

General Tips for Effective Essay Writing

Start early. The more time you have to draft and edit your college essays, the less stressed you'll be and the greater your chances of writing a brilliant essay. Dedicate several weeks to writing because good essays take several drafts.

Invest time in brainstorming.

- Read the prompt and focus on what is being asked. Is the college asking for examples of leadership, values, goals or for you to discuss an intellectual issue?
- Write down several different ways of answering the same question. Think of different stories to illustrate your points. Write whatever comes into your head. Let the ideas come fast and furious. Jot down everything. Don't second-guess yourself. Do not censor. There will be time to edit later.
- Once your mind is empty, leave your collection of ideas for at least a day or two.
- Before picking a final topic and beginning to write in earnest be sure to:
 - ✓ **Choose a topic you care about.** One of the biggest mistakes students make is "writing what they think others want to hear, rather than about an issue, event, or person that really had significance for them", says an admissions officer. What do **YOU** love, find interesting, or value?
 - ✓ **Keep your focus narrow.** Don't try to cover too many topics. A list of accomplishments does not allow the reader to get to know you as well as picking one idea and explaining in detail the significance to you.
 - ✓ **Be sure to pick a topic that answers the question.**

Grab your reader. Many admissions officers spend 2-3 minutes reading a college essay. Capture the reader's attention in the introduction using these ideas:

- **Create mystery in your Introduction.** Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to lure them into reading on:
 - ✓ Try starting with a question or a bold statement.
 - ✓ Use an interesting quote.
 - ✓ Place the reader in the middle of something happening or a conversation.
 - ✓ Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.
 - ✓ Challenge the reader, speaking directly to the reader.
- **Don't summarize in your introduction.** Why would a reader want to read your entire essay after reading a summary introduction?
- **Try writing the opening last!** Writing a good opening can be difficult. Sometimes it is easiest to write at the end of the editing process when you have a clear idea of the main point of the essay.

When Writing:

- **Use your own voice.** Remember the point of the essay is for the admissions officer to get to know you. Your essay should sound like you. Choose words that

you use in everyday speech rather than "Thesaurus" language. Using formal words in your essay sounds unnatural and distances the reader from you.

- **Show, Don't Tell.** Try to back up statements with stories, examples, details, and reasons to develop your idea.
 - ✓ **Don't** simply state a fact to get an idea across, such as "I like to surround myself with people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."
 - ✓ **Do** describe a situation. When you were surrounded by various types of people? What were you doing? With whom did you speak? What did you take away from the experience?
- **Appeal to the five senses.** Use all five senses—not just the sense of sight—to add details about what you heard, saw, and felt during the event. For example, "My heart jumped as the dark shape of the brown grizzly lurched toward me out of the woods" provides more information about the writer than, "I saw a bear when I was hiking".
- **Describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions.** If you do this, your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you.
- **Use recent examples.** It's always best to focus on events that occurred while in high school rather than earlier. If you focus on something significant that happened when you were younger, be sure to explain how this event has affected you in recent years.
- **Add depth and meaning.** Since you are writing about a topic of importance to you, go beyond the description and add some reflection or analysis of the significance to you. What lesson did you learn? How has this affected your life?

Leave your reader with a lasting impression. Wrap up your story with a memorable, concise closing statement and end on a broad, upbeat note. There is no one right way to do this but here are a few ways to making it memorable:

- **Bring Your Essay Full Circle.** Find a way to link back to the original anecdote in the introduction.
- **Bring the reader up to date.** Most of your essay was telling about something that happened in the **past**. In your conclusion bring the reader into the **present** by linking your beginning to today. This also gives you the chance to focus on your **future** aspirations.

Proofread. After working on an essay for a long time it is easy to overlook grammar, spelling, and other errors. When you are ready to send off your essay, it is a good idea to use spell check on the computer and have someone proofread the essay. Just remember: proofreading is not the same as having someone rewrite your essay. You do not want your voice to get lost. The colleges are serious when they say they want to hear your voice in the essay—not your parent's or English teacher's voice. Have one or two people review the essay specifically for mistakes and see if the essay really represents the person you are. If the essay sounds like you and is error-free, you are done!