

How to write a college application essay

By Margaret Metzger

Many colleges require a short essay as part of the application process. The directions for the essay vary from college to college. Most colleges offer some variation of the topic. "Tell us more about yourself."

Like most students, you might hate this subject and dread writing the essay. You know that it is a crucial piece of writing and that it must be done, but secretly you hope somehow to avoid the task. Like most tasks, the tension created by procrastinating is worse than the work itself—in this case, just sitting down and writing the essay.

You can use the college essay to strengthen your application. In fact, your essay can be the strongest part, presenting you as a thoughtful, sincere, interesting applicant. You can use the college essay to explain mistakes of the past—failed courses, low SAT® scores, or few extracurricular activities. Best of all, you can demonstrate that you know how to write well, an ability all colleges value.

Find a topic

Colleges genuinely want to know who you are. Although it is difficult to believe, they do not have an "ideal student" in mind. They want a variety of students. They understand that they can't know everything about you by your grade point average and your SAT scores. They want to know what kind of person you are, what aspirations you have, what struggles you have gone through, what is important to you. They ask you to write an essay about yourself because they want more personal information.

Before you write, think about how you may be different from other applicants. What unusual experience would you bring to the college? What interests, activities, travel, struggles, or situations have had a particular impact on you? You are probably thinking, "Nothing is special about me; I'm just an average kid." That's what most students think. Sometimes it helps to ask other people what they think is unique about you.

If you know exactly what you want to write about, you are lucky. Use that topic. Be sure to consider the traditional, but appropriate and effective, topics, such as academic achievements, extracurricular activities, travel and work experiences, and life-changing events.

Also think of more subtle accomplishments. What kind of student are you? In which class did you learn to think,

to study? What do you do with your free time? What have you done for the past two summers? What words would you use to describe your personality? Do you belong to any organizations outside high school? What jobs have you held? What have you learned about organizing your time? Who is your most unusual friend? What magazines, newspapers, columnists, or authors do you like to read? What are some of the failures or disappointments in your life? What kind of plans do you have for the future? Who has been influential in your life? What responsibilities do you have at home? What do you do for other people? What does music (particularly playing or composing) mean to you? How have you changed (besides physically) in the last four years?

Be specific

Remember that the admissions board is reading hundreds of applications, and you must make yours memorable. Some students resort to gimmicks: 8-inch-by-10-inch glossy pictures of themselves hang gliding, or a videotape or a cartoon book about themselves. You may have heard stories about an ordinary student getting into an exclusive college by taking a creative or startling approach. But gimmicks are high risk. Maybe the admissions board doesn't have the time or the equipment to play the videotape of your band. Maybe you will seem egocentric or cute or, more likely, as though you are dodging the difficult task that everyone else has done: writing an essay.

You can make yourself stand out from the crowd and stress your individuality by a less risky method. Your English teachers have been telling you for years to use specifics when you write. Specifics make a piece of writing memorable. This basic principle of good writing applies, as well, to writing the college essay. Be specific. Tell the truth about yourself as specifically as possible. If you claim that you like school, say exactly what you like: "I like biology and got particularly interested in a three-month project I did about algae on the teeth." Always be as specific as possible.

Narrow your topic

You have only one-and-a-half to two pages for this essay. You can't write about everything that has ever happened to you. You need one to three topics for this paper. You must pick a few of the most important aspects of your identity.