

# **The Application Essay**

A Very Brief Guide on How to Make Your Essay Great!

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## Introduction

There are a few things you should know about how applications get read at most colleges. Typically, two people will read an application—the college admission rep responsible for your geographical region, and one other assigned admission person. In the few weeks between the application deadline and the date when decisions start to get made about next year's entering class, each member of the admission committee will have to read many hundreds, or even thousands, of applications. To get through this mountain of paperwork, they will spend between fifteen and twenty minutes reading your **entire** application. That's not much time to stand out from the crowd.

Who are these admissions people? What are they like? Well, they vary, just like we all do. They are young and old, funny and serious, academic and artistic. There is no predicting what they will want to read, so don't even try. They all agree on one simple thing, however. Their job is to put together the best freshman class they can out of the pool of applicants in front of them. They are looking for a wide range of individuals with a wide variety of strengths. Their job is to put together a diverse community of students who will excel at that particular school. Your best chance of getting into their school is to be who you are, and not try to turn yourself into the person you think they want.

**What do they look for in the personal essay?** Two things: they want it to reveal the person behind the application, and they want to know that you can write and think. Before they read your essay, most of what they know about you consists of lists and numbers: GPA, class rank, test scores, and a list of courses you've taken. The essay is your best chance to show them who **you** are and how you're different from everybody else who's applying.

What, then, does this mean about how to write your personal essay? Here are a few simple guidelines I suggest you follow:

- Make it **personal**. Your essay must be about you. It can speak about the grandfather who raised you, or the Native American girl who taught you to speak Navajo, but the subject of your essay is you. The essay should reveal some of your deepest beliefs or feelings. Consider using an important personal experience that has influenced the person you are.

- Make it **honest**. Good writing is first of all about honesty. Your topic must be important to *you*. If you believe in what you are writing, so will your reader.
- Have a **strong opening**. If you can grab your reader's attention right from the start, he will be on your side, not yawning and thinking about how many more essays he still has to read.
- Start **early**. Start brainstorming topics months before the application deadline. Your first draft may be terrible. That's fine! The important thing is that you started to write. You will want the time to write three, four, five drafts if that's what it takes to make it great.

## What Admission Officers Say

Here are a few things that admission officers themselves have said about the application essay. Read them and take them to heart:

*Be yourself. Use your own voice. "Own" your essay rather than letting someone else tell you what to write....Tell your "story," if you have one.*

Lorne T. Robinson, Dean of Admission and Financial Aid, Macalester College

*Don't be too cautious. It seems to me that we work hard to craft questions that prevent that, but we see students who are too cautious. Be adventurous intellectually—write unconventionally. Applicants have more freedom than they think, and it's in their interest to use that flexibility.*

John Latting, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions, Johns Hopkins University

*Keep it narrow, get readers' attention right away, and stay on task, on point. We like to see things that are personal and simple.*

Jim Miller, Dean of Admission, Brown University

## Getting Started

Start early. The summer before your senior year is best. Many colleges post their applications online in July, and the Common App goes online August 1. Download them and become familiar with the essay prompts. As an example, here is the list of Personal Essay prompts from the 2011 – 2012 Common Application. The applicant is asked to choose one of the five topics, or a topic of your choice.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. 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.
5. 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.
6. Topic of your choice.

The first step is to brainstorm topic ideas. But now that you know these Common App essay prompts, forget them! The best topic for your essay is the one you most want to write about, the topic that's most important to you. If the topic you eventually choose doesn't answer one of the five prompts above, you can always choose "topic of your choice."

The purpose of brainstorming essay topics is to discover what's most important to **you** to write about. I suggest you spend a full week compiling a list of specific ideas which interest you, and that during this process you let your imagination run free. Don't edit these ideas yet—there's plenty of time for that later. These can be worked out topics, or short fragments. They can be related, or totally disconnected from each other. But make sure you write down at least one idea every day for a week.

After you've lived with this list awhile, start crossing off what's less interesting to you, and look at whether there are any connections between the items still left on your list. You will find that a couple of essay ideas are actually beginning to take shape. Continue to fill in the blanks with more details, more specifics. Remember that good writing requires specific details. Generalities are boring, and will put the reader to sleep.

Once you've chosen the topic you most want to write about, and have compiled a list of details to help your idea come alive for the reader, it may help to outline the essay before starting to write it. How does it begin and end? What are the specifics that will give it shape and life? Don't become too obsessed with the outline, however. Some people like starting from an outline, and others prefer to start writing the piece immediately. Whichever works best for you is the right way to proceed.

Finally, it's time to write a rough draft. It's important to keep in mind that a rough draft is exactly that – **rough**! The biggest mistake you can make at this point is to self-edit the rough draft as you're writing it. Don't censor yourself. Don't worry about it being too long, or too foolish. Write what comes to mind, and don't listen to that little voice in your head that says, "This stinks." It's supposed to stink!

I like to tell my students that the worse the rough draft is, the higher their grade. Why? *Because the only purpose of the rough draft is to get written.* If you try to make it too good, you won't finish it. Keep the door to your imagination open—you'll have plenty of time to correct and edit later. Now is the time to let the ideas flow as freely as they can, to be foolish, to make mistakes. You may be surprised at the wonderful places your imagination may take you when it's allowed to be free!

## **Editing the Rough Draft**

The hard part is over. Live with this draft awhile. Put it down for a few days, then re-read it to see what you think. You may really like what you've done, or you may not. You may want to show it to family or friends, or you may want to keep it private. It's up to you. When you're ready to edit this draft, ask these questions:

- Does it answer the question asked in the prompt?
- Does it have enough details and specifics?
- Does it say something significant about me that will distinguish me from every other applicant?
- Does it sound like me?
- Have I taken enough of a chance in making it unconventional and personal?
- If I slipped it under the door of one of my favorite teachers and it didn't have my name on it, would the teacher know it was mine?

It may take one, two, or three more drafts to be able to answer these questions with a yes. But you're not finished until you can.

## The Final Draft

When your last draft has answered the six questions above with a yes, it's time to move on to the final draft. Check the length requirement to make sure your essay is within those limits. For the 2011-2012 Common App, the word count should be between 250 and 500 words. Now that you've loaded your essay with wonderful and personal details, it can be disheartening to find out you have to shorten it. But don't worry—shorter is probably better! Be ruthless. If it's not needed, get rid of it.

Finally, double check—no triple check—to make sure there are no spelling, grammar, or punctuation mistakes. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can get you into big trouble! You want the admissions people to know you are a careful writer and that you take the application seriously enough to make sure it's mistake-free. But while cleansing your essay of errors, be careful **not** to scrub away your own voice and personality.

## One Last Thing

When you think you have completed your final draft, it is time to show it to others—your parents, your teachers, your college counselor, your friends. You may get widely differing opinions. Some suggestions may be helpful, some may not. In the end, it's up to you of course. Change what you think needs improving, and hold onto what you think

does not. These are **your** words, telling **your** story. If you've reached down deep enough, if you've made it personal enough, if you've taken some chances to make it truly original, it will give life to your application and set you apart from the others.

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