
4. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

Sample Successful Essay: Accepted by Middlebury College, University of Vermont, and Skidmore College

Breaking Me

Through glazed eyes I watch the tear-streaked mourners shuffle into the funeral parlor and disperse. The unspoken law of wet cheeks and six-inch voices has me glancing over my shoulder for the funeral police, awaiting a rigorous interrogation. I'd have to explain my perfect mascara, my un-pink nose, my clammy hands clutching not a tissue but a scrap of notebook paper lined with the lyrics to the song I owe my grandfather. As the jagged handwriting stares back at me, the crowd settles into the matrix of rigid folding chairs. Someone nudges me out to the podium. I'm less ready to sing than I ever thought possible, and the music begins. "Stop," I choke, swallowing hard. Eight hundred raised eyebrows gnaw at my teetering composure.

The line echoes between my ears: "Spend all your time waiting for that second chance, for a break that would make it okay." I missed my cue.

Fidgeting with my skirt, I stare at the same piece of frayed carpeting. My entire body is numb. I've pulled myself together for this moment, prepared for it technically and emotionally, contorted myself into this fallacy of strength. Slow and deliberate, I breathe in the black anguish that flattens the room.

"I need some distraction, oh, beautiful release." The voice is not my own.

I blink twice, squeeze my eyes shut and open them again, looking up. My cousin Ashley, two years my elder, flashes me an aching smile as she smooths a sheet of paper over her knee. The night she heard the news, she snatched up a pen and channeled her grief into the poem she's about to read to an audience that scarcely intimidates her. Soon after, she'll climb into the first car in the procession and watch nobly as her grandfather's wooden casket is lowered to rest beside her father's. Her pale forehead bears creases numerous beyond her years, carved by ancient battles and layers of unjustified loss. Those bright eyes see deeper than they let on; they penetrate the flimsy aura surrounding my sheltered self.

The end of the first verse melts through me: "Let me be empty and weightless and maybe I'll find some peace tonight."

Dwarfed by her innocent intensity, I motion for the song to be restarted. Soft, simple chords waft into the room and my own voice latches onto the steady pulse. The words are buoyant in salt tears. "May you find some comfort here," I sing easily. My own eyes are stinging, my throat hollow, and a tear traces my virgin cheek like footsteps through a fresh snowfall.

Comments on Essay

The above essay relates a single experience in the life of a sheltered individual who summons the strength to cope with a difficult situation. The author employs a narrative structure, which begins and ends with the action of the story. By contrasting her weakness with the strength of her cousin, the author risks portraying herself as a weakling. However, the sincerity of the writing and her ultimate success in singing the song suggest her inner strength. The ending simile detracts from an otherwise strong essay with the melodramatic comparison of her "virgin cheek" to a "fresh snowfall." In addition, the author's liberal use of adjectives and adverbs can be distracting to the reader, as can her awkward phrases: *fallacy of strength*, etc. Still, this is a good essay that led to admission at a top liberal-arts college. (See *EssayEdge.com* for a description of five other essay structures and strategy hints for the fourteen most common essay questions.)

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Real Essay Blunders



At EssayEdge, we help students with tens of thousands of admissions essays each year. Let these humorous but unfortunate examples be a lesson to read your essay carefully for unintended meanings and meaningless sentences.

It was like getting admitted to an Ivory League school.

Berkeley has a reputation of breeding nationalists and communists.

I'd like to attend a college where I can expose myself to many diverse people.

I was totally free except for the rules.

In a word, the experience taught me the importance of dedication, friendship, and goals.

I have an extensive knowledge of the value of intelligence.

I envy people with a lot of time in their hands.

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