

A young woman with dark curly hair, wearing a yellow hoodie and light blue headphones, is sitting at a desk in a library. She is looking down at a smartphone in her left hand while holding a pen in her right hand over an open notebook. The background is filled with bookshelves packed with books.

# How to write a college admission essay



## The College Admission Essay is Where You Can Set Yourself Apart From the Crowd.

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Despite the mountain of college admission essay advice available, the vast majority of applicants still make the same mistakes: turning the essay into a resume in literary format, citing irrelevant anecdotes, lacking a coherent theme, having an essay that starts strong and ends weak, and submitting a college admission essay that has errors in grammar, punctuation, and word choice.

For this reason, creating an essay that gets the ‘fundamentals’ right will help you stand head and shoulders above the crowd. Although it can seem counterintuitive after spending so much time trying to show yourself to be a ‘well-rounded individual’, college admissions essays should focus on only one or two of your most significant accomplishments.

Additionally, make sure that the information that you are including is important for the admissions committee to know for a potential applicant, not the information that would be important for someone to know about you if you were making a personal friend. If your essay has a theme, weave that theme throughout the essay. It is better for college admissions essays to be straightforward without literary flourishes than to include them, but poorly.

Finally, do not underestimate the importance of proofreading. These errors are glaring and distract the reader from the message that you are conveying in your college admissions essays.



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# What You Must Accomplish in a Successful Admission Essay

A successful admission essay will demonstrate to the reader that you belong in their program. It's imperative that your admission essay directly connects what you want to achieve to what the program has to offer. The connection should also feel natural. When an admissions officer reads your essay, there should be no doubt that your placement in their program makes sense. Taking the time to really understand the program and your goals are really important if you want to succeed.

Most applicants are applying to more than one program. This means that it is an extra effort to get to know each one. However, this will pay off in the long run. Tailoring your admission essay to the program has far more potential to capture the reader's interest than a generic one. Not to put too fine a point on it, but generic admission essays tend to be very boring to read. Since the essay is trying to appeal broadly, it usually offers little insight into the applicant's ability to contribute to and get the most from any particular program.

However, with the application process becoming increasingly streamlined with centralized application services, how can you ensure your admission essay accomplishes what it needs to do? This article will explain the role of the admission essay and how you can write a successful essay.





# The Role of an Admission Essay

Although admissions essays are commonly referred to as “advertisements” and “brochures”, this view of the admission essay isn’t quite accurate. Your admission essay is actually less of a sales pitch and more of an introduction. However, it is not an introduction to you socially, but an announcement of your intentions and desire to both excel in and contribute to a school’s program. Ideally, your admission essay will pique the interest of the admissions committee to learn more about you and your potential.

Unfortunately, you won’t get to be in the room when admissions committees evaluate your application. Many applicants will have the same or very similar backgrounds, accomplishments, and standardized test scores. For this reason, your admission essay acts as your representative. It is an invaluable opportunity to provide context for your application.

## Your Admissions Essay is an Integral Part of Your Application Package

Test scores and lists of achievements are valuable tools, but only tell so much. And with programs receiving increasing numbers of applications from people who exceed or even greatly exceed their minimum requirements, the admissions essay has become the focus of the selection process. While it can seem overwhelming or even nerve-wracking, taking the time to craft an excellent admissions essay is more important than ever.

Fortunately, the admission essay is the part of the application over which you have the most control. It’s your chance to persuade the admissions committee to see you as you wish to be seen. This is not to say that you should ever misrepresent yourself within the admissions essay or attempt to mislead the admissions officers. These are sophisticated people, and they’ve seen it all.



However, admissions officers are looking to you for guidance as to what you find most meaningful about your experiences and accomplishments to date. Test scores and resumes cannot tell them about your aspirations and vision. Do you want to help rid the world of poverty? Help advance our understanding of motivation in the workplace? What role do you see yourself having? What difference do you see yourself making?

Whether you want the admissions committee to look beyond your achievements or look more deeply at certain accomplishments, the admission essay is the aspect of your application package where you get to demonstrate who you are as an individual and why the school would benefit from having you as part of their program. To show this, you need to demonstrate passion and purpose.

## **Create a Successful Admission Essay by Demonstrating Passion and Purpose**

Regardless of whether you are applying directly to a school or through a centralized service, you can intrigue the reader by showing that you have specific goals and a strong drive to achieve them. Think about what it is that you really want from your educational experience, and don't be shy about making direct requests in your admission essay. This means that most schools will pass on you. However, you couldn't attend every program anyway. Moreover, if the school does not have what you are seeking, you probably would not be satisfied with your education – regardless of the brand name of the school or the excellent quality of the program.

Casting the widest net possible in the hopes that some program – any program – will offer you admission is too much of a gamble for something that will consume such a high level of resources in terms of both your time and finances. If you're not sure what you want from a program, take the time to discover this through reading, speaking with advisors, and even asking in internet forums. Then reflect your newfound focus and sense of direction in your admission essay. Both you and the admissions committee will be thankful you did.



# Tips for Writing a College Essay Introduction that Makes You Stand Out

When you sit down to write your college essay or college personal statement, don't dismiss the introduction. In fact, it's probably the most important part of your essay, because it draws in the reader. Ideally, this should begin right from the attention-grabbing opening sentence.

Many people make the mistake of writing an introductory paragraph that explains what they are going to talk about in the rest of the essay. Such a paragraph might include something such as the following: "My journey toward college has been shaped by a variety of experiences, including academic studies, volunteer work, and extracurricular activities." The reader knows that you are going to talk about these things and is most likely muttering to himself, "Get to the point."

*A general rule to follow is this: Move your most compelling experience to the forefront, and structure your essay around it.*

## Strategies on how to start an essay

Start from structuring your introduction and crafting a meaningful thesis statement. Think about what your readers need to know about you, and in what sequence. Here are some approaches you can take for your college essay introduction:

### **1** Don't Waste Time

You don't need to restate the essay prompt. If you open with something like, "I want to go to college to learn and achieve my goals," this will just waste the reader's time. Don't start your essay with something generic and unnecessary.



## Consider this applicant's introduction:

“

*I can't tell you in which peer group I'd fit best because I'm a social chameleon and am comfortable in most; I will instead describe my own social situation and the various cliques I drift in and out of.*



This applicant writes what starts out as a potentially engaging introduction, but the paragraph immediately loses the reader's interest by telling him what the applicant is going to write about.

## Now consider the applicant's second paragraph:

“

*My high school's student body is from a part of town that is much more diverse than the rest of the city, and the city as a whole is more diverse than most of the state. The location of my school, only a few blocks from the University of Oregon, is greatly responsible for the social atmosphere. Whereas the other high schools in town draw mainly from middle-class white suburban families, mine sits in the division between the poor west university neighborhood and the affluent east university one. East university is hilly and forested with quiet residential streets and peaceful, large houses. A few blocks west, using the university as the divider, the houses become small and seedy. On the west side of my school, there are many dirty apartments; crime is high and social status is low.*



Here, the writer engages the reader by providing a vivid description of the locale of his home and school. He probably felt he needed the introductory paragraph so the reader would not be confused by his second paragraph. However, by adding such a short and bland introduction, he has decreased the effectiveness of his personal statement. It is sometimes unnecessary to establish context right away. Let your story flow, engaging the reader and gradually relating setting and context.



The advice to jump right in also applies to anecdotes. One effective way to grab the reader's attention is to describe the action of your story.

## Consider this applicant's introduction:

“

*Breeze in and breeze out. Clear your mind by zinking of somezing plasant.' For five minutes, all of us found ourselves sitting cross-legged on the floor with a soft, sleepy look on our faces as we subconsciously nodded to the soothing rhythmic voice of our French teacher. Our heads were still half wafting in the delicious swirls of dreamland, barely dwelling in the bittersweet shock of reality. Time whizzed by swiftly, and we were forced to tend to the grueling task of untangling our aching frames, stiffened from prolonged straining positions.*



The above introduction does a much better job of engaging the reader. Dialogue can be a very effective way to win over the reader's attention. This applicant lets the reader know the setting—his French class—even though he never explicitly states the location of the story. He paints a vivid picture in the reader's mind while incorporating the element of mystery, as the reader wonders what further action will occur, as well as what the point of this anecdote will ultimately be.



## 2 Stand Out

If there is something unique about yourself that is also relevant to your essay, then, by all means, start with that! You're up against hundreds, if not thousands, of other applicants, so whatever makes you stand out from the crowd is going to work in your favor.

### This applicant starts with:

*When I was four years old I decided to challenge conventional notions of the human limit by flying through a glass window. The impetus was Superman, whose exploits on television had induced my experiment. Nine stitches and thirteen years later, while I no longer attempt to be stronger than steel or faster than a speeding bullet, I still find myself testing my limits, mental and physical.*

### This applicant takes a similar approach:

*I am an addict. I tell people I could stop anytime, but deep inside, I know I am lying. I need to listen to music, to write music, to play music every day. I can't go a whole day without, at the very least, humming or whistling the tunes that crowd my head. I sing myself hoarse each morning in the shower, and playing the trumpet leaves a red mouthpiece-shaped badge of courage on my lips all day. I suspect that if someone were to look at my blood under a microscope, they would see, between the platelets and t-cells, little black musical notes coursing through my body.*



Both writers have succeeded in grabbing our attention and revealing something unique about their personalities, which they will go on to explain in further detail.



### 3 A Concrete Image

Starting with a concrete image helps the reader to grasp your point more immediately. For example, this applicant begins to describe her favorite places to think:

*While eating Cheerios, my eyes wandered from the yellow giant cardboard box to the white plastered ceiling, with shades of dawn in muted colors, and back to my bowl of cereal.*



This is probably not a particular episode since the applicant frequently uses the kitchen table as a thoughtful refuge. Yet she offers a vivid description with concrete details, and so we can picture her sitting at her kitchen table, letting her mind drift into pensive thought.

### 4 A Concrete Image

There are many ways to engage your reader, but the elements of mystery and surprise are perhaps the most effective. With admissions officers pouring over as many as fifty essays in a day, they begin to scan applicant statements, stopping to read only those that are written extremely well and are out of the ordinary. There is perhaps no better way to get your readers to finish reading your personal statement than to make them guess what you are writing about through the element of mystery.



## Consider this applicant's introduction:

“

*I had a mental image of them standing there, wearing ragged clothes, hot and depressed, looking upon us as intruders in their world. They would sneer at our audacity. We would invade their territory only to take pictures and observe them like tourists.*



Though the applicant provides precise details that help form a concrete picture in the mind of the reader, he makes sure to keep from relating other vital information that will establish context until the second paragraph:

“

*We climbed out of the van and faced eleven men assembled in the shade. My mental image was confirmed. My class, consisting of twelve primarily white, middle-class students, felt out of place. Our Politics of Food curriculum at Governor's School, a summer environmental program, included an interview with migrant workers. We were at a farmworker labor camp in southern New Jersey, but judging from the rural landscape, it may as well have been Iowa. I felt like a trespasser.*

## 5 A Concrete Image

Share a problem you have faced, and then explain how you tackled it. This applicant relates how an issue of international prominence became personalized for him and his family:

“

*I have often wondered whether the United States has an obligation to get involved in the internal conflicts of other countries. When does the power to intervene become an obligation to act? I gained some insight into this dilemma when a small part of the Bosnian war spilled into my home last year.*



You do not need to limit yourself to far-reaching global issues. You could state a general problem common to the lives of most people and then go on to personalize it for yourself, relating how it affects you and what you are doing or will do to address it. There are many possibilities here, but what unites them is the element of drama, and you should use that to your advantage in creating a strong introduction.



# Most Common Mistakes to Avoid



- ✗ Don't make an introduction of your application essay too long or too short. Take a look at our article on how to keep your personal statement the right length.
- ✗ Don't create a list of arguments in your introduction. Try to tell a story of your life instead of simply reproducing the chronology and describing several events.
- ✗ Make sure your introduction is still relevant when the body of your application essay is finished. Sometimes students tend to change the plot while writing. All the moves from your initial idea have to be reflected in the final version of the essay introduction.



# Decoding and Tackling College Essay Prompts: Hacks and Pro-Tips

Write about a dilemma. Tell us how your experiences shaped who you are. Submit a personal statement. Whether general or specific, figuring out what exactly it is that the college wants to read about in your college app essay is the first step. Then comes step two: What am I going to write? Follow the tips below to help you break down different types of college essay prompts and write an essay that is on-topic and outstanding.

## General Essay Prompts

Sometimes a school does not give you a prompt at all, only informing you that you need to submit a personal statement as part of your application package. Sometimes they'll state a word count. Sometimes they won't. If all you have is the fact that you need to write a college entrance essay, aim for a solid, one-page personal statement that demonstrates your readiness for the challenges of their school.

Write about the experiences in your life that have led you to this point. Instead of writing about the events that you think will most impress them, write about what has made the biggest difference for you. This will help your college app essay stand apart from the crowd of applicants with similar backgrounds while giving your personal statement the energy and passion to keep the admissions officers engaged from start to finish.

Also, you need to let them know why their school is your top choice. Avoid writing about things like the school's reputation. The admissions officers already know that their school is great. Make direct connections between the offerings of the school (courses, programs, internships, clubs, etc.) and your goals.



## Particular Life Experiences



If a school asks you to write about a specific life experience, take your essay beyond simply stating the facts of what happened. The school will want to know what the experience meant to you personally. Therefore, tell the admissions officers what you learned and why this experience has made you better prepared to succeed in their program.

What if you've never had an experience like that? First of all, don't lie. Even if the admissions officers basically believe your story, they won't believe that you're being sincere. At the same time, don't start your essay with, 'Well, something like this has never happened to me.' The anecdote that you choose doesn't have to be perfectly squared with the prompt as long as it gets to the underlying life experience that the school is addressing in the prompt.



## Particular Life Experiences

Personally, I find these to be the prompts that are most difficult for applicants. It's challenging to write concretely about something abstract. However, if that's what they ask, then that's what you've got to do. Choose examples or experiences that paint vivid pictures in the reader's mind. Next, you will need to make strong connections between the examples and the skills or perspective that you have gained as a result. As you should with any college entrance essay, have another person take a look at it to see if the essay is expressing your ideas in a way that can connect with others.

## Oddly Specific Prompts

Though uncommon, college essay prompts can be long enough to qualify as a paragraph. Usually, the school will provide a generous word count or page limit to give you enough room to address each aspect of the prompt fully. Instead of feeling overwhelmed by so many topics to address, break up the prompt. Are there aspects that fit naturally together? Others that really need to be their own paragraph? Don't feel the need to organize your college entrance essay exactly as the topics in the prompt are presented. Make sure you touch on each topic, but you can give your personal statement a natural flow that shows your passion and potential to the admissions officers.



# How to Use Sample College Application Essays

There are thousands and thousands of sample college application essays available on the Internet today. These provide a valuable resource for current-year applicants who want to familiarize themselves with this type of writing before starting their own essays. Before you start looking at samples, however, make sure you know how to correctly use them. Misuse of college application essay examples can actually hurt your own admissions writing.

01.

## Never Plagiarize

This is the most important thing to consider when reviewing samples. Samples are there for you to learn about this type of writing and see what others have done when faced with a similar task. They're not there for you to copy or even worse, steal. If you do so, the essay will not only work poorly for you (since unique, personal stories are vital to success) but also increase your chance of outright rejection. If the admissions committee finds that you plagiarized – and they're very good at catching it – your application will be thrown out.

02.

## Always Look at the Prompt

When reviewing sample college application essays, many make the mistake of looking only at the essay itself. Don't forget to look at the prompt, though. A great essay is much more helpful if you can see what the applicant was asked for when they set out to write it. That way, you can see how they tackled the challenge.



**03.**

### **Watch Out for Clichés**

Just because an essay is posted on the Internet, many people will use it to guide their own writing. That can often lead to essays that share something common to the original. When looking at a sample, be sure to keep an eye out for clichés. Recognizing what's overdone will help you avoid that type of material in your own essay.

**04.**

### **Identify Strengths and Weaknesses**

When reviewing sample college application essays, many make the mistake of looking only at the essay itself. Don't forget to look at the prompt, though. A great essay is much more helpful if you can see what the applicant was asked for when they set out to write it. That way, you can see how they tackled the challenge.

**05.**

### **Think About Your Own Situation**

No matter how good a college sample essay seems, remember that you're a unique applicant with your own particular set of circumstances. A piece of writing that worked well for one person will almost certainly not work as well for anyone else. That's why it's so important to write your own, unique, personal college application essay.



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