

HOW TO WRITE A COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY THAT GETS YOU IN



By Kimberly Houston

www.theessaymentor.com

How to Write a College Application Essay That Gets You In

The application is a lifeless thing--a few sheets of paper and a few numbers. The essay is the best way to breathe life into it. - Admissions Officer

One of the most daunting and stressful tasks you will face as a high school student in the college application process is writing the college admissions essay or personal statement.

While there are many factors that go into an admissions decision, writing a stellar college application essay can help distinguish you from the hundreds or thousands of other applicants with similar test scores, grades and EC's, and help get you in. The key is to write a superior essay that leaves a positive, lasting impression about your candidacy and what you will bring to the school that **sets you apart from the pack**.

Imagine for a moment that you are a college admissions officer at a competitive university. Now imagine reviewing the applications of thousands of eager college applicants with excellent grades, EC's and SAT scores.

Think about this: more than 29,500 high school seniors have submitted applications for admission to Duke University this year, and many of those have outstanding application packets. If you're an admissions officer at Duke, how do you determine who gets in among the many gifted, qualified candidates?

With all else being equal among those applicants, **the personal statement or essay is one way to distinguish yourself**. You need to leave a lasting impression on someone who reads 50-100 essays a day.

The challenge for you as a high school senior is to be able to articulate who you are and what makes you unique and different from your friends and peers, and write persuasively about it. Just how do you get at what defines you, makes you special, and sets you apart from hundreds of other qualified candidates in 500 to 750 words or less?

Well, I'm going to help you with that.

But, first things first . . .

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

Why The College Application Essay Is So Important

We all know that gaining entrance into just about any college is getting more and more difficult, as more applicants, many of them academically gifted and highly qualified, are seeking to fill a very limited number of slots.

The 2009 College Board's College Admission and Enrollment Statistics found that while grades, secondary school records and SAT scores are the top factors in the college admissions decision, a majority of colleges and universities **consider the essay to be important or very important** in determining which academically qualified students they'll choose.

Think about it.

By the time you apply to college, your GPA or class rank is mostly set, and it's difficult to change it significantly. Your SAT score is also pretty much a done deal. And can you really add or change your extracurricular activities enough to make a difference at this point?

Besides, there are hundreds of high school students out there with kick-a** GPAs, awesome SAT scores, and tons of extracurriculars on their resumes. And they are applying to the same schools you are.

What to do?

At this point there are two factors still within your control for enhancing your college applications in a way that will set you apart – your letters of reference and your personal statement or essay. You can work with your letter writers to get good letters of reference, and of course they want to help you, but they are going to write what they want to write. You have no control over what they say and how they say it.

Which leaves the personal statement or essay.

Your college application essay or personal statement is how you distinguish yourself from the mass of other academically stellar, highly-qualified, top-notch candidates.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

The good news is, the essay is **completely** within your control. It's your chance to show college admissions officers what is unique, special and wonderful about you. It's where you can articulate how you are a candidate unlike any other, through a well-chosen topic and a persuasively written essay.

It's where you get to tell a story only you can tell.

This very important piece of writing is where you will highlight what makes you unique among the hordes of other applicants, in your own words.

Your essay needs to draw attention to things about yourself not found in your resume and elsewhere in your application packet, because it provides information about you that test scores, grades, and extracurricular activities cannot.

It just makes sense.

When all else is equal between competing applicants with similar grades, SAT scores and EC's, a compelling, powerfully written essay can make the difference. It distinguishes you from your peers, and is your best chance to stand out from the sea of other qualified applicants.

What Are Colleges Looking For in an Essay?

The Purpose of the Essay

Your essay needs to:

- ~ Persuade the admissions committee that you are worthy of admission
- ~ Show the admissions committee that you are more than a GPA and a standardized test score -- you are a real-life, unique and interesting personality.

When reading your essay, admissions committees are looking for:

Evidence of your writing abilities – they want to see that you can write in a clear and organized way. The essay showcases your writing skills, and your ability to organize your thoughts into a coherent, structured narrative. You will be doing **a lot** of this kind of writing in college, and admissions committees want to see that you've got what it takes.

Evidence of reasonable goals and expectations – they want to see that you can clearly convey what you want to study and why.

What you can bring to a college campus -- the essay will reveal your unique personality and character. The portrait you paint of yourself says a great deal about both your qualifications and your individuality and uniqueness.

Your essay is meant to reveal what you think and feel is important about your world. **Colleges want to know about your preferences, your values, and your thought process.**

Colleges want to gain insights into you that aren't revealed in your test scores, transcripts or letters of recommendation. They want to know what makes you unique. Your GPA and test scores may paint you as a stellar student, but the essay will tell the admissions committee something special and interesting about you they don't already know from reviewing the rest of your application packet.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

Think of it like this.

The admissions committee won't choose or reject you based **solely** on your essay, but it can be a strong voice in your favor, a way to separate yourself from the hordes, to stand out from the "gray zone" of all the other candidates.

So let's say there's Candidate A, with terrific SAT scores, an awesome GPA, all the right EC's, and a dull, run-of-the-mill, clichéd essay. Then there's you, Candidate B, with terrific SAT scores, an awesome GPA, all the right EC's, and a kick-a** essay that sets just the right tone, tells a story only you can tell, and does so persuasively, in a well-written, well-articulated package.

Who do you think gets in? That's right, you do! High fives all around! :)

Before You Write the Essay ~ MINDSET

It is very important that you have the right mindset before you begin the essay writing process. Now is not the time to worry over things you can't change, such as grades you've already earned. Work as hard as you can to have stellar grades in your senior year, and focus on what you can do going forward.

Secondly, when it comes to writing your college application essay, try not to think of it as the most difficult or stressful task you've ever had to do, otherwise you're not going to have the focus and concentration you need to do it well. And you CAN do this well. So relax and breathe.

Yes, this is a very important piece of writing, but if you take it step by step, going through each phase of the writing process, you will write a terrific essay.

So don't get anxious, you can handle this. It **IS** going to take some work, but it can be done, it has been done, very well, by students with exactly the same time frame as you have and with similar skills, qualifications, experiences and talents. You have it in you to write a kick-a** essay.

That's the mindset I want you to get yourself into before sitting down to write.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

One neat little mindset trick you can use is to remember that **they want you to be the one**. The admissions officer picks up your essay hoping it will knock their socks off.

Depending on where the admissions officer is in the process, it's likely they've read many, many boring regurgitation-of-the-rest-of-the-application-materials or list-of-accomplishments essays by this point, so if yours stands out in a way that paints you in a positive light with specificity, focus and proof, you've just won major, major points.

In my seasonal work as a test scorer of high school end-of-year essay tests, I read over 200 essays a day, most of them merely adequate, and stellar ones stand out and are remembered. **Really** remembered. Unfortunately, these are **very** few.

Other mindset tips: Keep in mind, you've written many essays before – your papers for English class, for example, so this is nothing new. And you have plenty of time for the entire process (you have given yourself plenty of time, right?), and you are motivated to do well because you want to get into the college of your choice. All of those factors are going to help you write an excellent essay.

And, absolutely most importantly, you are an expert on the topic – YOU. None one else can write the essay you are going to write, because no one else has your particular story to tell. The topic of you is your exclusive territory, your experiences are uniquely your own. If you keep this in mind, you won't get freaked by this task.

There is no other person like you on earth, and you have some terrific material in your life from which to draw to create a stellar essay. You're going to uncover this material in the **Brainstorming Topics** section below, ok?

So don't panic. It's all good. And just by virtue of the fact that you went to the trouble to download and read this report means you have what it takes to write a terrific essay.

So, let's get started!

The Essay Writing Process

In a nutshell, it's this:

1. Brainstorm and choose topic
2. Write the first draft, put aside for a few days
3. Come back to first draft and revise; write the second draft
4. Review and revise/edit draft two to get your final draft
5. Proofread and polish
6. Let it go

Every writer is different; you may not follow this process to the letter and that's OK. But at the very least, you want to write a draft, set it aside, then come back to it and revise/improve upon it until you are satisfied, and make sure to proofread, proofread, proofread!

Choosing an Essay Topic

Choosing an essay topic is keenly important, but nothing to get anxious about. To choose your essay topic, you're going to do some brainstorming exercises below that will give you a bunch of good material to choose from, so no worries.

Your choice of essay topic is important because it gives the college a way to evaluate your preferences, values, and your mental process. It reveals something important about you that can't be gleaned from the other elements of your application package.

When choosing a topic, keep in mind the college application essay is not the place to tell everything about yourself. It's not your life story. It's not an autobiography, or a summary of your entire life's accomplishments.

What you want to do is **select an important positive quality or characteristic about yourself**, and an event or experience that reflects and proves that quality or characteristic, and illuminate it. Tell a defining story that reveals one of your strengths.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

I know it's hard to know what one event or experience has changed your life or made you the person you are, or the one character trait that makes you special and unique. But after you're done with your brainstorming, you'll have a roadmap/list/outline of topic ideas to choose from.

Maybe there isn't just one big thing that that jumps out at you, but **with brainstorming, you'll begin to see connections that define the person you are. Narrow down your topic choice to something you can write about most persuasively and effectively, and go with that topic.**

It's important to be passionate about the topic you choose that brings out your defining characteristics. Don't be boring. **Choose a clear focus, and prove your choice with evidence.**

Colleges are more interested in how you think than a summary of your life's events. Your experiences matter less than what you think about those experiences.

Brainstorming

This is the fun part – thinking of all the interesting, unique and special things yourself, with no pressure to select a topic or thesis at this point, if you've started the process early enough. You can relax and get creative.

Give yourself plenty of time before the drop-dead deadline for the essay so you've got time to gather topic ideas, review them, reject what doesn't work, and hone in and elaborate on what does. I recommend carrying around a small notebook or journal to note ideas in when they occur to you.

The goal of brainstorming is to develop ideas, so don't censor yourself in the exercises below. Just let it flow out of you. ;))

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

The Brain Dump

One brainstorming process you can use is called the “brain dump.” Start filling up a page with things you’ve done, places you’ve been, accomplishments, goals achieved, hopes, dreams and aspirations, disappointments, stream of consciousness daydreaming stuff . . . just get it all down. Write, write, write, without filters!

Listmaking

- ~ Make a list of important things you’ve done in school and out of school.
- ~ Make a list of what you feel your best traits/strongest attributes are.
- ~ Make a list of the experiences that have meant the most to you in your life.
- ~ Come up with a list of what one or two things your parents, friends, teachers, etc., always say about you. “Joshua is always so conscientious and polite.” “Jessica never lets an opportunity to make someone else’s day a little better go by.” “David is the most focused, goal-oriented kid I’ve ever met.” “Alyson would rather be on the soccer field than anywhere else.” You get the idea.
- ~ In terms of your accomplishments, think not only of the obvious ones, the ones you’ve been formally recognized for, but also of smaller ones that are meaningful to you in a more personal way.
- ~ What’s something that sets you apart from everyone else? Something that your friends and family think of you that is quirky, but lovable, and just **so you**, that you may not even notice it? Or you can’t imagine not having this quality or characteristic? When I was in high school friends and family would say about me, “She’s always got her head in a book,” or, “She’s got a very vivid imagination,” or, “She’s such a dreamer.” (Pay attention to these things, because having a good grasp of what makes you tick with not only help you with your application essay, but also with your choice of major, and your choice of career.)
- ~ Think about your favorite books and movies – why are they your favorites? Has a particular book or movie influenced you or changed your perception about something in a meaningful way?

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

- ~ Have you ever struggled to achieve something you thought you desperately wanted, only to feel apathetic about the result once you achieved it? What lesson/realization did you take away from the experience?
- ~ Look at something you've worked very hard for and achieved – what made you successful? Was it focus and determination? Mindset? Passion? Unwavering commitment?
- ~ Is there something you really wanted and worked hard for, then failed to get? How did you react to this disappointment?
- ~ What's the most difficult thing you've had to overcome in your life, and how did you handle it? What lessons did you learn?
- ~ If you could have one-on-one conversations with any three people, living or dead, who would they be, and what would you ask them/talk to them about?
- ~ What activities of yours outside of school bring you the most joy and fulfillment?
- ~ Poll a few friends and family members and ask what they would write about you if they were writing your admissions essay. Alternatively, ask a few of these folks to make a list of 3-5 your key personality traits, and see if you notice a theme in their responses.
- ~ Has there ever been anything your parents made you do that you weren't thrilled about and didn't want to do, but that once you went through with the activity you realized you were glad you did, and liked it? What does this reveal about you?
- ~ What one activity outside of school is the most near and dear to your heart/most meaningful to you? What made you choose it? What is it about this activity that gets your heart racing/puts you in the flow?
- ~ Looking ahead 5 years and acting as if everything you want for yourself in the next 5 years has been accomplished, what does your life look like? What were the steps you took to get there?
- ~ Are there interests you had as a child that have carried into your current life, interests you still want to explore further?

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

~ What are your goals, hopes, dreams and aspirations for the future? How do the schools you're applying to fit into those goals?

~ What most interests you? What do you care passionately about?

Once you're finished brainstorming . . .

What the brainstorming process is meant to do is give you a bunch of stuff to begin working with. The answer to any one of the questions above is not necessarily going to be your best essay topic. But if you answer several of the questions, say in a "brain dump" in a Word document, or old school on a legal pad, you will begin to see connections, or a "theme," about yourself.

The brainstorming exercises are a way for you to begin the process. You could answer all these questions in a notebook or on your computer, then set it aside for a couple of days and go back to it. Let questions simmer in your mind if you can't answer them right away. Come back to them. I bet you'll begin to see some overriding themes jump out at you. You may even have one of those "aha" moments where you know **exactly** what to write about.

If you don't feel passionate about a particular topic, chances are you'll write a dull, uninspired essay. **You don't want yours to be among the thousands of generic essays that could have been written by just about anyone; it must bring out the defining characteristics of your unique personality. The college admissions committee wants to know what makes you tick, what makes you special and interesting.**

Once you finish brainstorming topic ideas through the exercises above, you want to go through your notes and make connections, and come up with experiences that support the topic you choose. **Remember: focus, specificity, and proof.** Your essay has a clear **focus**, and you use **specific** examples/experiences to **prove** your thesis.

Make sure to answer the question asked of you in the application, and choose a topic that will allow you to write persuasively and succinctly about your important personal attributes and experiences that ties in with why you want to attend that particular school.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

Making connections and finding your “theme”

So, now you’ve got all this info from your brainstorming, right? It’s a bunch of notes, or maybe it’s fully-formed sentences or paragraphs, or whatever it is. Now it’s time to make sense of it.

What you want to do now is look over what you’ve written and begin analyzing and organizing the information and looking for connections. Are there recurring themes? Can you make connections between the experiences and events you’ve written down that reveal some special and important positive trait, or set of traits, about yourself?

What shows up repeatedly? Volunteer projects? Sports activities? Introspective activities like reading and writing? Creative pursuits like photography, art, web design, etc? Technical pursuits?

Group similar things together and note patterns. Choose three or four important strengths or personality traits and events/experiences that jump out at you.

Note these strengths and list 5 or 6 pieces of supporting evidence from your life for each strength. Not everything you pick will be a good essay topic, but by going through this process you can determine what will work and what won’t.

You want to choose a thesis that focuses attention on a positive characteristic that you can prove with evidence from your life’s experiences and choices.

Don’t choose a topic that you don’t have much evidence for. That’s why you want to look for recurring themes – strengths you can back up with solid, vivid proof.

Look at the results of your brainstorming information holistically and choose one focus. Focus on one interpretation of yourself that you have positive evidence for and choose the events and experiences from your brainstorming efforts that back this interpretation up. Choose only things that PROVE and SUPPORT your thesis, the interpretation of yourself you are trying to convey.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

Once you've chosen your topic and your thesis, ask yourself:

- Do I have vivid personal experiences I can use as evidence/support?
- Does my topic repeat information about me found in elsewhere in my application packet? (If so, nix it. You want your essay to reveal something positive about yourself not found in other areas of your application.)
- Do I have plenty of evidence to support my thesis for a 500-700 (or whatever the length is) essay?

Remember: focus, specificity, and proof. Your essay has a clear **focus**, and you use **specific** examples and experiences to **prove** your thesis.

Writing the Thing: Structure and Mechanics

But, first things first, remember: ****Tell a story only you can tell!****

By now you know you want to operate from this key principle when crafting your essay, but I'm repeating it here because I want to make sure you keep it in mind as you're writing.

OK, so it's simple really: you're going to develop a thesis and prove it. You have your brainstorming work, you've chosen your topic, now you are going to nail down your thesis and choose evidence that supports that thesis from your brainstorming exercises.

The basic structure of a college admission essay is:

1. **The Introduction**—Your intro gives the reader an idea of the essay's content. You want to start strong so the reader immediately feels compelled to read through to the end. You've got to hook them from the get-go. If you are telling a story only you can tell in a persuasive, well-written manner, you got 'em.
 - You may want to begin with a fascinating statistic, a few lines of dialogue, or an interesting anecdote. But if none of these feels right, don't force it. Starting strong can be as simple as a well-crafted sentence that simply makes the reader want to *know more*.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

- **State your thesis.** Identify the topic to get things going. Include a brief overview of the ideas you'll be expressing to support and develop your thesis, but don't summarize the essay in the introduction – you want your reader to be eager to read the rest of the essay. Your introduction could be as short as one or two sentences. (I highly recommend reviewing college essay samples online or in one of the many of essay writing guides you can find in the bookstore. There are many ways to “start strong” and get your thesis across in your first few sentences, and I don't have the space here to lay them all out.)

2. **The Body**—three to five paragraphs, one paragraph for each supporting idea. Start each paragraph with a topic sentence that lays out the focus of the paragraph, and follow up with sentences that support your main point. Your experiences are the supporting details. Your body paragraphs relate to the introduction. Use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to ensure your essay flows logically.

3. **The Conclusion**—Wrap up by reminding the reader of your thesis statement. You can be brief here. Reveal something you've learned or a new perspective you've gained, for example. You want to **make the connection between the events or experiences you've written about and their meaning to you in a way that showcases the way you think.**

- Avoid summarizing. If you've written the essay well, you shouldn't have to remind the reader of what you wrote in your introduction. Avoid phrases like “in summary,” “in conclusion,” or “to conclude,” and so on.

Throughout the writing process you want to: **Focus and Prove, Focus and Prove, Focus and Prove.**

In my seasonal essay scoring work where I read 200 + essays a day, the ones that truly stand out are the ones that **focus and prove, make interesting connections, and use specific examples and vivid details.**

Your essay **must:** have a narrow focus, offer proof, and use specificity.

- Prove a single point or thesis. Your main idea can be found and followed from beginning to end, right?
- Your main idea is developed with examples, facts, events, or dialogue, etc. **Show, don't tell, using specific, vivid details.**

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

Your essay **must not**: be clichéd or generic, repeat what is elsewhere in your application, read like a resumé, or tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear.

- Be sure to write an essay that could only be written by you. Like Oscar Wilde said, “Be yourself; everyone else is already taken.”
- Do not simply list your activities, even if you’ve “done it all.”
- Don’t make the mistake of trying to kiss the admission committees’ butt by gushing about the school, the programs, the campus or any other thing you know you are **only** writing about hoping to charm your way into their institution. :) This doesn’t work.

Draft One Is Complete: Next Steps

Revise!

- Once you have a good draft you’re happy with, put it aside for a few days. This is key, as things you’ll want to change about the essay will jump out at you much more easily after you’ve had time away from it.
- When you come back to the draft after a few days, ask yourself if your main idea comes across clearly. Read it aloud to see if it flows. Read it aloud to someone else and see if **they** think it flows. **Make sure you’ve proven your points with specific details.**
- Have one or two trusted advisors, folks who will be honest with you, read the essay and give you feedback. Ask them to identify your main idea – if they can’t, you’ll have to do more work to make sure your thesis comes across clearly.

Edit and Polish

- Edit for clarity. Make sure you use clear, direct language.
- Make sure your transitions within and between paragraphs flow and move the essay to a logical and clear conclusion.

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

Proofread

- Proofread for grammatical and spelling errors, awkward language, paragraph transitions, or hazy logic.
- Proofread again. And again. Ideally, you've given yourself enough time in the process to put the essay aside for a couple of days, or at least a few hours, between each step above so that necessary revisions become obvious.
- Have a trusted advisor proofread for you as well.

Take it from a writer who knows, when you are too close to your writing, you **will** miss something that could have been changed for the better. The way to avoid this is to give yourself enough time to give each part of the essay writing process its full due.

More Writing Tips

- ~ Make sure to answer the question asked.
- ~ Focus on a personal quality, not on an event or something you've done. The events and "somethings you've done" are used in the essay as the supporting evidence of the quality or characteristic about yourself you want to reveal to the admissions officers.
- ~ Be original and be yourself.
- ~ Show, don't tell. Demonstrate, don't describe.
- ~ Don't just explain something you've done. Talk about how it has changed your life or your perspective in some way. It's all about making logical connections between what you've done and how it has affected you and your way of thinking.
- ~ If you need to use a thesaurus, do so only sparingly. Yes, you are trying to get into college, but the admissions committee wants to know about **you**, in **your** words. Don't use a big word when a small one will do.

~ Be clear and specific. I know I've said the same thing 5 different ways in this report, but it bears repeating. When I do high-school essay scoring each Spring, I read hundreds of essays that are vague, general, and spend 5 paragraphs telling the reader almost nothing – at least nothing memorable.

~ Delete anything that does not relate to your main argument. Make sure every sentence has a reason for being there. Everything in your essay must move your idea forward logically and be related to your thesis.

~ Once your writing is complete, go back to make sure it doesn't display any of the following big-red-flag essay offenses: boring/dull, sloppy, insincere, tasteless, clichéd, unclear/lacking in focus and specificity, lacking in authenticity, or a repeat of information found elsewhere in the application packet.

And there you go. If you've gone through each step of the essay writing process outlined in this report, giving yourself plenty of time to really hone in on each step and complete it, by now you will have a stellar essay that will help get you into the college of your choice.

Some Final Thoughts

Listen, writing your college application essay can seem scary and overwhelming, I know. But it doesn't have to be that way. **Sure, there's a lot at stake here – this very important piece of writing needs to help you get into the college of your choice, and the competition is flat out fierce.** But if you give yourself enough time to complete the entire essay writing process – **a couple of weeks, minimum** – you can avoid the stress and overwhelm, and write an excellent essay.

This report isn't meant to be a comprehensive A to Z guide on essay writing, but it will help get you going in the right direction. With this report, and the help of your parents, your guidance counselor, essay-writing books and online resources, you have everything you need to succeed. I know you can write a kick-a** essay.

I wish you much good luck in getting into the college of your choice!

<http://www.theessaymentor.com>

About Me

What qualifies me to write this guide?

When I was writing my undergraduate college application essays and my personal statements for graduate school admissions, I did research, read essay writing books, and wrote multiple versions of my essays. I spent countless hours reading essay examples and breaking them down into the components that made them flow well; I brainstormed, pre-wrote, wrote and re-wrote, edited, and then wrote some more. **I studied how the best essay examples were able to convey a persuasive and desirable message about the applicant, and I made sure my essays did the same.**

In other words, I figured out what worked.

I then applied these lessons to my own essays, which were a key factor in getting me into my undergraduate school of choice, my transfer school, and my graduate institution. This guide can help you do the same.

My Experience:

I work as a Seasonal Reader at a test scoring facility every Spring, **where I score 11th grade essays on reading comprehension and persuasive writing.** I score in the neighborhood of 200 essays per day.

I've seen the best and I've seen the worst, and I know when an essay does all the right things – that is, when it provides a compelling thesis and backs it up with clear, cogent reasoning and vivid examples that support that thesis.

My professional writing career includes:

- **PR Director for King's English Advertising and Public Relations**, where I wrote and edited web content, newsletter copy, fact sheets, press releases and case studies.
- Current writer for a Chicago-based real estate website
- Current writer/editor and creator of KimberlyDHouston.com, where I write about copywriting, blogging, social media and other online marketing methods
- Current writer/editor and creator of Wine & Walnuts, a food and wine blog
- Essay reader since 2007 for Meas., Inc., where I score essays for persuasive writing and reading comprehension

My education includes:

- M.A. in Latin American Studies, University of New Mexico
- B.A. in English, Fordham University

Once again, I wish you the very best in your essay writing process and with getting into the college of your dreams!

Kimberly Houston