

Suggestions on How to Write College Application Essays

1. As the ancient Greeks commanded, “Know thyself.” Before you write anything, go through an intensive process of brainstorming and note-taking¹ about the things you may want to write about.

College essay prompts demand a familiarity with your significant life experiences, your interests and values, and your goals in life. It can be difficult to think of responses to specific prompts in the absence of a comprehensive review of these things, so force yourself to meditate on a few questions. By doing so, you will arrive at a greater understanding of yourself that will make the process much easier and more productive, and you will develop a rich palette of your life experiences to draw on in responding to specific prompts. Look at the process of writing these essays as an opportunity to consolidate your knowledge of yourself and your life.

In general, you should think about who or what has influenced you and the “defining experiences” that have made you who you are. Here are some different approaches to this process that may help you focus your thinking:

- **Think chronologically:** the experiences of your childhood in general, your middle school years, each school year and summer of your high school years.
- **Think in terms of different life contexts:** your family experiences, your academic experiences, your social experiences with friends, your extra-curricular school experiences, your travel experiences, your summer experiences, your community service/volunteer experiences.
- **Think about the activities you enjoy doing:** those you do for fun, those that stimulate your curiosity, those that you consider most meaningful and worthwhile.
- **Think about what’s important to you in a more general sense:** family, relationships, an exciting and successful career, helping others, science and/or the arts, exploring your intellectual interests, developing your abilities and character, exploring new experiences.
- **Think about your philosophy of life.** How do you approach life? What lessons have you learned about how to live your life? What values or principles do you think people should live by?
- **Think about your future.** What kind of life do you envision living? What are your dreams in terms of career and family? What specific goals do you have for yourself in both the short term and the long term?
- **Think about your tastes:** your heroes and people you dislike, the things that inspire and disturb you, your preferences in entertainment and the arts—what is the basis of your likes and dislikes?

One thing you will want to give specific thought to is your reasons for choosing your anticipated major.

2. Make the process of writing application essays as efficient as possible by surveying all of the essay prompts before you start writing.

There will be opportunities to use the same essay, or slightly different versions of the same essay, on multiple applications. Of course you don’t want to submit an essay that doesn’t fit a particular prompt, but the nature of college application essays in general is such that you can often use the same basic material for several different prompts. If you plan ahead and give yourself the best opportunity to reuse material you’ve worked hard on, you’ll save yourself a lot of time and stress, and you can focus on developing the quality of each essay instead of being overwhelmed by quantity.

3. Avoid giving overlapping answers on the same application.

You’ll give yourself the best chance of impressing the admissions officers if you show them as many different facets of your abilities, interests, and experiences as you can, so try to express these different aspects of yourself when an application involves multiple essay or short-answer prompts. You might, for example, demonstrate your passion for *learning* in one response, your passion for *people* in another, and your passion for *life* in another. *Remember, however, that being well rounded should not come at the expense of serious dedication to things that you’re truly passionate about.* It’s better

¹ Having it all “up there” in your head isn’t good enough. Get these thoughts down in concrete form, preferably in word-processor form, so you can remember them, add to them, and revise them.

to be the president of one organization than to be a “serial joiner” of many organizations without ever taking a leadership role that shows your commitment and sincere interest.

4. Don't worry about length at first.

The most important thing to do in writing these essays is to unleash your creativity and inspiration. If you're too concerned with limiting yourself to a particular length, you will stifle that creative power. Explore whatever ideas you have freely; say everything significant you can think of to say about a given topic. After you've exhausted your ideas, you can weed out the ideas and passages that are less promising and refine the material that has more potential. It's much better to have to condense an essay with a lot of substance than to be stuck with an essay whose power is weakened by wordiness and redundancy. You'll probably be amazed by how much “fat” there is in your writing when you're forced to edit it down to the real meat.

5. Always keep your ultimate goal in mind: to show the schools you're applying to that it would be in their best interest to accept you.

In the course of writing, sometimes it's easy to get caught up in your subject and lose sight of its purpose. Avoid spending time and creative energy on things that are not relevant in some way, obvious or subtle, to your goal of convincing the admissions officers that they should want to have you at their school.

6. Be specific: Give concrete details to go with general or abstract points.

As in any piece of writing, your general points won't be truly effective or carry much weight without specific details and examples to back them up. This is especially true when you want to come across as a sincere person to college admissions officers who read hundreds of application essays. It's easy for any student to fabricate some superficially impressive statements about how passionate he is about learning, or about how much a particular experience affected her, but those things sound like trite, generic, unconvincing platitudes without the support of true-to-life *details*. Another reason for the importance of being specific is that it's usually easier to discuss the abstract and general things you want to get across about yourself if you use a specific experience as the basis of your response. Trying to build on a foundation of abstractions and generalities tends to be much more difficult. *If you can, include specific information about the particular school you're applying to somewhere in your essay(s). Show them that you really want to be there, not just at any decent school, by showing off your knowledge of that school's programs, activities, community, departments, etc.*

7. Try not to overuse “I” in your answers.

If every sentence you write starts with “I,” you'll probably come off as being too self-centered. Although the goal of your essays is to tell them about yourself, sometimes that can be accomplished most gracefully by writing about a person who inspired you, by detailing your observations of other people, by discussing a subject that's important to you, etc. With that approach, you can show them that you're sensitive and curious, not egocentric, as you convey a sense of your personality and values. *Make sure, however, that the primary effect of your essay is to convey who you are; talking about someone or something else is merely a starting point or medium for reflection on yourself.*

8. Distinguish yourself.

As you go through the process of reviewing your life experiences, values, and goals, try to identify the qualities and abilities that make you unique. There will probably be a lot of other applicants with similar grades, similar backgrounds, and similar test scores, so it's critical to find things to say that will set you apart from that crowd and grab the attention and interest of the admissions officers.