
The Tyler P. Fick Writing Center

**Writing the College Application Essay**

Writing the college application essay might make you break out in hives if that is how you respond to stress. When college counsellors and teachers tell you to “have fun with it,” you might have to bite your tongue to keep yourself from using a sarcastic tone when you say, “Right!” Getting started early is important: that’s why you are in The Tyler P. Fick Writing Center now—rather than waiting until December!

You have grades, SAT scores, and a resume. So does every other applicant. How do you persuade the admissions officers that you are a unique individual who will make positive contributions to the college you attend? Visit the college and do an interview: that’s one way to make yourself known as an individual. The other way is to write an effective application essay.

Basically, you want to tell a story about yourself, and you want to tell it with style.

The most common application essay topics try to bring out your characteristics as a person. You have probably seen all of these:

\* Which book has had the greatest impact on your life? Explain.

\* Think of a person who had a major influence on you. Describe the person and the influence he or she has had on you.

\* Sometimes a single experience can change the way a person thinks about the world. Describe an experience that has transformed your way of thinking.

Occasionally, admissions officers try to be creative and original. Some of their creative topics can elicit highly original responses from applicants. Other creative topics can just seem weird.

\* You are 65 years old, and you have just published your autobiography. Please submit page 215.

\* Think of an issue that is very important to you. Now, try to explain it to an extra-terrestrial who is visiting the earth for only 24 hours.

Consider the following as you begin to write your college application essay:

1. Make the first line memorable. One student began, “In the trunk of my car I have five different swords.” The student was an actress who had mastered fencing and stage combat. The essay was unforgettable.

2. Write about something that will not be apparent from the transcript and resume. Maybe there is something in your life that just does not fit into one of the application boxes. This does not mean you cannot write about your involvement with sports or acting or dance, but show your reader what it is like to be involved with these activities. Don’t begin with “It was the last game of the season, so I knew I had to be at my best.” Terrible beginning! Try something more like: “I am standing on the field, sweat burning my eyes, my heart pounding.” Try using present tense to show what it is like to compete or create.

3. You are writing for adults who read thousands of application essays every year. Write in order to project a mature, enthusiastic personality.

4. Edit your essay, and have more than one adult read it.

5. If you write about travel, skip the part about the airplane ride. You are writing for adults, that is, people for whom air travel ceased to be interesting twenty to thirty years ago. Don’t merely recite your itinerary. Pick one truly memorable experience in one of the countries you visited.

6. Think about what you value in life. Try to project your sense of values, but avoid clichés like “living in the moment,” and “getting stronger, able to meet any challenge.”

7. If you quote, it is better to quote from a book you have actually read than from “randomphilosophers.com.”

8. Use vivid verbs, but go easy on the adjectives and adverbs.

9. Use original metaphors and similes.

10. Humorous writing is difficult, but memorable. If you have the gift, use it.