

The College Essay

Adapted from collegeadmissionguidance.com

The college essay is an opportunity to show your character. When brainstorming, it is crucial to keep in mind that your essay should tell the reader something *new* about yourself which you have not had the opportunity to discuss in the other sections.

We should start by considering the structure of the application essay. As the only two restrictions to your writing are a brief prompt and a word limit, you may be delighted to have the space for creativity. For many applicants, however, this freedom can be equally daunting because there is no rubric to serve as a guide. We can offer a couple of structural suggestions for any essay:

- **Give the paragraphs variable lengths.** This can make the essay seem more conversational and informal, and thereby easier to read. For example, some paragraphs can be 1-2 sentence-long comedic interjections in between longer paragraphs that more directly address the prompt.
- **A thesis-first structure is probably still your best bet.** Although you should abandon some of the formality of academic writing you were taught in school, briefly summarizing the message of your essay in the

end of your introduction is always a good idea. Doing this can make sure that the reader understands what you are going to talk about, and they will keep your topic in mind while reading the rest of the essay.

A pitfall we sometimes see in the essays we edit is that they can lack the introspection that admissions officers expect to see. Below we've listed some common topics that can lead an essay astray. Keep in mind that all of these topics are still okay to write about, but make sure that you avoid these traps:

Topic	Frequent issue	Consequence	Possible solution
Traumatic event (e.g. loss of a loved one, parents' divorce, etc).	Emphasizes the negative impact of the event and leaves out personal growth.	Can come across as a "sob story" meant to evoke empathy and nothing more.	Start talking about yourself early on in the essay. Make a mental list of 2-3 specific traits that you gained from this trauma and state them clearly in the introduction, with some sentence that relates the challenge you faced with the long-term positive impact it had on you. Try organizing your body paragraphs by trait rather than chronologically; this way the essay is about you.
Another person who means a lot to you.	Centers on praising and showing gratitude for the other person.	The reader doesn't find out enough about who you are (the whole point of the essay).	Although you can start off the essay with a brief tribute to this person, your "thesis" should be about how <u>your life</u> and <u>your actions</u> are different because of them. Every time you mention them, ask yourself whether you are making it clear how this is pertinent to your growth, your ambitions and interests, or your outlook on life.

A great essay communicates your character clearly and truthfully in an entertaining and well written way.

Explaining The College Essay Through A 'Famous' Example Essay

This is a perfect example of a 'great' essay according to admissions officers (which is what matters). It is easy for me to explain the college essay by using this essay as an example.

[This essay got a high-school senior into 5 Ivy League schools and Stanford](#)

She starts the essay mid action and recounts a semi-entertaining story of her running through Costco as a child. She uses a diverse vocabulary and sprinkles in some safe humor.

She gives examples of her intellectual curiosity throughout the essay and gives insight into her thought process. She does so in a way that doesn't feel incredibly forced.

“Purchasing the yuletide hickory smoked ham inevitably led to a conversation between my father and me about Andrew Jackson’s controversiality. There was no questioning Old Hickory’s dedication; he was steadfast in his beliefs and pursuits – qualities I am compelled to admire, yet his morals were crooked. We both found the ham to be more likeable—and tender.”

This is her way of demonstrating her kindness/good morals, steadfastness, and intellectual curiosity with just one passage. She sprinkles in some of her other ‘desirable qualities’ but keeps the focus on what she believes to be her most desirable quality- her intellectual curiosity.

She strengthens her argument for intellectual curiosity even further by citing real examples.

“Whether it be through attempting aerial yoga, learning how to chart blackbody radiation using astronomical software, or dancing in front of hundreds of people, I am compelled to try any activity that interests me in the slightest.”

She even sprinkles in some of her academic knowledge.

“I was a conquistador, but rather than searching the land for El Dorado, I scoured aisles for free samples.”

Finally she closes with a reminder of who she is and what she wants admissions officers to take away from her essay.

“My intense desire to know, to explore beyond the bounds of rational thought; this is what defines me. Costco fuels my insatiability and cultivates curiosity within me at a cellular level. Encoded to immerse myself in the unknown, I find it difficult to complacently accept the “what”; I want to hunt for the “whys” and dissect the “hows”. In essence, I subsist on discovery.”

This is her eloquent and lighthearted way of saying I AM
INTELLECTUALLY CURIOUS.

Here are some of the things she does that makes her essay a good essay. You will see that this matches up to the list in “College Essay Summary”:

- The essay is well written and semi entertaining. She showcases her desirable character traits in a way that is lighthearted and doesn't feel too forced.
- She makes it clear she has intellectual curiosity and cites countless examples including REAL LIFE examples.
- She writes in a unique voice and shows her thought process.
- She demonstrates some academic knowledge.

Explaining The College Essay Through Jack's Essay

Jack, one of the team members at WriteKey, has shared his own college essay because this is an example of an essay that we think is not “great” or riveting (he overdoes it with the metaphors), but still shows his personality and desirable traits in a substantial way. That is, it accomplishes what the essay needs to accomplish without sounding too unlikeable, narcissistic, or pretentious.

[Jack's Essay](#)

Jack comments, “It’s not entertaining or memorable. I didn’t talk about a life changing event. I talked about a hill near my house and used the hill metaphorically to show what I believe to be my most compelling trait- a desire to succeed and propel others along with me. I took the easy route by keeping my essay metaphorical. This way I could simply speak my thoughts and show my desirable trait without it seeming too out of place.”

It is hard to show multiple facets of your character through the essay; focusing on simply one—like intellectual curiosity in the girl’s case—is often much easier and the rest of your character can

often be shown in the way you write and think or through more subtle references.

Our advice is to pinpoint your strongest and most compelling trait and use your essay to highlight that trait. The rest of your application should then support that.

WriteKey's "red flags"

If you're wondering what WriteKey editors look for when reviewing student essays, here are a few of the "red flags" that we notice in many essays and try to correct. See if you can spot any of these in your own:

- Vagueness: Watch for areas where you do not elaborate on your ideas.
- Word choice: Sometimes students use a word incorrectly, or have a sentence that could be rephrased in a more sophisticated way by changing the vocabulary.
- Redundancy: We always make note of instances where a student is redundant, meaning he or she unnecessarily repeats information in a way that distracts from the essay's main message.
- Passive voice: We encourage students to use active voice instead of passive voice because it adds agency to the key characters in your writing and sometimes provides important information about them (e.g. saying that your brother broke the vase rather than simply that the vase was broken assigns responsibility to your brother and establishes a relevant background for him as a clumsy individual).
- Content relevance: We try to make sure our students are addressing the prompts of their essays. We ask each student to provide us with the prompt so that we can assess how well they are answering it. This is a crucial component of the advising process. Specific areas in the essay where editors look are the thesis statement and the conclusion, as

these often provide a good idea of how on-topic the student is.

Sometimes, a student will answer some but not all of the prompt, or overemphasize one part while not elaborating enough on other parts.

- Subtlety: Many times, students tell instead of showing. Detail makes a world of difference, and our editors point to specific areas in students' essays where a more descriptive narrative can be used.
- Transitions between ideas: We look for areas where students fail to transition between ideas smoothly. Sometimes, a student attempts to include very disparate thoughts in the same text. Editors judge whether the student should narrow their focus, or strategically organize paragraphs so as to logically move from one idea to the next.
- Cliches: Students tend to use cliches in college application essays a lot, because they are discussing profound events and lessons from life. However, in keeping with the conventions of sophisticated writing, we want to try to avoid overused phrases as much as possible. They often make the writing sound less original, and replacing (or sometimes deleting) the phrase usually does not take away from the meaning of the essay and helps it stand out more.

College Essay Summary

- Showcase your personality, thought process, and desirable trait(s). Keeping it light hearted can make you seem more likeable, but it depends on the subject matter.
- Write eloquently and naturally. Don't force big words or vocabulary.
- Use REAL LIFE examples of things that you have done that support your traits or character.
- Provide more insight into you; don't just repeat surface level information from the rest of your application.
- Think about how your essay fits in with the rest of your application. Other parts of your application should support the desirable traits you are portraying and align with your presented character.

- Find a way to showcase your personality and desirable trait(s) seamlessly whether it be by including an internal monologue, writing metaphorically, or any other means.

Figuring out your desirable traits and qualities and constructing a fluid essay that incorporates these elements is the hard part. If you can accomplish this, if your essay is true to you, and if your essay makes you seem at least somewhat likeable, then you have a great college essay.

This Year's Common App Essay Prompts

[2017-2018 Common Application Essay 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. [No change]
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? [Revised]
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome? [Revised]

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 be taken to identify a solution. [No change]
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. [Revised]
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? [New]
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. [New]

Supplementary Essays

It's important to remember that your essays should always give more insight into you or something you have done. If you write about an event already in your application there should be more details, descriptions, etc.

You have to try and find a balance between cohesive and repetitive. You want there to be a unifying theme—usually your

desirable traits—and it is necessary to reinforce the theme, but be careful not to be too repetitive.