



Tips for Writing an Effective Admission Essay

Writing the college application essay is stressful. Here's how to share your story and set yourself apart.

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So you've started putting together your college applications, and like a pro, you've been requesting transcripts, filling in your personal information, and asking for recommendation letters. But there's one last requirement that you've been dreading. It's the summit of your mountain, the boss fight in your video game, the spun sugar on your croquembouche.

I'm talking, of course, about the college admission essay.

If you're like many high-school seniors, you've been putting off this part of your application. Maybe it's because you're not inspired by the various prompts. Perhaps you're procrastinating because trying to express your character, personality, worldview, passions, writing skill, and desire to go to a particular school all within just a few hundred words feels overwhelming. Or maybe you're stressed because you know a lot rides on this part of your application but you don't consider yourself a strong writer.

Whatever the reason, I'm here with suggestions—and insider tips from the experts—to make the essay-writing process a little less painful.

It's a story, not a résumé

Some admission officers pore over your application; others spend only minutes reading your documents. Whatever your reader's process, you need to grab their attention. And a snore-mongering list of extracurriculars is *not* the way to hook your audience. As Southwestern University Associate Director of Admission Dana Marchant suggests, "Do not reiterate all the activities and involvement you have completed during your high-school years. Focus on one experience and the skill it has taught you. It may be very big (e.g., being adopted) or small (e.g., a jarring conversation at an after-school club meeting), but focus on the life lessons you learned from that experience. Some of the best essays I have read have been about a simple experience, but students have been able to put me in that moment with them and then expounded on how it changed them."

Remember that stories don't begin with a repetition of the prompt (e.g., please don't start with, "One time when I questioned or challenged a belief or idea was ...") or a definition from a dictionary (e.g., avoid saying, "Merriam-Webster defines 'success' as ..."); instead, you should begin with something descriptive, such as setting the scene or jumping right into the middle of the action. Then, go on to illustrate how the event took place, devoting details only to significant moments. (Life hack: Keep in mind that this is also a story and not a novel, so don't go all Charles Dickens on this.)

But unlike a story, an essay needs a main point that's stated explicitly, so beyond describing the event or person, be sure to explain how that event or person changed you. Did you learn a skill you've used or would like to continue honing as an undergraduate? Did you learn an important lesson that has shaped how you think or behave in some way? Regardless of the topic you choose, your essay should tell a distinctive, compelling, cohesive story about who you are, how you've grown as an individual, and the contributions you'll make to this particular college campus.

Honesty is the only policy

The application essay is not a résumé, nor is it an epic. And by "not an epic," I mean both "not fiction" and "not a grand adventure story about an extraordinary protagonist." Some students might feel pressured to invent tragic past experiences or monumental achievements to heighten the emotional appeal of their essays, but admission officers can detect bovine feces. They also don't expect you to have survived trauma or carried out heroic feats by your senior year in high school. So always represent yourself in the best way possible, but make sure you keep that depiction truthful. "To paint the lily ... Is wasteful and ridiculous excess" Remember what Salisbury says to the crown and Pembroke in Shakespeare's *The Life and Death of King John* (1595), which I know you're intimately familiar with and can quote by rote:

To descry your plans for achieving world peace,
To say a spork is but a metaphor for life,
Or to hint that an aglet is a fair symbol of your soul
Is slick and unctuous smarm. (4.2.11-14)

OK, that is in no way a direct quotation (because I made it up), nor is it anything close to blank verse, but trust me: the bard would want you to avoid trying to anticipate what the admission staff want to read. So don't try to be too clever or cutesy in your essay, and don't try to embellish a perfectly simple story. "We're trying to discern whether you can put thoughts on paper in a coherent manner," says Southwestern University's Vice President for Strategic Recruitment and Enrollment Tom Delahunt. "The topic doesn't have to be heavy, like death, dying, or a debilitating illness. It can be light and still give us an indication that you can write and effectively

communicate.” Everyday experiences can be meaningful, and you should describe how a particular difficult conversation affected your thinking about cultural differences or how collecting antique typewriters helps you see technology in a different way. But don’t exaggerate the significance of your experience; the effect it’s had on your personal growth does not need to be elevated to the level of global impact.

And don’t try to use sesquipedalian (SAT alert!) vocabulary when you’re a mono- or disyllabic kind of writer; relying on a thesaurus and using words you’re not familiar with are another sure signal of an inauthentic voice.

The rough draft should not be the only draft

The college essay may seem like its own beast—and therefore one that you don’t know how to grapple with—but the writing process is the same as it often is for an academic essay, a blog post, a letter to the editor, or a cover letter: brainstorm, outline, write a rough draft, get critical distance from it, revise it, edit it, and proofread it.

Notice that I didn’t say, “write a rough draft, *and submit it.*” Why shouldn’t you let your essay fly? Because you need to take some time away from it to get some critical distance. For example, in the flurry of a rough draft, you might feel attached to a particular sentence or paragraph, but after stepping away—physically and mentally—from your first effort, you might come back to find that those wonderful turns of phrase don’t really fit the content or tone of the rest of the piece. You’ll be better able to catch those inconsistencies and revise them if you’ve given yourself distance from the essay. You want to make sure that your application is polished and tells a clear, convincing, coherent story about why you belong at XYZ University, so instead of dashing it off and being done with it, give yourself at least a day or two away from it so that you can come back to revise with an alert mind and fresh eyes. Only after you’ve had a chance to review your essay carefully and put the finishing touches on it should you click the submit button.

Get feedback

Another way to get critical distance from your essay is to get criticism. And I don’t mean a slash-and-burn review like you might get from an unreasonable



reality-TV competition judge. I’m talking about constructive about constructive feedback from trusted friends, family, or mentors. Southwestern University Assistant Director of Admission Rebecca Rother recommends having two people review your essay. The first should be someone “who knows you super well, such as a parent, best friend, close teacher, etc. They will be able to see the essence of you in the story you’ve chosen.” The second reader should be “someone who doesn’t know you as well,” such as “a teacher you haven’t had for a few years, a friend of the family, the librarian at the local library, etc. This will be the person who makes sure that you aren’t missing key details to your story.” Often, the college-application essay is so personal that you can forget that your reader, the admission officer, is practically a stranger and may not recognize the people and places you mention in your essay, so your second reader can help you clarify those unfamiliar references.

Another great trick is to ask your two reviewers to read your essay and then, considering the story you have shared, think of three adjectives to describe you. If those three adjectives reflect the message or self-portrait you intended to depict in your draft, then you are on the right track; if not, then you need to rethink your content.

Use your words—preferably correctly spelled ones

Your grammar and usage do not have to be perfect. However, your essay should be polished and free of conspicuous errors, such as typos and spelling mistakes. In addition to having reviewers spot any issues with clarity and readability, Southwestern University Dean of Admission and Enrollment Services Christine Bowman

suggests, "print out your essay, and read it aloud to make sure you have not missed any key words or punctuation. Sometimes we type faster than our thoughts get onto the page." Seeing your essay printed in hard copy can help you see what you might miss on screen; reading it aloud can help you "hear" errors that your eyes might skip.

Tailor it

This has nothing to do with clothing; this has everything to do with making sure that you're not sending the same essay to every university. If an admission counselor at Yalevard reads that your wonderful volunteer experience at the local girafferehabilitation center makes you a great fit for Stanmouth, then they're likely to guffaw ... right before they chuck your application into the rejection pile. Such mistakes can make you look careless and less than committed to the school. But even beyond just mentioning the correct names of schools, do your research to find out what makes each university the right fit for you. Clarifying specific aspects of each college's curriculum, special programs, student organizations, athletic teams, or other opportunities and why they are an ideal match for your interests and values can impress admission staff that you're serious about their institution. (Pro tip: you'll want to remember this tip when you write cover letters and even résumés for internships and jobs; customizing your content to specific employers is always key.)

All that said . . .

Earlier, I mentioned that you shouldn't make mountains out of molehills *within* your essay. Similarly, don't exaggerate the importance of the essay itself: it is only one part of your college application, and it is rarely the sole reason a student gets admitted or denied. A particularly strong essay won't balance out a consistent record of underwhelming academic performance, and a less-than-award-winning essay will not necessarily cancel out an otherwise stellar application filled with excellent grades, commitment to community service, and compelling recommendations. Admission staff aren't looking for the perfect topic or essay; rather, they just want to get a better sense of each applicant's passions, opinions, and ways of thinking so that they can fill each incoming class with a diverse group of interesting classmates and roommates. So work hard and carefully on your college-application essay, but don't obsess over it.

Best of luck!