

### 3 Ways to Approach Common College Essay Questions

#### 1. The “Describe yourself” question

With this type of question, the college is looking to get to know you better and to see how you present yourself. Here’s the most common example: “Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application.”

##### *How to answer it*

This type of question can be intimidating because it’s so open-ended. The key is to look at it as a chance to show who you are and what’s important to you. Try to keep your answer focused and avoid the urge to spill everything. Instead, discuss one or two subjects that reveal your best qualities.

#### 2. The “Explain why you want to attend our college” question

With this type of question, admission officers want to find out about your goals. They also want to know how serious you are about attending their school. Questions in this category include:

“Why is this college a good choice for you?”

“Tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study.”

##### *How to answer it*

The focus here is why you chose a certain college or path. It’s a pretty straightforward question, but be sure you know your subject well. For example, if you say you want to attend this college because of a specific academic department, make sure you’re clear on what that department offers.

#### 3. The “Discuss an issue” question

Admission officers look at both how intelligent and how creative your answer to this type question is. They want to see your ability to think outside the box. Here’s an example from Denison University: “Do you believe there’s a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others.”

##### *How to answer it*

Here you are asked to write about your views on a topic. Even though this is a creative piece, make sure to back up all your points with facts and intelligent explanations. And don’t take the creativity too far. Inventiveness is good, but wacky may not be the best choice.

When you apply to college, you’ll need to complete an essay as part of your application. This is your opportunity to show admission officers who you are and to provide information about yourself that didn’t fit in other areas of your application. The essay also reveals what you can do when you have time to think and work on a writing project.

The number one piece of advice from admission officers about your essay is “Be yourself.” The number two suggestion is “Start early.” Check out these other tips before you begin.

### Choose a Topic That Will Highlight You

**Don't** focus on the great aspects of a particular college, the amount of dedication it takes to be a doctor or the number of extracurricular activities you took part in during high school.

**Do** share your personal story and thoughts, take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren't covered in other parts of the application, like your high school records.

Top two tips: Be yourself and start early

### Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

**Don't** try to cover too many topics. This will make the essay sound like a résumé that doesn't provide any details about you.

**Do** focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are. Remember that the readers must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask a parent or teacher to read just your introduction and tell you what he or she thinks your essay is about.

### Show, Don't Tell

**Don't** simply state a fact to get an idea across, such as "I like to surround myself with people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."

**Do** include specific details, examples, reasons and so on to develop your ideas. For the example above, describe a situation when you were surrounded by various types of people. What were you doing? Whom did you talk with? What did you take away from the experience?

### Use Your Own Voice

**Don't** rely on phrases or ideas that people have used many times before. These could include statements like, "There is so much suffering in the world that I feel I have to help people." Avoid overly formal or business-like language, and don't use unnecessary words.

**Do** write in your own voice. For the above example, you could write about a real experience that you had and how it made you feel you had to take action. And note that admission officers will be able to tell if your essay was edited by an adult.

### Ask a Teacher or Parent to Proofread

**Don't** turn your essay in without proofreading it, and don't rely only on your computer's spell check to catch mistakes. A spell-check program will miss typos like these:

- "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to get a summer job."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

**Do** ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes. You should also ask the person who proofreads your essay if the writing sounds like you.

# Tips to Make Your College Essay Stand Out from the Rest

1. **INTRODUCE YOURSELF.** Writing your college essay is like being stuck in an elevator with the admissions officer of your top school. You have 20 floors (or 650 words) to make a good impression. Choose your words wisely. Take time to decide what it is that you want her to know about you. What do you have to say? This is a wonderful opportunity to share your voice. If you're funny, be funny. If not, don't start now. If you're serious and sensitive, by all means, share a story that reveals that special side of you. Dig deep and listen to who you are, because that's who the admissions officer truly wants to get to know.
2. **BE POSITIVE.** As a senior in high school, you have, no doubt, accumulated a few gripes. Your coach doesn't give you enough playing time in the game, your English teacher doesn't understand your deep, philosophical perspective, and your history teacher is just so incredibly boring. The college essay is not the place to share what you didn't like about high school and what you aren't looking for in a college. Leave the complaints for the dinner table. Don't misunderstand, the essay can be about a serious and even difficult challenge you have faced or overcome, but emphasize the positives. It's not about what knocked you down, but what lifted you up that's important.
3. **DON'T WRITE TO THE WORD COUNT.** When writing a draft of your college application essay, DON'T write to the word count. Write your draft. Get your story on the paper first. Then slice/dice/add as needed. Often the true start to your story is hidden somewhere in your fifth paragraph. TeenLife.com
4. **TELL A STORY.** Engage your reader from the first word of your essay. Use your senses to convey and describe your moment. What did it feel like? Look like? Smell like? Close your eyes and really think about it. Then, bring the admissions officer into your story.
5. **BEGIN WITH THE GOOD STUFF.** Transformative narratives are perfect for an English essay on "Macbeth," but less so for your college essay. Don't save the big reveal for the end of your essay. If the admissions officer gets a phone call after reading only the first paragraph of your essay, you don't want her last impression to be of your pre-transformation self. So, either start with the good stuff and work backwards or save the transformative pieces for English class.
6. **LEAVE THE CLICHÉS OFF THE PAGE.** Use authentic emotions to captivate your reader. Anyone can say "my heart pounded," "all for one and one for all," or "as luck would have it," but only you can say the moment felt like an itchy sweater on a 90-degree day in Boston in August.
7. **BE YOURSELF.** One of the biggest mistakes students make is writing what they think others want to hear, rather than about an issue, event, or person they care about. An essay like that is not just boring to write. It's boring to read. What interests you? What do you love to talk about? Write about that. Think of your essay as a creative way to help college officials get to know you as a person.
8. **PUT YOUR BEST FOOT FORWARD.** Applying online may feel like you're sending email, but you're not. Incorrect capitalization or abbreviations like B4 or "thanx" are not appropriate for a formal document. Make sure your essay represents the best of you.
9. **GET A SECOND OPINION.** When you've rewritten the essay to your satisfaction, find someone who can give you advice on how to make it even better. Choose a person you respect and who knows something about writing. Ask them to tell you what they like best about your essay, and what you can do to improve it. Also, criticism can be tough to hear, but try to listen with an open mind. You don't have to make every change suggested. After all, it's your essay and no one else's. But you should seriously consider each suggestion.

10. **PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD, PROOFREAD.** Little errors creep in throughout the writing and editing process. Before you submit your essay, make sure to proofread. Try reading your essay aloud or having someone else read it to you. Another strategy is to read the essay backward, from the last sentence to the first. Errors your eye may have previously skipped over will jump out at you.
11. **DON'T EXPECT TOO MUCH FROM AN ESSAY.** The application essay is important. But admission officers look at the whole package — your academics, extracurricular activities, standardized tests, and other factors. Make your essay as well-written as you can, but don't put so much pressure on yourself that the rest of the application fades in importance.

So grab a chair, consider the tips, reread the essay question, and start writing. Don't edit, don't censor, and don't hesitate. Share your story. When you're done, think about revisions. But for now, just write.

## **Find Your Voice, Your Vision, and Your Passion to Write Your College Essay**

Remember small moments in your life can make big statements. Anything from the moment you drove your first beat-up car out of the driveway to the moment you realized you could rig your book to read in the shower. Here are some tips to help you find the perfect story that embraces your voice, your vision, and your passion - and write your college essay.

**Review the Question.** Take a moment and read the essay question. Think about it, put it away, and let the ideas flow.

**Create an Idea Bank.** You've read the question, now list all of the ideas that come to mind. Little. Big. Funny. Weird. Esoteric. Philosophical. Don't censor and don't edit. Just list. This is not a desk job. List your ideas while you're on the train to your summer job, on the bus to sports, or eating your breakfast. Keep your list on your computer, tablet, phone, or notebook. Whatever mode works best for you, just write ideas down.

**Stroll Down Memory Lane.** No one remembers every detail of your life like your parents, grand- parents and caregivers. Their memories and perspectives are a wonderful place to begin. They may trigger your own memory or help you make connections between your present and past. TeenLife.com Reconnect and relive all those wonderful and sometimes embarrassing childhood stories. Ask your parents, grandparents, caregiver, best friend, and sibling about your best and worst moments growing up; about your favorite toy, book, game or hobby; about your special place to think, sit or sulk; and the qualities they'd want an admissions officer to know about you.

**Mine your photos.** Try looking through your photos on FB, Pinterest, in family albums, on your home videos. Don't forget about the scrapbooks that hold those tickets to your favorite concert or pictures of that haircut you got on a dare. Sometimes the best stories are tucked behind an old photo.

**Talk it out.** The best way to refine an idea is to vet it. If it feels too personal or too stressful to share with a parent or friend, seek out a teacher, college counselor, or essay advisor and talk it out. Now your idea bank is brimming with stories and you're ready to begin. Reread the question, out- line your answer, and write. Share your voice, your vision, your passion. After all, this is your story.