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College Application Essay Writing Tips

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WHY
BOTHER
WITH THE
ADMISSION
ESSAY?

The College Admission Essay:

- Offers you a chance to **contribute your voice** to the admission process.
- Is **not read in isolation** but with all the information you provide in your application.
- Allows you to **add information** that you couldn't work into the other parts of the application.
- Provides the reader a way to **evaluate your writing style**, language usage, organization and content.
- Is your opportunity to **become more than just another name.**

Common Application Essay Questions

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Common Application Essay Questions

4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Write an Essay, not a Biography

The best essays:

- Are very focused
- Are not a life story, but a small glimpse of it
 - Rich with meaning and alive with imagery
- Your family or a trip to France *can* be effective:
 - A special Christmas Eve mass or Yom Kippur service
 - A meal of boiled tongue at Grandma's house
 - One day of scooping ice cream at 31 Flavors

Essay Ideas

- An event that changed your mind
- A time when you felt out of place
- An experience that made you think less of someone or think of yourself differently
- An event that conforms in surprising ways to the required topic
- An event that involves a telling interaction with someone else
- Traumatic or dramatic events work, too
 - If you can handle them well

Preparing to Write Your College Essay

- **Understand the assignment**
 - Read and reread the essay question
- **Figure out what you want to say**
 - What's your main point or argument?
 - Know before you begin. *In order to make a point, you have to have one.*
- **Create an outline**
 - Take the time to organize your thoughts
 - Prune out things that are irrelevant

The Introduction

- One technique is to create mystery or intrigue in the first paragraph
- Do not give away the whole story right at the beginning
- One vivid sentence might do:
 - My favorite science project was a complete failure.
 - While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?
 - Some fathers might disapprove of their children handling noxious chemicals in the garage.
 - I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.

Focus On The Message

- Prove a single point
- Your reader needs to find your main idea and follow it from the beginning to end
- Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down
- The college wants to learn more about you, not your friends or your relatives
- It should be your story that can come from only you

Be Specific

- Avoid clichéd, generic, predictable writing by using vivid and specific details
 - **Boring and Generic:** “I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family. I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others.”
 - **Much Better:** “My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines ‘til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody’s golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. That kind of commitment is what I’d like to bring to working with fourth-graders.”

Answer the Question

- Don't turn a 600-word essay into a complete autobiography
 - It fails to answer the question
- Make sure that every sentence in your essay exists solely to answer the question
- After you are done writing, ask yourself:
 - Is every sentence crucial to the essay?

Conclude Effectively

- The conclusion is the last chance to persuade or impress admission officers
- Avoid summarizing
- Make it interesting for a long-lasting impression

Things Not to Do

- Don't be offensive – if you think it's offensive, it probably is
- Don't repeat information found elsewhere in the application
- Don't mention your GPA or SAT/ACT scores in your essay
- Don't bore the reader – admissions officers often skim
- Be interesting – but don't come off too eccentric or weird

Tips for Good Writing

- Use short, direct sentences for impact
- Use a variety of sentence lengths mixed within any given paragraph
- Use transitions between paragraphs, such as nevertheless, furthermore, consequently, etc.
- Avoid slang
 - No LOLs, LMAO, BTW, FML
 - Avoid words like very, really, a lot, cool, awesome, nice

Word Usage

- Avoid clichés
 - I know my dreams will come true
 - I can make a difference
 - I no longer take my loved ones for granted
- Use active voice; passive voice makes prose seem flat and uninteresting
 - *Passive:* The tray of food was dropped by the waiter.
 - *Active:* The waiter dropped the tray of food.

Word Choice

- Use your own voice
- Admission officers can tell Roget from a high school student
- Big words detract from the essay and sound contrived
- Powerful ideas are often best expressed in simple and elegant prose

Finally...Proofread

- Spellcheck is your friend.

Spellcheck is not, however, perfect:

- “After I graduate form high school, I well work fir ah nonprofit.”
- “I can’t wait to wear a Harvard sweatshirt!”
in your essay to UMass
- **Have a parent, teacher or trusted adult read your essay**
- **Read your essay aloud (seriously)**

QUESTIONS?