

Not all colleges require an admissions essay, but for those that do, your college admissions essay is one of the most important parts of your college application. When an admissions counselor reads your essay, you become more than a compilation of test scores and transcripts. You become a unique individual with skills and talents to contribute to a college campus.

This publication provides guidelines for composing your college admissions essay, including tips for getting started, following directions, engaging the reader, and avoiding pitfalls.

Types of Admissions Essays

There are two types of admissions essays. The first type is a personal statement. This essay is general in nature and gives you the opportunity to tell an admissions counselor more about yourself or about events and people that have influenced you.

The second type of admissions essay requires you to answer a specific question with a more structured response. These questions cover a wide range of topics and can be creative, analytical, or philosophical.

Personal Statement:

Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence

- University of the Pacific

What are your expectations of a college education? In what ways do you hope to grow or change?

- Mills College

Structured Question:

Speaking about education, Dr. Martin Luther King once said, "The function of education is to teach one to think intensively and to think critically. Intelligence plus character—that is the goal of true education."

Dr. King suggests that critical thinking results in our ability to inform intelligence with character, and strengthen character with intelligence. Please talk about a situation that demanded critical thinking from you, and how your choices or decisions integrated intelligence and character.

– Loyola Marymount University

Getting Started

If you are applying to more than one school, you might have to write several essays. The first step is determining how many essays you need and making a schedule based on your writing speed and skill. For example, you might allow yourself one week per essay, so plan on three weeks for three essays.

Begin the writing process by brainstorming. Ask yourself what interests and excites you about the topic. Write down anything that occurs to you, knowing you can always eliminate it later. When you brainstorm, ideas build upon each other. Something that may seem boring at first glance can become very interesting as you write about it completely.

Don't be afraid of less traditional topics such as failure or frustration. Sometimes writing about situations when you have overcome obstacles reveals your true character and values. These topics can also reveal valuable qualities such as maturity and self-awareness.

(A note of caution: be sure to be generally positive in order to avoid sounding as if you are complaining or appealing for sympathy.)

If you are stuck, consider reading some sample essays available in books and on the Internet. Other essays can provide inspiration or give you a jumpstart on your topic. Remember that essay readers are trained to spot plagiarism, so don't try to imitate another essay. Use the samples only as a tool to help you find your own words.

Following Directions

Your essay provides an abundance of information to an admissions counselor, including how well you can follow directions. If the application asks for one page, then attach *only* one page. If the application provides a space in which to write your essay, fill the whole space. If the application doesn't give specific requirements, aim for 1-2 double-spaced, typed pages. Make sure you use an easy-to-read font and type size, such as black 12-point Times Roman.

Finally, don't be tempted to write one general essay and send it with all your applications. If a college asks a specific question, be sure to answer THAT question.

Keeping the Reader Engaged

Think creatively. Because your essay is one of hundreds to be read by admissions counselors, it needs to make an impression. Focus on what you are excited and passionate about. The best strategy is to reveal your genuine self, and it will make the writing process more fun. Your goal is to get the reader to remember you favorably. Be honest and sincere, and let your individual voice and personality separate you from the crowd.

Try to grab the reader's attention with a great opening sentence. Be bold and colorful. If it succeeds, the reader will be encouraged to continue. Don't feel pressure, however, to have a brilliant opening line before you begin to compose the body of your essay. Often it's best to do a draft of the entire essay and then return to the opening sentence. It might be easier to write an attention-grabbing first line when the following paragraphs are already on the page.

Show, don't tell. Try to capture people, places, events, and feelings in words so a reader can visualize and respond to them. Illustrate your points with examples and specific descriptive details. For instance, don't just say that you're a leader. Show your leadership with life experiences and stories instead.

To keep the reader engaged, use present tense, active verbs, and other descriptive language; give interesting details and facts; and if possible, use all the senses in your descriptions. How did something look? How did it sound? How did it feel, smell, taste? Remember you are not writing an assignment for a grade; you are writing an essay for a reader to appreciate. Admissions officers want to read what you want to write, not what you think they want to read.

Avoiding Pitfalls

Do not use your essay to summarize activities and achievements you've already listed on the application. Although you may decide to write your essay on a personal experience or achievement, avoid writing an essay that merely summarizes information presented elsewhere in your application.

Be original, but not gimmicky. For example, do not write your essay in an unusual, "clever" format just to be different. Leave out language a reader might not understand, such as jargon and technical terms.

Stick with the truth. This may seem obvious, but it can be tempting to stretch the truth when you are trying to impress someone. Remember that the purpose of the admissions essay is to let a reader know what sort of person you really are.

Do not hire a professional writing coach or get excessive help from your parents. Admissions counselors are trained to spot plagiarism and writing that does not sound like the applicant.

Stick to vocabulary that is familiar to you. If you rely too heavily on a thesaurus in search of bigger and better-sounding words, you risk sounding pretentious as well as unintentionally misusing words.

Write several drafts. Polish and proofread for positive results. Read your writing repeatedly for errors in spelling and grammar. Reading the essay aloud is helpful. Ask a few good proofreaders to check your writing for mistakes, since it's easy to miss errors in your own writing. Also ask them to point out any passages that are vague or unclear. Do not underestimate the importance of grammatical correctness. Represent your ideas in the best light by checking your essay thoroughly for correct usage, spelling, and punctuation.

Sample Essay Question:

What do you consider to be one of the most urgent social or political issues of our time? What do you believe we should do in response to this?

– University of La Verne