

Writing a Great College Essay: 3 Tips to Guide you from Stress to Success

by Cindy Montgomery

If there is one part of the college application that tends to cause anxiety for students, it's the essay. If this sounds like you, take a deep breath and relax. It might help to think of the college essay as a gift—a valuable opportunity to highlight your strengths, your personality, and your values. Below are 3 tips to help you create a personal statement that leaves the reader eager to meet you and excited by the prospect of you joining their campus community.

Tip # 1: Tell Your Story

The term “college essay” is a bit of a misnomer. The goal is not to write an essay *per se*. Your personal statement should read more like a great story—with you as the main character! Think of the essay as an exercise in self-reflection: sit down at a time and place that inspire you and start writing, freely and without concern for spelling, punctuation or paragraphs. Those important details will—indeed, *must*—come later; but for now the goal is to get your creative juices flowing. Some of the most successful essays I've read over the years have been about seemingly mundane events: playing chess with an elderly neighbor, surviving a disastrous haircut, talking with a stranger on the bus. These essays worked because they managed to capture the essence of the writer's personality and value system in an engaging and subtle way. They were genuine, thoughtful and, most importantly, personal. When you're done, ask yourself this question: Could anyone else have written this essay? If the answer is “no”, you're on track to telling a story that is uniquely you—and likely to be remembered by the college admissions officer that reads your file.

Tip # 2: Find Your Voice

One of the most common mistakes that students make when writing the college essay is they try to anticipate what will appeal to an admissions officer—and they sacrifice their “voice” in the process. Starting with a quotation from a poet or philosopher might seem like the perfect way to impress; but in reality it's more likely to lead your essay in a direction away from who you are and what you've experienced. Choose fresh, unpretentious language. Likewise, aim for personal over political. College essays that reflect on national or global issues often make students seem like Application Anonymous. If you are passionate about the environment, a

well-written piece on your efforts to convince reluctant classmates to recycle is more likely to illuminate your character than an essay on your reaction to the UN Summit on global warming. College admissions officers know you are a teenager, and they expect—indeed, they *want*—your essay to give them a glimpse into the world that you inhabit. Authenticity is the key ingredient to a great college essay.

Tip #3: Be Concise

Many students are surprised by how difficult it can be to stay within the 500- word limit that is often suggested for the college essay. Given the relatively small amount of space you have to convey a great deal about yourself, word choice and editing are crucial. Read your essay out loud. Does the essay flow from one sentence to the next? Have you been descriptive yet succinct? If you find yourself having difficulty refining your essay, enlist the advice of a trusted adult to help with the editing process. Without the same emotional attachment to the words that you have as the author, they are often in a better position to make difficult editing choices. If, after careful review, your essay still exceeds the recommended limit, don't dismay. Remember that it's quality not quantity that makes a winning personal statement. If your essay is thoughtful and flows beautifully from one sentence to the next, the admissions officer will delight in reading it from start to finish— regardless of the length.

Keep these simple tips in mind, and you'll be on your way to writing a college essay that is enjoyable and memorable. Before submitting, do a final check to make sure it passes the "So What?" test. Does it have a message that can be easily summarized by the reader? Does it provide value to the college admissions officer reading your file? Remember, you want your essay to be the one that stands out from the stacks. So get to work! Writing a great college essay takes imagination, self-reflection and time. Be patient. Believe in yourself. And, above all, start writing.