

## WISDOM FOR WRITING COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS

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1. The application essay is important – but although some high school students are accepted into college *because* of their terrific essays, other are accepted *despite* their poor essays. So, while you should not overstress, do spend time to write the best essay you can. With some colleges not requiring standardized test scores and transcripts reflecting a different high school program given the pandemic, the essay has gained more importance. It is often the one window where the college gets to know you as a person. You get to “talk” directly to the college. It is often the one item in your admissions folder that puts you all together -- in focus -- for the university or college.

2. The college application essay is an informal, familiar piece and *not* a five-paragraph essay of analysis. It is not the way you have been writing in history class or on most IB/AP tests. Your audience for that first-read college admissions officer is often someone in her 20s or 30s. That person is not a professor with grey hair or a world expert on the mating habits of a rare Amazon insect. The audience is an adult, often young adult, who desires to meet you.

3. Write about a topic only you could write. Don’t try to impress, just be honest; don’t try to figure out what *they* want to hear, just tell them what *you* want them to know. Remember that admissions people often read the essay last, so they know your GPA, your clubs, your profile from your recommending teachers. What they don’t yet know is you – so paint a picture of yourself with words and stories so you become real to them and not just a batch of statistics.

4. Avoid heaping lavish praise on the college, although you might acknowledge their special programs you are interested in. It is nice for them to realize you are familiar with their school. However, foremost is the goal of showing them who you are and why you are a good fit for their institution.

5. There are no bad topics – just bad essays. Don’t let anyone tell you what you can’t write about, even admissions officers. You should be careful and strategic, maybe even political in your choices, but don’t dismiss a topic that is uniquely yours. How many kids will write about a what they did during COVID virtual instruction trip or being captain of the basketball team? Many, but if that is your best story to reveal your personality and character, go for it. Just be sure to reveal yourself in a fresh, engaging and maybe innovative way. Remember, despite the prompt, every essay is asking only one question: Who are you?

6. Watch the length of your essay. Submitting too short an essay could appear as if there isn’t much to say about you or you aren’t truly enthusiastic about being accepted to this college. It can also signal that you have time management problems. Always choose a topic that can be well written within the number of words allowed. Also, limit the scope of your essay. You wouldn’t discuss all the causes of the Civil War in a two-page essay, so don’t try to describe your entire life in a paper of 650 words. Do a small, focused topic – a flower, not your whole garden; a day, not your entire summer; a game, not the entire season.

7. Introduction, introduction, and introduction – these are the first three important parts of your essay. Grab the reader’s attention with solid, smooth writing, an exciting moment, or a provocative statement. From the first paragraph, make the reader interested in spending the next few minutes listening to you. Try to use your words and not a famous quote – write from your voice from the start.

8. A conclusion should be like a gymnast's dismount – "stick it" with your words like they do with their hands up in the air in triumph. If you can compose an appropriate concluding line for your theme and your voice, you will leave an overall positive impression. It also will make any minor flaws in execution elsewhere in your essay seem less important.

9. Learn to love details. The readers should be able to picture you in their minds. Almost like a screenplay directs an actor, your words should direct the admissions people so they see you in action and learn how you think. You don't want to write "I worked with an elementary kid after school once a week." That is just a fact stated without any personality. Instead, you could write, "Each week I tutored Elena, a shy third grader who was given to me because she was failing math. Walking tentatively over to my seat in the local elementary school cafeteria that first day, her head was down, and her hands clutched a math book with crumpled worksheets sticking out at all angles." Here you entertain the reader with a story by pulling them in to your description of the little girl. The essay can then proceed to show how you succeeded with her. If written well, this essay would show you are an effective tutor, not state that you are. Key rule of good writing is "Show, Don't Tell."

10. Storytelling is the best writing there is – bar none. If you tell a story, readers think they know you, and, better yet, they enjoy getting to know you. Treat your essay like a film script -- can the reader film your narrative or get a picture of what you are like from what you wrote? Have at least one good story in your essay.

11. Write autobiography – not fiction. As you write your personal stories, don't feel any need to exaggerate the elements of your life and avoid any desire to fabricate any of its details. Be confident that your authentic story will be dramatic, poignant, significant, interesting enough to capture the attention of an admissions officer. You may use poetic license where you can quote statements from long ago, arrange or simplify events and otherwise narrate a story with details that are approximate. If you are using specific information that approximates the reality of the event or the way a person talked, you are still writing ethically.

12. Never ask what "they" want to hear in the essay – rather give them what you want them to know about you. Look over your application, note your standardized test scores, and think about what your recommending teachers will be saying about you. Now, what does this college need to know about you that they have yet to learn? Is there something they will know superficially that is important for them to know in more depth? You might also use the essay to explain any part of the application that is less than stellar -- a tough sophomore year when life didn't let you concentrate on schoolwork, or a challenge you had in a particular course and what you learned from the experience. You choose the best topic for you.

13. Get help in the editing of your paper – but don't get too much help. A school counselor or English teacher or some other adult (a tutor like me) can be helpful guiding you to write the best essay on the best topic for you. Just allow them only to guide you as an overly adult-edited paper just reads oddly to a savvy admissions officer -- and most of them are savvy. Parents are often good resources but be wary of them as well. They don't always have the most objectivity regarding you -- you are their perfect child! A fresh, honestly written teenage essay, even one with some mistakes, is more impressive than a manufactured essay edited by too many adults. Admissions officers can "smell" the difference between an essay written by a 45-year-old from one written by a 17-year-old. Own your paper.

14. Proofread for spelling and punctuation and word choice. Be sure you have answered their prompt.

15. Write a good essay and modify it for other colleges whenever possible. Try not to write a brand-new essay for each institution if you can help it – they don't expect you to and it is too time consuming. Ideally devise a topic response that can suffice for all of your Common Application colleges, and when it comes to supplemental essays, put all the topics on a page and think of essays that will satisfy more than one college. Think of your essay as a little black dress that is a staple of any woman's closet – it can be dressed up or down by wearing different accessories or different shoes. Recycle stories and paragraphs as much as you can to save your sanity and nerves. You want to earn good first semester senior year grades, remember.

16. As you write, but especially before you seal up the envelope or push the submit button on your application, **read your essay out loud**. This action is by far your best editing tool as it forces you to read slowly. If you stumble over a sentence, it is usually a sign you need to shorten or rephrase it. If you left out words while typing, you can add them back in. If you used a word or phrase repeatedly, you'll hear those repetitions and can look for appropriate synonyms. Editing by reading orally will allow you to find places where commas were needed as well as places where they were unnecessary. Most importantly, you'll hear the rhythm of the essay to check if it sounds like you. If it doesn't, revise until you can read it naturally.

17. Final question you should ask of your essay: Does this essay tell something important about how you think and react to the world? If so, send it on. If a college ultimately rejects you, you want them to reject the *real* you, not the one you manufactured for the application. Think of this admissions process like internet dating (!) – if you portray yourself accurately, you will find true love. If you fabricate or distort who you are, you might be on a miserable date -- for four years!

18. Colleges are molding a class, so although there are many people they would like to invite, they won't be able to invite everyone. Think of the analogy as a party at your home – you have more friends that you can fit in your basement, but who will make a good party? A college is not deciding your fate as a human being, just whether you fit with the other students on that college's list one particular year. The college admissions process is very personal on so many aspects, but the final decision should not be taken personally. Wherever you go to college, you take one item that will guarantee your success -- you.

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