

THE APPLICATION ESSAY

The essay, or personal statement, is important, representing a central part of your application. It is your opportunity to bring you—the person behind those academic credentials and extracurricular achievements—to life and demonstrate what you might bring to a college community.

What should I write about?

Yourself! Your essay needs to reveal something meaningful to the colleges about you, your interests, how you relate to others, and/or how you think.

How do I start?

Rather than starting with the specific essay prompts, identify what it is about yourself that you want the colleges to know, then decide how you will demonstrate that point. You can start by asking yourself probing questions about your life that might best answer one or more of the suggested essay topics. The answers to some of these questions will bring to mind a story or anecdote that you can bring to life through vivid details and this, in turn, will show the reader your goals, interests, values, and how you think. Your examples should be current or recent. Don't describe an event from sixth grade; the colleges are not interested in who you were as a child. They want to know who you are now.

Questions to get you thinking could be: what experiences in your life made you uncomfortable and how did you deal with them? Looking back, what experiences stand out the most? Why? Who has had the most influence on you and how and why? Have you ever had an experience that led to an epiphany that changed how you view yourself or the world? What difficulties have you faced and how have you overcome them? When have you been happiest, surprised, or moved? What did you learn?

Concentrate on one or two ideas at most to give the essay depth. It is more effective to elaborate on one key idea, rather than trying to communicate a list of your attributes. If you try to include too many different concepts, you risk diluting your message and creating a superficial impression.

Give specific and current anecdotal examples of the points you are trying to make.

Be sure that you answer the question to which you are responding; keep your essay focused and give the reader a conclusion in a sentence or two which will emphasize an important thought or idea that creates a lasting impression of you.

Work on your essay and then let it sit. This gives you a chance to re-read it with fresh eyes. Once you have developed it to the point where you are satisfied with it (and have proofread it), send it to us for comments. Our feedback will focus on clarification of content and style. Our counselors will provide the type of objective scrutiny that you will receive from admissions committees. We will, however, ensure that your voice remains throughout and that you have the final word. It is your essay!

What you should do in your essay:

Share credit with others, while modestly showing what you do to contribute. Other people, your guidance counselor or teachers, can tell admissions officers how great you are. Your topic does not need to be dramatic, grand, or terribly humorous. It needs to be crisp, clear, and reveal who you are and how you think. If you are writing about how a person has influenced you, do not get lost in describing the person. Be sure to focus more on **how** that person impacted you. Expression matters; proofread your work many times.

Get your reader's attention and get to your point. There is no need to waste words on introductory or summary paragraphs. The college application essay is not a typical five-paragraph essay, so do not describe what you are going to write about and then repeat it at the end. Your job is to grab the reader's attention and hold it. Be careful if writing about potentially controversial issues (politics, humor, religion, race, etc.) as you don't know who will be reading your essay; it's fine to express an opinion but it is also important to communicate tolerance for a diversity of opinions. Most applications will have a word limit, so every word matters.

What you should not do:

While you want your essay to be honest and true, you should never put anyone down or blame anyone for your actions. Limit any negative thoughts or images and be sure to ultimately present an optimistic and positive attitude. Be careful not to exaggerate or compare yourself to others. Avoid superlatives. When talking about your accomplishments, use "we" at least as often as you use "I."

Essay Topics

Historically, the Common Application has offered five essay topics, unveiled in the early spring to allow English teachers to work on application essays with their classes.

Colleges that do not accept the Common Application may differ in the essay options they offer. Regardless of what your topic is, your essay should shed some light on who you are as a person, what you value, or what makes you different. Keep in mind to whom you are writing, remembering they don't know you, and help them more fully understand who you are as an applicant to their college or university.

Additional Information

The Common Application also includes an Additional Information section. This is NOT to be used as an opportunity to add another essay of your choice and doing so can be viewed negatively by admissions readers. It is specifically designed for you to add context as necessary, perhaps disclosing a learning difference, explaining a specific obstacle you and/or your family have faced that has had an impact on your academics, adding detail about an activity that doesn't fit in the Activities section, or adding additional testing credentials that don't fit in the spaces allocated. Other opportunities will open up in the application if you need to discuss a move from one secondary school to another or a disciplinary issue.

Essays in Supplements

Many Common Application colleges also require that you complete a supplementary application. These supplements often include an additional essay, a common topic being “why are you interested in our college?” Some of these essays fall into other categories—describing an academic or intellectual interest, discussing a community you are a member of or extracurricular activity, or exploring character. Don’t give these supplementary essays or other short questions (e.g., “what is your most important activity and why is it meaningful to you?”) short shrift; they are read just as closely as your main personal essay. When answering the question on why you are applying to the college, be sure to cite some specific academic factors.

Here are a few examples of supplemental essay topics taken from actual college applications:

- What matters to you and why? (Stanford)
- What outrages you and why? (Wake Forest)
- Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it. (University of Michigan)
- Blessed Basil Moreau, the founder of the Congregation of Holy Cross, described education as “the art of helping young people to completeness.” How are you incomplete? (University of Notre Dame)
- Rerhceseras say it’s siltl plisbsoe to raed txet wthi olny the frist and lsat ltteres in palce. This is beacuse the hamun mnid can fnid oderr in dorsdier. Give us your best example of finding order in disorder. (For your reader’s sake, please use full sentences with conventional spelling.) (University of Chicago)
- Tell us about Spiders. (University of Richmond)
- What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way? (University of Virginia)

“Optional” Essays

If you are given the opportunity to write an **optional** essay, write it! Don’t waste an opportunity to tell the college more about yourself. Admissions officers want to know how maturely you think and what is most important to you. Every essay is an opportunity to connect with your readers. The more they feel they know you, the better chance you have of being accepted. The essays are where they hear directly from you.