

THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

The essay is very important. Out of all the grades and scores represented in your application it is the only thing that gives you a face and ultimately the only way that you can let your personality shine through to the college admissions committee. The essay is the face of the application. The essay should tell them about the substance of the author. It should give the admissions committee an idea of what you will bring to the incoming class, the sorts of interests and activities you are involved in, and what concrete goals you have. Through the essay they want to see your personality more than any specific skill or achievement. Use this opportunity to tell them something new about yourself, something not covered elsewhere in your application. The essay should complete the profile they gain from your grades, scores, recommendations and talents.

The admissions committee does not look merely for people who are smart enough to do the work but interesting people who will make a contribution to the incoming class. If you make them feel like they know you it will be much more difficult for them to reject you. If you make them like you, they might even ignore a slight weakness in another part of your application. The quality of your writing is, of course, important. But the essay tells a story, about you.

The best way to approach your personal essay is to imagine that you have five minutes with someone from the admissions committee. How would you go about making the best case for yourself while holding the listener's interest? What would you include and omit in your story? Figuring out the answer to these questions is critical to successfully writing an effective essay.

An effective strategy involves giving much thought to yourself, your experiences, and your goals, and thereby laying the groundwork for formulating an interesting and persuasive presentation of your own personal story. You must ask yourself why you are interested in a top-tier education and what attributes, experiences, insights or goals qualify/prepare you for the challenge of such an education. In your subsequent essay, remember to keep the discussion personal. Do not get bogged down in minute details and jargon. Ultimately, the focus of the story should remain on you and your growth or success.

If you remember nothing else about this article, remember this: **Be Interesting. Be Concise. Be Personal.**

The Personal Touch

Write about things that are truly meaningful to you. Include anecdotes, details and imagery that are specific to your life. A personal epiphany, tragedy, life change is not essential to producing a good essay. It does not have to have confidential details, be very emotional or even inspiring. You do not have to be very preoccupied with finding the perfect topic. You can share stories of determination to achieve a particular goal, showing that you understand the need for hard work and perseverance, stories of effort and

achievement, stories on interests and particular activities, stories of people who have influenced your life, etc. In fact, almost anything that has had a significant influence on you can be woven into an application essay. Note, however, that you could have a very important experience to describe but if you do not explain its impact and influence on you or its importance to you it will still not be personal. Simply giving an interesting story or event is not enough.

You should also avoid making claims without the experience or the ability to back them up. Make sure you understand your topic well as well as the implications of the conclusions you make. If you feel strongly about a particular career and want to highlight it, do so. However, admissions officers know that high school students rarely have specific or unusual plans. A good idea is to write small i.e. keep the topic close to your life and write only about what you know about.

Why a Top-Tier Education?

In describing your interest in a particular college/group of colleges, watch out that you do not describe your point in such a clichéd, prepackaged way as to make your reader cringe. For example, you should not start your essay, "I have always wanted to" or "I have always known that _____ was my calling." Instead, you should relate specific personal anecdotes to explain your motivation to apply to a given school – or elite education in general. You should additionally avoid mistakes like discussing the school's rank or prestige, or simply offering generic praise as your reasons for applying to a given college. Instead, if applicable, mention specific reasons why a particular college – or group of colleges – appeals to you.

12 ADMISSIONS ESSAY WRITING TIPS

1. Don't Write a Term Paper.

As a prospective college student, you may be tempted to try to impress your reader with an already tight grasp of academic style. Resist this temptation! You will have plenty of time to produce labyrinthine sentences and sophisticated vocabulary. Your reader will have seen too many essays to appreciate bewilderingly advanced prose. Write clearly and personably. Use conversational style and easy-to-understand language to project a genuine, relaxed image. However, watch against being too informal, such as using slang words because they will also want to know that you take the process seriously. If the subject matter you choose begs a serious approach e.g. writing on a particular issue of concern such as the AIDS pandemic, it is okay to take a serious tone.

If you have to mention vocabulary or concepts from a given field/subject, do so in a way that a novice in the subject would still understand you. Avoid obscure, complex reasoning: default for the simple and clear – both in tone, content and vocabulary. Your intention must never be to impress; strive, instead, to be understood. Never address the reader directly (for instance "I think that you, the reader, thinks I am a ..."). Use

rhetorical questions and constructs very sparingly. They not only take up valuable space but may also distract you from fully explaining yourself.

2. Don't Bore the Reader. Do Be Interesting.

Admissions officers have to read hundreds of essays, and they must often skim. Abstract rumination has no place in an application essay. Admissions officers aren't looking for a new way to view the world; they're looking for a new way to view you the applicant.

The best way to grip your reader is to begin the essay with a captivating snapshot. You should never begin your essay with grand proclamations about the nature of humanity and the universe. Tell a simple story and draw inference from it. Don't take too long to get to a story; don't take too long to get to the point. The aim is to grab the reader's attention as quickly as possible, and hold it for the entire essay by keeping the essay interesting and meaningful, then through the contents try to affect the reader in the way you want. Notice how the slightly jarring scene depicted in the "after" creates intrigue and keeps the reader's interest.

Before: *I am a compilation of many years of experiences gained from overcoming the relentless struggles of life.*

After: *I was six years old, the eldest of six children in the Bronx, when my father was murdered.*

3. Structure Your Essay

In structuring your essay you must give sufficient focus to the significance of the story you tell. Many essays mistakenly describe the impact of a story in just a few sentences, forgetting that this is the essence of the personal essay. Your plot should be closely-knit. Especially avoid great leaps in your plot. For instance, while you may have learnt your first and most important life lessons as a child of 10, a college will be interested to know what those lessons have meant to you in the subsequent years prior to your college application. Your essay must also be coherent, with free-flowing thoughts. A key strategy to ensure your entire plot is coherent is to summarize each paragraph in a sentence, then see if the sequence of sentences you've written tell a coherent story. If not, you may need to change the focus of some of the paragraphs.

Never explicitly refer a reader back to a previous paragraph in your essay. Do so implicitly, but most definitely through a clear progression of thought expressed in an easy-to-follow structure. Remember that nothing trumps the clarity of simplicity.

4. Do Use Personal Detail. Show, Don't Tell!

Good essays are concrete and grounded in personal detail. They do not merely assert "I learned my lesson" or that "these lessons are useful both on and off the field." They show it through personal detail. "Show, don't tell," means if you want to relate a personal quality, do so through your experiences and do not merely assert it.

Before: *If it were not for a strong support system which instilled into me strong family values and morals, I would not be where I am today.*

After: *Although my grandmother and I didn't have a car or running water, we still lived far more comfortably than did the other families I knew. I learned an important lesson: My grandmother made the most of what little she had, and she was known and respected for her generosity. Even at that age, I recognized the value she placed on maximizing her resources and helping those around her.*

The first example 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.

You may fear that your essay may end up being too lengthy. However, you'd rather "show" a few insights than "tell" a lot more. The admissions officers know that a complex human being cannot be summed up in one short essay. "Showing" them a few things about you describes your uniqueness more effectively than "telling" a lot does. Don't try to cover too much in your essay. Instead, choose one area or event in your life and write about it in depth.

5. Do Be Concise. Don't Be Wordy.

Wordiness not only takes up valuable space, but also confuses the important ideas you're trying to convey. Short sentences are more forceful because they are direct and to the point. Certain phrases, such as "the fact that," are usually unnecessary. Notice how the revised version focuses on active verbs rather than forms of "to be" and adverbs and adjectives.

Before: *My recognition of the fact that the book was finally finished was a deeply satisfying moment that will forever linger in my memory.*

After: *Completing the book at last gave me an enduring sense of fulfillment.*

6. Do Address Your Weaknesses. Don't Dwell on Them.

The personal statement may be your only opportunity to explain deficiencies in your application, and you should take advantage of it. Be sure to explain them adequately: "*I partied too much to do well on tests*" will not help your application. The best tactic is to spin the negatives into positives by stressing your attempts to improve; for example, mention your poor first-quarter grades briefly, then describe what you did to bring them up.

7. Do Vary Your Sentences and Use Transitions.

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. An overuse of transition words may mean that this thought progression is not fully coherent.

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.*

8. Do 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 have prepared me for my graduate studies were taught to me by my mother.*

After: *My mother taught me lessons that will prove invaluable as I pursue my research interests.*

9. Use Appropriate Vocabulary.

Simple words are often more powerful than their complex synonyms. However, in some cases you may have to use more complex vocabulary to illustrate specific ideas, concepts or moods. For instance, “concise” “cogent” “coherent” describe writing more precisely than “clear” does, while you’d rather say “obscure writing” instead of “periphrastic writing”. The key is to be specific and precise without being sophisticated. A good thesaurus like the one provided by MS Word can help you select the most appropriate vocabulary to use in a given scenario. It will also help you avoid overusing given words or phrases by offering you appropriate synonyms.

Before: *I am interested in joining __ College because its programs interest me.*

After: *I am interested in joining __ College because its programs excite me.*

Avoid clichés, including the standard proverbs and similes taught in school, and non-standard phrases and vocabulary. The examples below may be understood by Kenyans but are nonetheless ungrammatical.

Before: *I cleared school.*

After: *I completed high school/I graduated from high school.*

Before: *The teacher worked on him using a big cane.*

After: *The teacher caned him with a big stick.*

10. Do Seek Multiple Opinions.

Ask your friends and family to keep these questions in mind:

- *Does my essay have one central theme?*
- *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 short sentences?*

- *Are there any clichés such as "cutting edge" or "learned my lesson?"*
- *Do I use transitions 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? The essay should not have any loose ends, unexplained assertions, or overly complicated reasoning.*
- *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?*

11. Don't Wander. Do Stay Focused.

Many applicants try to turn the personal statement into a complete autobiography. Not surprisingly, they find it difficult to pack so much information into such a short essay, and their essays end up sounding more like a list of experiences than a coherent, well-organized thought. Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to support one central theme.

12. Do Revise, Revise, Revise.

The first step in improving any essay is to cut, cut, and cut some more. Finally, REMEMBER there is no excuse for typographical or grammatical errors.

Some Sample Essay Topics (from the Common Applications)

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

Credits:

Summarized from: "Essays that will get you into college" by Burnham, Kaufman and Dowhan in "New Horizons: A Guide to Applying to American Colleges" by Nathaniel Choge, et al, and "Admissions Essay Writing Tips" from EssayEdge.com.