

## College Application Essay Writing Tips

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### Why the College Essay is Important

Many colleges and universities require an essay as part of their admission application. Scholarship applications also require one or more essays to accompany your school grades and test scores. The typical college application question asks you to share personal information that enables the selection committee to get to know you—such as your plans or goals, an important event in your life, your philosophy about life, or your financial situation. Writing this essay is an opportunity for you to stand out among the applicants and to prove you're the most deserving candidate.

College application essays have become important because each year colleges receive thousands of applications from students with similar or identical grades, test scores, and extracurricular accomplishments. As a result, the essay has become the determining admissions factor in many cases. *You owe it to yourself to make your essay shine!*

### What to Write in a Few Hundred Words

The college application essay's length is usually limited to a few hundred words (*less than 500 words*). Its goal is to show that you are a special person within the context of a short story that reveals something about you. Because the essay is short, it is typically a good idea to describe one or two events in detail rather than trying to tackle big issues or long chains of events.

Generally, there are three types of questions colleges want you to write about in your essay:

#### 1. The “You” Question: How do you describe yourself?

Many colleges ask for an essay that boils down to,

- “Tell us about yourself.”
- “How would you describe yourself as a human being?”

*How to tackle the “You” question:* This question offers you the opportunity to reveal your personality, insight, and commitment. It is an open-ended question so be careful to focus on just one or two things that will reveal your best qualities, and avoid the urge to spill everything.

#### 2. “Why Us” Question? Why did you pick our college?

Some colleges ask for an essay about why you wish to enroll in their school and how that ties in with your career plans. They're looking for information about your goals, and about how serious your commitment is to this particular school. For example:

- “Why is our college a good choice for you?”
- “Please tell us about what you want to study in our college and your career goals.”

*How to tackle the “Why Us” question:* This kind of question should be easy for you to answer since you obviously went through some type of career planning and college selection process. Make sure you know your subject well. For example, if you said you chose “Cornell University” as a place to study “Urban Planning” you better be certain that Cornell actually offers Urban Planning as a major area of study. If it doesn't your application will be rejected.

#### 3. The “Creative” Question: “What is your opinion about -----?”

Some colleges evaluate you through your choice and familiarity with some national issue, or some famous or controversial person. Here the school is looking at your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge and education

For example:

- “Do you believe there's a generation gap?--- Describe the differences between your generation and your parents' generation.”
- “Identify a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.”

*How to tackle the “Creative” Question:* This type of question gives you a chance to express yourself in a way that demonstrates your views, knowledge and command of the topic you selected.

## Some Frequent Essay Topics

Here is a sample of the most frequent topics on which student applicants are asked to write about:

- Write a personal statement that gives the admission committee a sense of you as an individual.
- Describe a significant interest or experience that has special meaning for you.
- How have you grown and developed?
- Why have you selected this college?
- What career or profession did you decide to pursue and why?
- Write about an important issue of personal, local, or national concern.
- Choose a prominent person (living, deceased, or fictional) that you would like to interview and explain why.
- Identify a person who had a significant influence on you and explain the influence.
- Write about a book that has special significance for you.

## Basic Steps for Writing a Great College Essay of 500 Words or Less

The application essay is a chance for you to show your personality, talents, vision, and spirit to the admission committee. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can clearly put your thoughts into writing.

### Step 1. Prewriting and Outlining

To begin, you must first organize your ideas for your essay. Remember all college essay questions are attempts to learn about you, so do the following:

- First, do some brainstorming and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. It's helpful to ask parents, friends, and teachers what they see as your strengths and talents...
- Next, create a "Self-Assessment" outline. Next to each positive strength and talent, list several pieces of evidence from your life -- things you've done -- that prove your point.
- Now, look for patterns and connections in the "Self-Assessment" outline you've created. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, perhaps your passion for math shows up in your performance in the state math competition, or perhaps in a summer job at the computer store, or setting up a tax accounting software system for a local business. Another example could be your love for counseling and teaching skills to children supported by volunteer work at a community youth development center and summer jobs as a camp counselor.
- Next, use your outline as a springboard to begin the drafting of your essay by following the "Structuring" guidelines described in Step 2 below. .

### Step 2. How to Structure Your Essay:

Start with a written draft of your essay consisting of three basic parts: the *Introduction*, the *Body*, and the *Conclusion*. The Introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. One clearly stated sentence might do. The Body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incidents to show the reader how great you are. The objective is for the reader to recognize your strengths, personality and good character by reading your descriptions of incidents and events. The Conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described. *Here are some more details about the three basic parts of your essay:*

**The Introduction:** Your introduction must grab the reader's attention. If you can't think of a good introduction when you first start out, you can wait until after you're done with the rest of the essay. In a college essay of several hundred words, your introduction only needs to be a sentence or two. Below are some examples of different kinds of introductions you can use in your essay.

- *The Basic Introduction:* The basic introduction simply introduces the essay in a logical way and should be based on the question asked by the college.  
*Example:* "A well known, controversial, living person I would like to interview would be President George W. Bush."
- *The Narrative Introduction:* This technique is used for introducing a story. The narrative introduction grabs the reader and pulls him right into the beginning of your story  
*Example:* "On the first day of my summer job at the Artistic Colors Printing Company, I was approached by a group of union workers."

- *The "I" Introduction:* The "I" introduction immediately tells the reader something about you. Most often the first sentence begins with the word "I".  
*Example:* "I always enjoy hiking in the wilderness."
- *The Surprise Introduction:* This introduction starts out with something dramatic and is intended to capture the readers' attention.  
*Example:* "I was going through the airport security check line at JFK Airport when two military police officers approached me."

**The Body:** A good college essay can be structured in a number of ways. No matter what essay format you choose, your essay should be personal so that it reveals something about yourself and your passions. Use details and dialogue to describe events or experiences and leave the readers to draw their own favorable conclusions about you; do not tell the reader what to think. *Described below are several structures that work well with college essays.*

- *Standard Essay Structure:* This structure is very simple. You begin by stating the main idea of your essay, then you describe some evidence --typically three points-- that back up this idea, and then you bring everything back together with a conclusion. The conclusion must do more than just restate what has already been written. Remember that stories make for the most interesting reading.
- *Narrative Structure:* A narrative is a story. No matter what the topic of your essay is, incorporating a story into the essay is guaranteed to hold your reader's interest. The narrative can be incorporated into a standard essay format, or it can stand on its own as the entire essay. A narrative can be a precise, detailed description of a single person, place, thing, situation, or event. Your narrative should have a main idea or a theme and should give the readers a clear view of your strengths and personality. Remember to use vivid verbs and imagery in such a way that your words create a picture for your readers. There are several ways to approach a narrative story:

*a) Chronological Narrative Approach:* This structure works well for describing a single event. You tell the detailed story of what happened, one thing after another, in chronological order. At the beginning of the essay you should orient the reader by describing the setting (the time and place where the story begins). Then you proceed through the story describing each new occurrence in detail. The best use of detail is achieved through imagery which means you should use descriptions of things you can see, hear, taste, smell, and touch and also by the use of vivid verbs. For example use specific action verbs like '*sprinted*' instead of '*ran very quickly*.'

*b) Descriptive Narrative:* This structure can be used to tell the story of a single object, situation, setting, or person in great detail. Rather than telling a story that proceeds through time (as the chronological narrative does), this type of narrative tells a story about a specific situation or object. An example of a descriptive narrative could be a detailed description of a work of art you created as a vehicle for providing your readers with an insight to your artistic creativity, talents and knowledge.

**The Conclusion:** Because the length of college essays is usually limited to a few hundred words, you may not need a full paragraph for a conclusion. As with introductions, a sentence or two will be enough.

Here are some tips for writing your conclusion:

- Emphasize your main idea, but not by restating a previous remark.
- Connect the conclusion's main point back to the introduction.
- Broaden the theme addressed in your essay.
- Use the same tone that you have used throughout your essay.

Here are some other things not to do:

- Do not introduce your conclusion with the phrase "in conclusion," or anything along those lines.
- Don't introduce new information.
- Don't make it too long

### Step 3. The Finishing Touches for Your Essay

Now that you've finished your essay, you should take another look at your Introduction. If you haven't written one, now is the time to do it. If you do have one, ask yourself if it is all you want it to be. Does it flow with the rest of the essay? Does it grab the reader's attention? Does it need revising?

Before you revise your essay, take a break for a day or two because it's impossible to do a good editing job right after you have finished writing the essay. Here are some basic steps for revising your essay:

*First*, go through your essay and:

1. Remove all clichés. A *cliché* is a trite phrase, expression, or idea that has been overused to the point of losing its intended force. Example of clichés are: “*Clear the air, A man among men, Burden of proof, Tilt at windmills, Flower of youth, Neither rhyme nor reason*”.
2. Change the passive voice to the active voice wherever possible. Example of using the active voice to replace the passive voice are:

*Active:* They *stole* the painting.

*Passive:* The painting *was stolen*.

*Active:* They *are drawing* up new building plans.

*Passive:* The new building plans *are being drawn up*.

3. Replace any "thesaurus words" (words that you wouldn't normally use in writing). Slang and informal expressions should also be eliminated (except in dialogue). Proofread for errors in spelling, punctuation, grammar, and sentence mechanics.

*Next*, read the essay to be sure it satisfies the criteria in the check list below. Fix those parts of your essay that do not satisfy the checklist. It's perfectly normal to significantly rewrite whole sentences and paragraphs several times during the process of revision. So, be sure your essay does the following:

- Answers the question asked by the college.
- Shows your talents and personality through examples and descriptions of incidents rather than by telling the readers what they are.
- Uses vivid verbs and imagery.
- Tells a story
- Is unique, personal, and interesting.
- Grabs the reader's attention in the introduction.
- Reveals one or more of your personal passions.
- Proceeds in a logical order, with each idea leading naturally to the next.
- The introduction and conclusion fit naturally into the essay.
- Uses correct spelling, punctuation, grammar, or sentence mechanics.

*Next*, try reading your essay again, but this time read it aloud. How does it sound? You will probably notice some phrases that sound awkward or grammatically incorrect. Fix these phrases.

*Finally*, have someone else (preferably your English teacher) read your essay and make suggestions. Take these suggestions to heart and revise your essay again. Proof read it again.

### Essay Writing Tips for the SAT

The SAT now includes an essay writing requirement. It is graded simply on the overall impression it makes on the SAT graders. Here are some tips on how to score big on the SAT essay:

#### 1. Neatness counts

The SAT essay is to be handwritten. You won't be using any computer word processing programs. Therefore, one of the simplest ways to earn a good score is to write legibly. Graders are responsible for reviewing tons of essays each day, and so they have to limit the amount of time they can spend on each one. When they come upon an essay that is messy, it leaves them with a bad impression, which in turn means a lower score for you. So print legibly. *Yes, print is best for readability.*

## **2. Use Most of the Space Allowed (45 Lines)**

Remember, the SAT essay graders will read your essay holistically, meaning they look at the overall package and won't really get down to the nitty-gritty. There are 45 lines to fill--get as close to that as possible. Filling 40 lines is good. Only twenty ... not so good. It's important to know that you can only use the space that is given.

## **3. Use Well Constructed Paragraphs**

Use the same writing structure that was described above: *Introduction-Body-Conclusion*. *First*, your *introduction* should include a thesis statement, for example if you agree or disagree with a given statement. *Next, in the body*, you need three supporting paragraphs that back up your thesis. *Finally, you'll need a conclusion* to sum it all up.

By following this standard format you will demonstrate that you are organized. Clearly indent all of your paragraphs, about a full half-inch. The neater and clearer you make things for the SAT essay graders, the happier they will be.

## **4. Use an Example to Back Up Your Main Statement**

The SAT essay graders like to see examples or illustrations that reinforce the thesis of your essay. Examples from history or literature are the most persuasive because it shows that you are well read. So be prepared with some literary or historical examples before you take the SAT.

## **5. Show That You Have a Good Vocabulary.**

Ideally you should show off your vocabulary. If you decide to use some well chosen "power words", it is best to place them in the Introduction or Conclusion. They might get lost in the Body. Don't go overboard though and make sure you actually know the meaning of the words before you use them.

***Good Luck!***