

Writing a College Admissions/Application Essay

PURPOSE OF THE ESSAY

Your high school transcript, recommendations, and SAT scores address your academic abilities, but your essay lets them learn more about you as a person. Yes, they really will read your essay carefully -- in fact, they may pass it around the office to share their delight in your writing ability! Remember, though, your essay isn't meant simply to satisfy their curiosity about you, but rather, to:

Purpose

(continued)

- demonstrate your ability to express your views clearly and rationally, to resolve intellectual problems and to make new discoveries -- all important goals of a liberal arts education

AND...

- illustrate that you are a good match for the college by revealing your thoughts, attitudes, experiences, aspirations, and personal qualities.

Finding a Topic

Don't panic!

You've got plenty to write about. In the words of fiction writer Flannery O'Connor, "The fact is that anybody who has survived his childhood has enough information about life to last him the rest of his days. If you can't make something out of a little experience, you probably won't be able to make it out of a lot."

Finding a Topic

The challenge, then, is to use the application essay not only to report what you know, but also to discover, in the process of writing, something you hadn't known before.

Leave plenty of time before your deadline to allow this to happen.

The oral draft

You might try out a topic on a friend in order to test your ideas and to find your natural "voice" for expressing these ideas.

Pay attention to the natural structure of your conversation - do you tell a story to illustrate your point? Do your ideas provoke your friend to respond or argue? What logic does your argument follow?

The oral draft

Try representing the structure of your conversation in outline form or draw it in an eight-panel storyboard. Then consider what changes might be made to the way you've organized your "oral draft" in order to tell the story or make the argument more effectively in writing.

The oral draft

The college application essay should reveal your thoughts, feelings, and opinions, so you may use the pronoun "I" freely. And by practicing your topic with a friend, you will become aware of qualities of your communication style or "voice" (such as humor, wit, precision, or sincerity) that are important to preserve in your writing.

Revision

Next, try discussing your topic with a parent or teacher in order to find a (slightly) more formal tone and more deliberate structure for your essay. Write the first draft based on this new conversation, then set it aside for a day or two. After distancing yourself from your essay, you can re-read it with a fresh perspective and make any necessary changes in organization and tone. At this point, you should also pay close attention to matters of grammar and spelling.

Drafting

Once you have written your second draft, it would probably be helpful to share it with your family, friends, English teacher, or guidance counselor. They may be able to offer suggestions for improvement, but the final product must be yours.

Tell a Story

The question, "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you" (from the Common Application) requires you to tell a story.

This story (along with your thoughts about the events recounted) might become your entire essay, or the story you tell might be limited to an anecdote that illustrates a point that has been made abstractly.

Tell a Story

The "narrative essay" form derives much of its reader interest from depicting action; you might either begin at the highpoint of the action or at the story's chronological beginning. However you begin, remember that you want to do more than entertain.

Think of the impact your experience has had upon you as your thesis; your story should provide the evidence - in vivid, sensory detail -- to support your thesis.

In this form of essay...

Employ elements of story-telling including action, sensory detail, even dialogue, to make your essay compelling.

Remember that "action" can be physical or mental (your thought process).

Use your true, unique voice to tell the story, not a flowery, inflated or pretentious style. If you are thorough and thoughtful in expressing the meaning in your experience, this will be impressive enough.

Defend a belief or value

The question, "Discuss some issue of personal, national, or local concern and its importance to you" (from the Common Application) requires that you defend a well-considered point of view.

If you choose to answer this question, make sure that the issue you address is one about which you feel strongly.

Pay attention to the issues you follow in the news, discuss with your friends or write about in your journal.

Defend a belief or value

(continue)

Once you've identified why this particular issue is important to you, ask yourself, "So what?" Then answer this underlying question with your essay, which also gives you an opportunity to reveal your maturity and perspective by demonstrating your connection to the larger world. Bonus: you'll also show that you are ready to be an active participant in a diverse community, such as a college.

Remember!

Write what you really think,
not what you think others
want to read.

Write a character portrait

The question, "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence"

or

"Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence"

Do pay attention to the difference between exterior and interior descriptions.

More

Do remember that this character portrait is meant to reveal you: not only who you are now, but who you will become as a result.

You would do well, though, to show support or plan to support values in college.

Is there a research project, program, application, or work of art that has personal meaning and that you intend to pursue?

Application Essay checklist

- Is the essay interesting?
- Will it stand out because it shows who I really am?
- Is it about something important to me?
- Do I show how I think?
- Do I illustrate the issue, story or experience?
- Is my presentation neat, logical, and clearly stated?
- Are there good transitions between separate ideas?
- Did I make a conclusion rather than ending with a summary?