

The how and why of writing a college essay

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INTRODUCTION:

Why do colleges ask for an essay?

- Because they have way more academically qualified candidates than they have space for
- Because colleges have an idea of who they are as institutions, and they are looking for students who “fit”
- Related to that sense of fit, students are viewed as more than a sum of their grades, courses and awards, and it is this “essence” that a college is trying to gauge
- Colleges value creativity and good writing ability

As result, the more selective a school, generally the more important an essay becomes in conveying a sense, paradoxically, both of how a student fits in and stands out.

All writing is about a message and an audience: so start by asking yourself who are you writing for (your audience) and what you want to tell that audience (your message).

AUDIENCE:

The audience for your college essay will be admission officers, and not family or friends. Your writing needs to be crafted with these readers in mind, and generally they are:

- Well educated and intelligent
- Diverse in their backgrounds
- Mostly nice people and committed to education
- Skilled about reading between the lines in order to assess who you are and what you are trying to say
- Experienced in reading so many essays that there will be little they have not heard or encountered in an essay – hence their habit of talking about common essay topics in types, like the “objects in a room” essay, the “caught between two cultures” essay, or “the no pain no gain crew/cross-country race” essay.

MESSAGE:

So what is it you want to tell the reader?

- That you are smart enough to follow instructions

- That you are thoughtful and self-aware enough to be able to say something significant about who you are
- That you are interesting enough for the reader to want to stick around for your story
- That you are articulate enough to tell your story well.

CHOOSING A TOPIC:

Think of the topic you choose as simply the vehicle that will convey your message to your reader. In choosing that topic, your **first question** should NOT be “What do colleges want to hear,” but “What do I want to tell them about myself?” Your **second question** then becomes “What is the best way for me to convey that message?”

You will notice that most colleges ask questions that end in phrases like “and what is its impact on you,” or “and how did it influence you,” and “what does it reveal about you.”

In other words, the reader is less interested in the facts or the outline of your story and more in what it reveals to them about who you are and how you think. Which is not to say that those details are unimportant – on the contrary, as with any piece of writing, it is often the little details, the rich colour in which the story is painted, that keeps the reader’s attention.

In choosing a topic, keep the following in mind:

- Colleges want to see that you can follow instructions, so make sure you write to the essay question you have chosen or that they have stipulated.
- Do not mindlessly recycle the same essay for different application supplements. Your essay presents a college with a particular person, and that person needs to be someone that your reader will feel is a good fit for the institution. Think of this example: a politician may want the votes of both older war veterans and younger college students, but he will surely not give both groups exactly the same election speech. And neither should you think it a good idea to give very different institutions the same essay without thinking through matters of fit. Even when two schools ask you the same question, they may be looking for different focus and a different length. The supplement takes the place of the college-specific application: it is where colleges try and see who is a good fit for them, who is likely to attend if accepted, and so on.
- Whatever the topic, make the essay about you without allowing yourself to get bogged down in the narrative details of your story. In other words, if you are writing about a book or an event, for example, don’t spend all of your time and space relating the facts, so you never get around to telling them about yourself. Similarly, as your essay unfolds, the reader should get to know you, not be hammered over the head with a recitation of your good qualities.
- Every person has different personality facets, interests and tastes. Try to establish a single theme in your essay, though - by trying to cram all of those aspects into one piece, you risk treating everything superficially.
- Have some perspective. Others have likely had the same experiences and have written about it too, so know that you will succeed in catching the reader’s eye by the skill with which you approach the topic, not necessarily the choice of topic itself. It does not have to be a topic of international significance or a moral dilemma of global proportions either – it just has to matter to you.

- Similarly, don't invent or exaggerate a tragedy in order to show how you overcame adversity – many applicants have really had incredibly sad or difficult lives, and rather than try and match that, count your blessings and find another topic.
- Be careful when you choose to write about a controversial topic. It is not that some topics should be off-limit, but it can be hard to write an essay that reflects more depth than dogma. You are also writing for a reader about whom you know nothing except that you want to make a good impression on him or her.
- While any topic can work in the hands of a skilled writer, some will require much more skill than most seniors can muster, not least because they have been so thoroughly overused as to appear stale and banal. Try and avoid these, since you don't want to seem boring even before someone has started reading. Difficult essays (and I am not making this up, these are real ones!) include:

Laundry lists – “I am, I did...”

Travelogues – “I went to this exotic place and then I scuba dived in that country...”

Objects in your room – a staple topic in “Best college essay” books

Recipes – “Take one teaspoon of good humour, add two cups of compassion, etc...”

Discussions on why you prefer Edward to Jacob...

Downright stupid topics – it is hard to sound smart when your topic is not

CRAFTING YOUR MESSAGE:

Keep in mind that what you write is almost inseparable from how you write it. So good writing matters. You cannot spend all of your time coming up with an essay topic and none on actually writing about it. Spend a lot of time planning the essay and drafting it – given the kind of impact a great essay (or a really bad one) can have, it is time well spent. You have very little time to grab the attention of the reader – consider the possibility that someone is reading your essay at 3am in the morning with a whole stack more to wade through before committee at 9am! It is great if your essay sounds good to a reader second time through, but an admission officer will likely not have time to read it a second time, so first impressions will be what matter. Here are some basic dos and don'ts of good essay writing:

- Proofread repeatedly for good spelling and grammar, and write in full sentences. Keep in mind that your online spellchecker may save you from what used to be standard mistakes – like achieve and receive – but it will not distinguish between homophones like their and there, peak and pique.
- Try to use strong verbs and avoid the passive voice.
- First sentences (“topic sentences”) matter as much as your eight grade English teacher told you – it will help draw the reader into your story.
- Use humour if you wish, but be aware that it is hard for most people to sound really funny in writing.
- Read your essay out aloud to check for good flow.
- Share it with others, both to check your writing but also to see whether they recognize you in your writing.
- Trust your own voice – you are required to sound like a bright, interesting high school student, not like a professional writer, your parent, or your perception of what an academic superstar sounds like.

Things to avoid:

- Don't use a dictionary to mine for "big" words. You sound more pretentious than smart when you use words like "sesquipedalian."
- Don't sound arrogant. The really tricky part of a college essay lies in writing about you without sounding boastful, arrogant or self-centered. One way to avoid this is to steer clear of too many sentences that begin with "I."
- Avoid gimmicky or deliberately outrageous essays. They seldom work and are more likely to annoy than entertain.
- Similarly, even if you believe yourself to be ee cummings, keep the typography simple, and avoid overuse of brackets, font changes, italics or headings.
- Don't be repetitive, either by reiterating your list of extra-curriculars or your awards, or by reusing the same phrases or words over and over.
- Don't waste your essay on explaining or excusing weaknesses in the application – you are merely drawing attention to them.
- Spare the reader language that is crude and vulgar, and avoid many of the words with which poor public speakers pepper their speech - like, awesome, absolutely, definitely. Remember that many readers still find the use of "impact" as a transitive verb, very annoying!
- While the judicious use of a pithy quote can work well, avoid endless sayings by the famous or the obscure to show how others agree with your viewpoint. It more likely shows that you cannot match them in originality.
- Finally, do not allow another ownership of your essay – this is not only dishonest and dishonorable, but perhaps the reader would have liked your voice more anyway.