

Think of the essay as an opportunity to breathe life into your application. It is your chance to differentiate yourself from other applicants and become a real person in the eyes of your reader. While essays generally do not outweigh long-term measures, such as grades, they are important and can make a difference. Seek feedback from people you trust, but do not let others do any of the writing or too much editing. The best essays convey the true voice of the writer. There is no formula for writing a good essay. In fact there are many ways to approach these essays that can be effective. If you choose to write about something that genuinely matters to you, you will have made a good start.

Some colleges will leave the essay topic to you. Others will ask very specific questions. It is appropriate to use an essay for more than one college application (as long as the essay fits the topic or question posed). You may find yourself having to write several different essays.

Tips on Writing Essays

- Read the essay question/topic carefully.
- Brainstorm ideas before selecting your topic. List activities and experiences from your past; an unexpected topic might emerge from your brainstorming. Have a conversation with your college counselor if you are having trouble selecting a topic.
- Focus your essay topic as much as possible. For example, if you choose to write about a two-week backpacking trip or trip to Mexico, you might be best served by selecting a small slice (an event during the trip that lasted five minutes, an hour, or a day) of that experience that illuminates an important lesson learned or a meaningful event.
- Some of the most powerful essays are based on surprisingly simple or everyday topics or events. Tell a story about something that has happened to you or an experience that has shaped you, changed your perspective, or stuck with you. Incorporate anecdotes, examples, and quotes from conversations. Create a “you are there” type feeling if this fits your topic.
- Go beyond the description of an event: analyze and reflect on the significance of it.
- Consider what you want the reader to think and feel about you after reading your essay.
- Do not select a topic because you think it will “look good.” This may result in flat, predictable essay. Select a topic that is meaningful to you.
- Do not use the essay to describe, in narrative form, your activities or accomplishments.
- Know the purpose of the topic you select. Think about what you want to convey.
- Use a personal, not scholarly style (first person is appropriate), and write something you think will reach and elicit a response from a real person, not some imagined committee.
- Your essay should sound like you. Don’t let anyone put words in your mouth.
- Your writing should be honest, direct, clear, concise, and personal. Use active verbs.
- Proof your essay carefully and read your essay aloud as part of the editing process.
- Seek feedback on your essay from at least two people (parent, teacher, college counselor). Start your essay well before the deadline and seek feedback at various stages to make sure you are headed in the right direction. Allow yourself adequate time and work through several drafts of your essay.

Sample Essay Questions that Might Help You Think of a Topic

- Tell us about a situation where you have not been successful and what you learned.
- First experiences can be defining. Cite a first experience that you have had and explain its impact.
- Recall an occasion when you took a risk and what you learned from doing so.
- Describe a profound or surprising intellectual experience.
- You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.
- What do you think people who know you would be surprised to learn about you?
- What is your favorite word (food/color/book) and why?
- Ask and answer the one important question you wish we had asked.

A Few College Application Tips

- ❖ Set up your Common Application account sometime after August 1, 2011. This is when the application for the Class of 2012 will be available. If you set up an account prior to that, your account will disappear along with the accounts of the Class of 2011.
- ❖ As you determine where you will apply, determine how many essays you need to write (Common Application, Supplements, Non-Common Applications).
- ❖ Many Common Application colleges require a supplement. You can access these forms on the Common Application website under Download Forms / Forms / Complete First-Year Application Packet / College-Specific Supplements.

Common Application Personal Essay

Please write an essay of 250-500 words on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below. This personal essay helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself.

- Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
- Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
- Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
- Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
- A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.
- Topic of your choice.

Common Application (short answer)

Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences in the space below.

For this section we encourage you to select something that is important to you and explain why it is meaningful to you. Do not simply describe the activity/work experience. The topic for this short response should be different than your main essay topic.

Supplements to the Common Application

A number of Common Application colleges have a **supplemental form** that may include short answer questions or additional essays. You can link to most supplements on the Common Application website using this link: <https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/SupplementInfo.aspx>.

One of the key questions that some colleges ask is “**Why do you want to attend this college?**” It is important that you respond to this question in a thoughtful, specific, and genuine way. If you have done the type of research that you should do before applying to a college, you will be in a better position to answer this in a compelling and convincing manner that explains why *you* are interested in *this particular college*. If you offer a generic answer that could be given for most small liberal arts colleges or most colleges in an urban setting, for example, the admissions office may assume that you are not that interested and that you really don’t know much about their campus and programs. Do not make this a love fest for the college in which you go on about how wonderful the school is. Write a sincere response based on careful research that explains *your* interest in this college. What is it that draws you to this college over other options that are both similar and different?

Article on college essays from the Duke alumni magazine by Rachel Toor

College admissions is an art, not a science. As application numbers go up and the applicant pool gets stronger, as grades and rigorous curriculum choices and standardized testing scores all are going through the roof, the "subjective" parts of the application become increasingly important. We look not only for students who are involved in their communities, but also for those who have made an impact. We look not only for well-rounded students, but also for well-lopsided applicants who have demonstrated real prowess, potential, and focus in a particular area.

This year, the admissions staff at Duke read 14,580 "personal statements." Although we use six criteria to evaluate applicants, it is surprising how similar many of our hopefuls look. They've all taken hard classes and done well. Standardized testing is all in pretty much the same ballpark. Teachers all say they're the greatest thing since sliced bread. Even extracurriculars look pretty similar: captain of three varsity sports, president of student government, accomplished musician, and so forth. So, the personal statement becomes a way of making the applicant a person, explaining to us in a few double-spaced pages who these students are and why we would want to invite them to join our community.

As in every profession, admissions has its own jargon, its own conventions. We tend to think in shorthand and in categories. There's a certain inevitability when you ask seventeen-year-olds to write on "a matter of importance" that you will get many similar topics and essays. We understand this commonality of experience and understand, too, how heartfelt and tentative these attempts are, especially given how much our applicants think is riding on their work. They're trying to impress us; they think they should tell us what they think we want to hear. They try to sound smart and sophisticated and profound. Sometimes they succeed. Mostly, they are truly and painfully and wonderfully honest.

In terms of subject matter, there are a number of common genres. The catalogue of achievements. The meaningful activity. The community-service essay. The horrible tragedy, the death or illness of a friend, relative, stranger, or dog. The "me" essay, where they find some way to talk about themselves; these are often the best. Even though we lump these together, we try never to forget that for each applicant, the personal statement is personal--and about something intensely important. We resist cynicism even in the face of incredible similarity because we know how powerful these experiences are.

As far as we're concerned, any topic for the essay is fair game. It's not so much what they write about, but how they write. The writing doesn't have to be perfect, though some of these applicants are amazing writers. There are often spelling errors, typos, and, sometimes, the last line of their application essay to Duke does read, "and that's why I really want to go to Stanford." One applicant this year said she wanted to go to a private school like Duke, not one of the "big state public institutions." We notice these things, but we're really in the business of content, of looking for substance over style (though we do, of course, appreciate good style).

Can a good essay get an average student into a school like Duke? No, not really. In fact, many of our admitted students write fairly average essays. It's just one of the criteria we use in our evaluations. But when we read a good essay, we share it with our colleagues. We tell our friends about it. We get excited about the prospect of having the person, who shared his or her life, insight, or humor with us, come to Duke. College is fundamentally about getting to know other people and oneself. While we all learned a lot in our college courses and from our professors, college students ultimately learn from other students, in the dorms, in the dining halls, during late-night study breaks in the library. What a good essay can do is let us get to know a person whom we think other students would enjoy getting to know.

There's no such as the perfect college admissions essay, no formula for writing one's way into college, no winning topic. (*This article included sample essays that are not included here.*)