

# College Essay Writing

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## FUTURE PLANNING



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# Do's and Don'ts of an Effective Application Essay

Your application essay is one of the few things you have total control over as you apply for college. A great application essay will show the reader who you are – it will be personal, detailed, and compelling.

Your goal? Be honest. Be heard. And be different. A great application essay sets you apart from other candidates by exposing parts of your life that the general application can't do. Check out these tips as you begin your essay.

## Do's

1. **Narrow your focus.** Your essay should stay focused on a single topic or thesis statement. The reader should be able to follow your main idea from begging to end. The rest of your application will list your many activities and accomplishments – this is the place to expand on something that makes you unique. If you try to share your whole life story it will end up sounding watered down and unfocused.  
**\*\*\*Pro tip:** Have someone read your introduction. See what they think your essay is about. If they nail it, you've nailed it! Then continue down that focused path throughout your essay.
2. **Keep it personal.** This is called a *personal statement essay* for a reason. Let the reader know something about you the rest of your application can't show. Give the reader a glimpse into the world that built you.
3. **Show don't tell.** Take it all the way back to one of the first writing lessons – SHOW don't TELL. Paint a vivid picture with your words. "I was so mad!" tells the reader how you were feeling.
4. **Prove it.** Be specific. Use details. There is a difference between stating your point and letting it unfold with details from the moment.
5. **Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.**

## Don'ts

1. **Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear:** Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.
2. **Don't Write a Resume:** Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.
3. **Don't Use 50 Words When Five Will Do:** Eliminate unnecessary words.
4. **Don't Forget to Proofread:** Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can miss spelling errors or suggest corrections that are not grammatically correct.

## **Hello College-bound Hopeful!**

Thank you for letting us be a part of your college application journey. This document is meant to act as a guide as you write a great first draft to go along with your college/scholarship application. There is more than one way to write a strong essay, but we like this way as it's effective and easy to approach for a variety of prompts. Keep in mind the following about your essay:

**The essay needs to be compelling.** There are many students applying to college, and you want to stand out.

**The essay needs to be focused.** You have a limited number of words (between 250-650 for Common App prompts) to tell your story.

**The essay needs to be well-written.** A well-written essay can give the impression that you will be a good student.

### **There are four sections of our workshop today:**

1. The Student Interview
2. Start with a Story
3. Put a bow on it!
4. Why are YOU the Greatest?

## The Great College Essay Project Workshop Stage

After completing the student interview, please check in with a teacher for feedback and guidance on the next section. Please have the teacher initial that you had a conference before you move on. **If at any point you have a question or need help, don't be afraid to ask.**

Workshop Stage	Date Completed
Student Interview	
Start with A Story	
Put a Bow on it	
Why are YOU the Greatest?	

## Common Application Overview

The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from activities, courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)

### Common Application Prompts:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma – anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could take to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

### Other College Application Questions:

1. Why do you want to attend this university?
2. Tell us about the most significant person, experience, or circumstance which has shaped your life so far.
3. Describe the world you come from – for example, your family, community, or school – and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.
4. Some students enter college having already chosen a course of study; others have not yet narrowed their fields of interest. If you have decided on an area of study, what led you to this decision? If you have not yet determined your academic path, what steps do you plan to take in making that decision?
5. From a financial standpoint, what impact would this scholarship have on your education?
6. State any special personal or family circumstances affecting your need for financial assistance.

# STUDENT INTERVIEW

<b>Name:</b>		
<b>Nicknames:</b>		
	How did you get the nickname?	
<b>What school did you attend?</b>		
	What is your favorite thing about school? Why?	
	What is your least favorite thing about school? Why?	
	Do you participate in any extracurricular activities?	
<b>What is your family like?</b>		
	Does your family have any interesting traditions?	

<b>What is your favorite...</b>		
	Color?	
	Ice Cream Flavor?	
	Pizza Topping?	
	Song?	
	Book?	
	Place you have visited?	
<b>Who is someone who means a lot to you?</b>		
	Why is this someone important?	
	Share one experience you've shared with this person that was meaningful.	
<b>Without looking, what is the last thing you posted about on social media?</b>		
<b>Is there anything you feel like you're REALLY good at? What is it?</b>		
<b>Is there anything you'd like to get better at?</b>		

<b>What college do you want to attend?</b>		
	Why do you want to go to this college?	
	What do you want to study at college?	
	What career are you interested in pursuing? Why?	
<b>List 10 adjectives about yourself.</b>		
	Joy?	
	Fear?	
	Sadness?	
	Different?	
	Disappointed?	
	Proud?	
<b>Are you applying for any scholarships? If yes, which ones?</b>		



# START WITH A STORY

People love a good story! A story is a great way to engage and connect with the reader from the start. Admissions counselors read hundreds of essays. You must grab their attention right away. You want to:

- Tell the story of ONE interesting and important moment.
- Write in ways that gets the reader to picture what was happening, using descriptions, dialogue, action and thinking.

**Use the space below to outline the major details of your story:**

**Exposition:**

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**Rising Action:**

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**Falling Action:**

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**Conclusion:**

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**\*\*\*\*\* Time to take your details and write your story! \*\*\*\*\***

## PUT A BOW ON IT

Now, let's "put a bow on it" and tie your story to the prompt. Your story alone does not meet the requirements of the essay. You must show how the story fits the prompt you selected.

You want to:

- Use direct language to tell your reader how the story fits the prompt. Don't dance around it.
- Use transitions to help flow from one part of your writing to the other.
  - "This is why..."
  - "I share this because..."
- Answer the prompt with one or more reasons. Your story may seem completely irrelevant to the prompt. It is your job to show the admissions reader how it ties back to what they have asked you to write about.

# WHY ARE YOU THE GREATEST?

Muhammad Ali once said “I am the greatest! I said that before I knew I was.” Each of us can say the same about ourselves in some way. What are you the greatest at? Conclude your essay by tying your story together with why YOU are the greatest. The last words of the essay are just as powerful as the first and should leave the admissions team feeling like you deserve a spot.

***This is your final chance to say why you’re the greatest.***

You can:

- Tell about the wonderful things you plan to work toward in college and how you plan to use your studies after. *\*Be careful not to sound overindulgent – the future is unknown to all of us.*
- Without saying, “you should select me because...”, tell them why they should select you. Your “I am the greatest” statement should tell the admissions reader exactly why you will stand apart in excellence at their college or university.
- Take out words like “often” or “sometimes” or “if you choose me.” Use direct, confident language that shows you have total belief in yourself just as the admissions reader should. Muhammed Ali didn’t say he *could be* the greatest, he just said he was the greatest. Say what you do well without hesitation or coyness. *Just be the greatest!*

For example:

If you told a story about persisting through a difficult time you might conclude with, “*I persist when I have a goal in mind. This is a part of my character that will guide me though my studies at (your school of choice). I’ll live as an ambassador of (your school of choice) as I use my skills in (field of study) to (what are your plans with your degree? How will you change the world?).*”