

Choosing an Essay Topic: Advice from Member Colleges of Associated Colleges of the Midwest

College & Retirement Solutions
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The essay personalizes your application. The essay is your chance to use your voice. The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college. In the essay, you can speak in your own voice and personalize your application. Here's your opportunity to show something about you that doesn't really come across elsewhere in your application.

So, step back and be reflective. Think about who you are as an individual. How do you view the world? What do you care about deeply? What experiences and people have been important in shaping you as a person? What are your aspirations in life? It is in such reflection that you can find your own unique voice. That's the voice that will help you write an interesting essay that only you could have written.

Why do colleges require essays?

A college application includes a lot of information about you, such as grades, recommendations, lists of your extracurricular activities, and test scores. All of that information is very important and helps admissions officers form a picture of your accomplishments and abilities. However, while it tells about how other people see you, there isn't much about how you see yourself. It's that inside view—how you see yourself—that colleges hope to find in your essay.

The essay performs other functions, as well:

- The essay can be a way of showing that you have researched and thought carefully about the college to which you are applying. It shows, in your own words, why you and the college would be a good match.
- An essay demonstrates your writing ability; a key component of success in college.
- In your essay, you can show that you are willing to put yourself into what you do. That kind of commitment is an important part of effective learning in college. And it shows the admissions committee that you are willing and able to be a contributing member of a community of learners.
- For selective colleges especially, the essay helps admissions committees draw distinctions and make choices among applicants. An essay will rarely take an applicant out of consideration at a college, but it certainly can elevate an applicant in an admissions committee's eyes.

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Choosing and handling a topic

Show your command of the basics of good writing. Here are some key points that admissions officers look for in an essay:

- Make sure to answer the essay question and to follow all the instructions.
- Start off with a strong opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest.
- Use a style that you find comfortable and that is appropriate for the subject matter.
- Use correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling.
- Make a point and stick to it; develop your argument or narrative.
- Check all your facts. Do you mention a date, a place, or an event in your essay? Make sure it's correct.
- Give your reader complete information, so he or she won't be confused.
- In general, be succinct. If there is a recommended length for the essay, pay attention to it.
- The essay should be neatly typed.
- Remember that mistakes, especially sloppy mistakes, make it look as if you don't take the essay (and, by extension, the application) very seriously.

Good sources of essay topics

Does the application ask you to choose a topic? There are as many good topics as there are applicants. Look for a topic among your interests, or among causes or events that touch you personally:

- Do you have hobbies and no school pursuits that engage your heart and mind? Writing about your out-of-classroom interests can help reveal a part of you that's not covered—or not covered to your fullest advantage—elsewhere in your application.
- Is there a social cause that you hold near and dear? Remember, an essay is not an academic paper; however, a cause that you feel passionately about may be the basis for a strong essay.
- Perhaps there is an event (local, national, or international) that has touched you in a personal way.
- Is there an academic subject that sparks your interest? Why does that subject excite you? Has it led to experiences or study outside of school?

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How to handle a topic

Often, you will be asked to write about an experience you've had, an achievement in your life, or a person who has been significant to you. Go beyond the what or who and dig into the how and why:

- This is a personal essay, not a travelogue. So if you're writing about a trip to another country, describe how your experiences affected you and why they were interesting or meaningful to you. The people reading the essay are interested in what makes you tick and how you got the way you are, not in how the trains run in Paris.
- Are you writing a tribute to your grandparents and their influence on your childhood? Be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how the particular things your grandparents did or said were important to you.
- Did you overcome an athletic injury and recover to perform well? A description of the type of cast you wore and your rehab routine won't make a compelling essay. But a reflection on what it felt like to watch your teammates, instead of playing alongside them, just might be the ticket.

Tips on avoiding possible pitfalls

- Writing a poem or making a videotape in place of an essay is probably not a good idea, unless you're applying to a specialized school that encourages such a submission.
- Humor can be risky, so be careful how you use it.
- Honor code rules are in effect when you write an essay, so do your own work and don't make things up. As a practical matter, other items in the application, such as letters of recommendation, make it likely that you'd be found out if you tried to give misinformation.

Some final tips

- Leave yourself time to rewrite and revise. For most people, this is not an easy assignment. You need to give yourself weeks, not days, and certainly not hours, to rework your essay.
- If your essay is longer than three pages (unless the instructions call for something longer), then it had better be interesting! Think hard about what you really want to focus on, and take out whatever distracts from your central point.

The admissions committee will take your essay seriously. You should, too. You have a lot to gain by putting in the time and effort to write a good essay.

Source: College Counseling Sourcebook, 4th Edition