WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY

Use college essays as your opportunity to:
- give your application a heartbeat and a personality.
- show (rather than tell) who you are, and who you’re becoming.
- demonstrate that you can communicate effectively.

The challenge that awaits you:
- To write succinctly can be difficult.
- To write succinctly about yourself can be more difficult.
- To capture the essence of who you are, succinctly, may be the most difficult.
- but… it’s possible.

What do admissions officers look for in an essay?
   Writing Ability - clear, proper use of English, including:
   - correct spelling, grammar, sentence structure
   - facility with standard conventions (i.e., topic sentences, supporting statements or examples, conclusion, etc.)
   - “voice”
   - evidence of attention to detail; careful proofreading
   Quality Content - subject matter with depth and substance, especially:
   - a topic that reveals something about you as a person (values, experiences, what you’ve learned, perspectives, contradictions)
   - Maturity/Insights/Perspectives/Creativity/Originality
   - what sets you apart; what distinguishes you from others
   - how you express yourself (without being cheesy or trite)

Some Guidelines as You Write

Initially, write from the inside, from your heart.
Later, edit from the outside, as if you were the admissions officer.

Be yourself.
- Think out loud. First draft, keep it loose.
- Write as if you’re talking to a good friend.
- Write with honesty.
- Write what you feel.
- Avoid gimmicks or trying to be overly clever.

Write about what you know.
- Write about things only you could describe.
- Write about something you care about.
- Write from personal experience.
Don’t try to accomplish too much.
  • Keep it simple. Keep it clear.
  • Write what you want to say, not what you think colleges want to hear.

Paint a specific picture.
  • Paint it well. Paint it vividly.
  • Don’t paint the whole mural.

Craft a good opening sentence.
  • Jump into the picture you are painting.

Eventually, rewrite... probably several times.
  • Tighten it up. Work toward brevity.
  • Avoid the morning-to-night, birth-to-death, all-inclusive, epic.
  • Check spelling. Check it again. Have someone else check it.
  • Assess your essay’s merits as a piece of good writing.
  • Be careful not to overwork it.
    • Don’t try to be more intellectual than you are.
    • Don’t try to be funny if you’re not.
    • Do be genuine.
  • Make it neat and easy to read.
  • Don’t write about your girlfriend. Don’t write about your boyfriend.

Possible places to start:
  • Rework an essay you’ve written for a class.
  • Ask a teacher or friend to help you focus an application question more specifically on your experience and perspectives.
  • Identify your passion; write with energy to match it; revise from there.

Other hints:
  • Start a journal about life as you see it.
  • Wonder... orate... philosophize... reflect. Step outside and look in.
  • Notice patterns and themes that recur in your life; visit them in your thinking.
  • Look at college applications to see what essay questions are asked. Start thinking how you’d answer them. Assume your first answer isn’t necessarily the best one.
  • Consider events and people in your life as parts of a story only you can tell.
  • Talk with friends, family, teachers to get you beyond obvious answers.
  • Give yourself time to write, leave it, re-write, share it, write it again.
  • Have someone who doesn’t know you (preferably an adult) read what you’ve written... Then, based only on that reading, have them tell you their impressions of who you are, what you care about, what you’re like. Decide if your essay needs any re-wording or re-working.
  • Remember that your “audience” consists of adults, not teenagers.

Identify who you are and what you’re writing.
  • State the essay question at the top of your first page.
  • For identification, be sure your name appears on each page of your essay.