

The College Essay

The college essay is an opportunity for the applicant to share more about him/herself with the admission committee. It is one piece of a whole puzzle that comes together to form a picture of the applicant. Below are a few helpful hints to think about when writing:

A GOOD ESSAY SHOULD:

- ✓ Answer the question at hand- all of it!
- ✓ Give the reader a clear sense of why the writer chose to a particular topic- why it is important to him/her.
- ✓ Show the reader *how the student has grown/changed* as a result of the experience discussed in the essay.
- ✓ Be clearly organized and concise. Avoid “flowery” language and extensive scenic descriptions.
- ✓ Be proofread carefully; spell check will not catch everything.
- ✓ Be re-written several times, and not saved for the last minute!
- ✓ Be written in the writer’s own words and voice. The essay should reveal the writer’s self. A funny person can write a funny essay, but someone who is not should not attempt to be.

WHEN WRITING A COLLEGE ESSAY, AVOID:

- ✓ Answering only half the question. Don’t just “*indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you...*” without also making sure that you “*...describe that influence.*”
- ✓ Allowing someone else to correct and re-write the essay. Asking for feedback is expected, but the changes must be made by the writer!
- ✓ Using words that are not part of every day vocabulary. This is not an opportunity to practice SAT words or use the thesaurus to “sound smart”.
- ✓ Using the essay as an opportunity to explain a flaw in the writer’s academic record. If something needs to be explained, this should be done elsewhere.
- ✓ Cutting and pasting the same essay to fit every college application, as it usually will not work. The Common Application makes this less of a problem, but avoid inserting the names of colleges in an essay; the wrong essay could end up at the wrong school!
- ✓ Position papers and political hot topics. It is *very* obvious when a student is re-using an essay s/he wrote for a class. Popular topics seem to include: abortion, the war in Iraq, the Presidential election, etc. Also, this may inadvertently offend the reader. Likewise, poetry and creative writing are not useful essays.

TO TEST THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ESSAY, ASK YOURSELF:

- ✓ What am I trying to say?
- ✓ If I had to summarize the whole essay in two sentences...
- ✓ How does it start and end? Am I still talking about the same thing?
- ✓ Does this really sound like me?
- ✓ What does the reader know about me after reading this?

Rules for Writers:

1. Verbs HAS to agree with their subjects.
 2. Prepositions are not words to end sentences with.
 3. And don't start a sentence with a conjunction.
 4. It is wrong to ever split an infinitive.
 5. Avoid clichés like the plague. (They're old hat)
 6. Also, always avoid annoying alliteration.
 7. Be more or less specific.
 8. Parenthetical remarks (however relevant) are (usually) unnecessary.
 9. Also too, never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
 10. No sentence fragments.
 11. Contractions aren't necessary and shouldn't be used.
 12. Foreign words and phrases are not apropos.
 13. Do not be redundant; do not use more words than necessary; it's highly superfluous.
 14. One should NEVER generalize.
 15. Comparisons are as bad as clichés.
 16. Don't use no double negatives.
 17. Eschew ampersands & abbreviations, etc.
 18. One-word sentences? Eliminate.
 19. Analogies in writing are like feathers on a snake.
 20. The passive voice is to be ignored.
 21. Eliminate commas, that are, not necessary. Parenthetical words however should be enclosed in commas.
 22. Never use a big word when a diminutive one would suffice.
 23. Kill all exclamation points!!!
 24. Use words correctly, irregardless of how others use them.
 25. Understatement is always the absolute best way to put forth earth shaking ideas.
 26. Use the apostrophe in it's proper place and omit it when its not needed.
 27. Eliminate quotations. As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "I hate quotations. Tell me what you know."
 28. If you've heard it once, you've hear it a thousand times: Resist hyperbole; not one writer in a million can use it correctly.
 29. Puns are for children, not groan readers.
 30. Go around the barn at high noon to avoid colloquialisms.
 31. Even IF a mixed metaphor sings, it should be derailed.
 32. Who needs rhetorical questions?
 33. Exaggeration is a billion times worse than understatement.
- And finally . . .
34. Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.