



If you're like many students, you might look at a college essay as just another hurdle on the way to acceptance at the college of your choice. **The essay isn't a hurdle – it's a rare opportunity.** Through your essay, you get the chance to speak directly to the college's admissions committee to help them see *you* the way you want to be seen – as a thinking, feeling person and not a set of impersonal statistics. It's one of the few chances to share your thoughts, insights, and opinions, highlight your accomplishments, and share your outlook on life.

## Purpose of the Essay

The first step in shaping how you approach the essay is understanding what the purpose of the essay is to the people reading it – the admissions committee. For admissions officers, the essay is important for two major reasons:

- **Evaluating Communication Skills** - For the admissions office, your essay will be a window into your written communication skills, such as the clarity of your thinking and your ability to convey thoughts in written form. A well-written essay can also help your application stand out among your peers.
- **Learning More about *You*** - There's only so much information SAT scores and grades can convey – a well-written essay can speak worlds about your attitudes, feelings, personal qualities, imagination, and creativity. This is the chance for the admissions office to learn more about you, from you.

## Choosing a Topic

Some colleges and universities will give you a topic to write about or present you with several specific topics to choose from. Others may present you with a broad, more generalized suggestion, but will still give you the opportunity to write about a topic of your choice. No matter which situation you find yourself in, here are a few general tips in deciding on the topic of your essay:

- **Narrow your topic** – Try your best to be as illustrative and specific as possible. If you leave the reader with specific images rather than broad ideas, your essay will have a much better chance of being remembered later on.
- **Don't be modest** – The easiest topic to write about is yourself – after all, who knows you better than you? – and since you want the admissions committee to get a good sense of who you are as an individual, the essay is no place to be modest. You should avoid exaggerating your character traits, though; instead, focus on little incidents and facts that are the most revealing about your character.
- **It's O.K. to be different** – An unusual or off-beat essay is an excellent way to show your creativity. Not to mention, a unique topic can be a refreshing read to an admissions officer who has read applications and essays all day.

## Preparing to Write

Before you actually sit down to write a draft of your essay, spend some time organizing your thoughts and developing a framework for your ideas. Consider your purpose, your tone, and what you ultimately want to convey in your essay. Make sure that you decide on a style, topic, and tone that **you** feel comfortable writing about, not something you think the admissions committee wants to read. Finally, remember to leave room for flexibility and creativity as you write. If you find yourself moving in a different direction than what you originally brainstormed, that's O.K. – just make sure your essay flows well from beginning to end.

## Writing the Essay

The most important thing to keep in mind is you can (and should!) write multiple drafts of your essay – put simply, you do not have to write the perfect essay in your first attempt! Instead, write the first draft of your essay with the main focus on content and communicating your thoughts. Then, step away from it for a day or two and re-read it with a fresh perspective. During this read-through, you should consider matters like organization, style, grammar, spelling, and tone. Once you have rewritten your first draft, try it out on your family, friends, English teacher, or guidance counselor – they may be able to offer helpful suggestions for improving the quality of the draft.

There is no science to writing your best essay and there are many different approaches you can take. However, there are a few dos and don'ts you should consider when writing your essay. Here are just a few:

### Don't

- Write what you think others want to read.
- Write a resumé.
- Use a flowery, inflated, or pretentious style.
- Neglect the technical part of your essay (grammar, spelling, sentence structure).
- Ramble – say what you have to say and conclude.

### Do

- Think “small” and write about something you know a great deal about.
- Reveal yourself in your writing.
- Show instead of tell—by giving examples and illustrating your topic, you help bring your essay to life.
- Write in your own “voice” and style.

Your college essay, along with your high school record, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement, will all be considered when a college makes its admissions decision. A thoughtful, well-written, creative essay can cast your application in a positive light. Keep this in mind and take full advantage of the opportunity you have with your essay.



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