

THE COLLEGE ESSAY



WHY WRITE THE ESSAY?

The process of applying to college can seem daunting at first glance, but in reality, there's every reason to be excited. The anticipation you feel at the idea of going to your dream school is matched by the excitement of an admissions officer hoping to discover a student who perfectly fits their school. The college essay plays a significant role in this process. It's an opportunity for you to show who you are beyond your grade point average, test scores and extra-curricular activities. Don't be afraid to let your interests, passions and personality shine!

TIP 1: "KNOW THYSELF"

What does Ancient Greek philosophy have in common with college application essays? The central importance of the maxim "know thyself". Self-discovery is a prerequisite for writing a successful college essay. As you prepare to begin your post-secondary education, colleges will encourage you to look back on your life thus far and reflect on the lessons you've learned from your experiences and how they will guide you as you move forward. This is a chance for you to introspect and learn more about your motivations, aspirations, and guiding principles.



TIP 2: FIND YOUR STORY



At heart, the college essay is your story. It's a chance for you to reflect on certain key moments in your life which have shaped who you are today, and who you will be tomorrow. Your story can be serious, quirky, dramatic, or funny, but above all it must be you. When brainstorming to find your story, you might recall dramatic moments in your life, you might talk about your passions and how you discovered and pursued them, or you might take an entirely different angle all-together. You can use various exercises such as life-mapping, personality tests, self-portraits or discussions with friends and family to brainstorm ideas for your essay. No matter what you pick, remember the goal is to demonstrate the depth of your thought and reveal who you truly are.

TIP 3: THE WRITING PROCESS

When it comes to actually writing your essay, the start is definitely half the battle. It can be helpful to set an assigned time to work on your first draft. The novelist Jane Smiley says that "every first draft is perfect, because all a first draft has to do is to exist". Keep this in mind throughout the writing process. There are several ways to start. Some students might opt for an engaging question or scene as a hook, while others will jump directly into the story, a technique known as *media res*. Forget five paragraph structure. Instead, your paragraph breaks for the essay should reflect changes in scenes or lessons you're discussing, so use as many as you need. As you write, try to keep a throughline, or central lesson or theme in mind.



TIP 4: MAKE IT YOURS



Once you've got the first draft down on paper, it's time to start revising. As you edit your paper, pay close attention to your voice. Make sure that your essay sounds like *you*. A good tip to keep in mind is that good writing sounds like a slightly more articulate version of how you speak. Don't overuse words, make sure that your writing is clear, direct, and comfortable. Confidence is good, but take care not to brag. Your essay should reflect the best version of yourself. During this stage, it's crucial to find one or two people (perhaps an English teacher or college counselor) to help you to polish and refine your essay into a final draft you can be proud of!

ADDITIONAL ESSAYS

Some colleges will request that you write additional shorter essays. Broadly speaking, these fall into two categories: conventional and quirky.

Conventional essays typically ask you to explain your motivations either for applying to that particular university, or for your chosen major, or both. These essays can be approached almost as research papers, where you learn more about the university and then describe how your goals align with opportunities offered.

Quirky essays are more creative in nature, requiring you to express your more playful side. The University of Chicago is famous for the quirkiness of its essays, including prompts like "So where is Waldo, really?" and "How did you get caught? (Or not caught, as the case may be.)" Remember, when writing these essays you should still aim to show the depth of your thought and personality through your writing.



WORKS CONSULTED

National Association for College Admission Counseling. *Fundamentals of College Admission Counseling (5th Edition): A textbook for graduate students and practicing counselors*. National Association for College Admission Counseling. Kindle Edition.