

The Why, How, and What to Know about College Essays

Why do colleges ask for essays?

Most colleges ask for one or more essays in their applications to conduct what is called a “holistic review,” meaning they evaluate applicants across a wide range of factors. There is more to you than simply what appears on your transcript and list of activities. Admission teams want to know who you are at a deeper level and the unique perspective that you will bring to their campus communities.

How are college essays used to evaluate your applications?

Each school has its own process for evaluating applications, but if they are asking for one or more essays, those pieces will have at least some influence. College is all about sharing ideas, so admission offices use essays to see how well you can communicate your experiences and insights through writing. While an essay is just one of many factors that shape an admission decision, one that stands out from the crowd can certainly tip the scales in your favor.

What makes a college essay stand out?

Admission teams are looking for experiences, behaviors, and values that will make their campus communities well-rounded. They read *a lot* of essays, and many discuss similar themes. Therefore, essays that capture a unique experience--or deeper, unique thinking about a common experience--tend to stand out. A descriptive writing style that grabs and holds the reader’s attention will also make your essay memorable. Here are some tips to consider as you write your essay(s):

- **Consider a What-Why-How structure.** Successful college essays come in many shapes and forms, but they generally follow a “what-why-how” format: a story or theme that you’ve chosen to write about (what), personal insights and reflections that explain *why* this story/theme is meaningful to you, and a conclusion that demonstrates *how* your experiences and reflections on those experiences have shaped you and how you navigate the world around you.
- **Be mindful of word limits.** Your general Common App essay cannot exceed 650 words, and additional school-specific essays will have varying word limits. [Note: it’s OK if your early drafts are over the limit--we’ll work on trimming them down together.]
- **Focus on your *why*.** You can write about anything--an experience, a personal passion, an aspect of your identity, etc. Whatever the theme, your essay should help the reader learn more about you by explaining ***why*** the topic is meaningful to you.
- **Stay away from clichés.** Many people have similar interests and similar experiences. If you do choose a more common theme to write about (sports, service, etc), you’ll want to emphasize ways in which your personal insights on the topic are unique. The same goes for cliché concepts, such as, “I learned that I need to work hard to get what I want in life.” If you’re unsure, ask your counselor--we’ve read plenty of essays and know which concepts are overplayed.

- **Write with personality.** If colleges wanted a dry research paper, they'd ask for one. Your writing style should reflect your voice and personality. Use bold statements, emphatic punctuation, humor (if appropriate) and other writing techniques that will grab and hold your reader's attention. Ideally, the reader will feel like you are in the room having a conversation. Check out [this short article](#) to see what we mean.
- **Show rather than tell.** "I was scared" is a (boring) statement. "I wiped away beads of cold sweat with trembling fingers as I nervously paced the basement floor" uses an active voice and vivid imagery to *show* the reader what you are experiencing. This will make your reader feel more engaged and eager to keep reading. Check out [this short blog post](#) to see how acclaimed author and podcaster Malcolm Gladwell utilizes storytelling techniques to captivate an audience.
- **Depth > Breadth.** When you're limited on space, it is often better to write with more reflection and detail by focusing on one or two specific experiences rather than trying to explain several examples. If you spread yourself thin with too many anecdotes and themes, your essay may lack the depth and insight that colleges are looking for.
- **Grow through the process.** Yes, writing a college essay can be stressful. But it can also be very rewarding. If you do it right, this process should force you to think more deeply about who you are and what has shaped you. Keep in mind, there is no research required for this essay, and you are the world's leading expert on the essay's core subject: *you*!

Next steps...

Read these [sample college essays](#), and as you read, consider how each writer uses the tips above. Also note the qualities that you learn about each student through their writing--this is ultimately the purpose of the college essay.

Complete these [brainstorming](#) and [freewriting](#) exercises.

1. Make a copy of each document and replace "Copy of" with your last name.
2. Share your document with your college counselor.
3. Record your responses for each prompt.