

# College Application Essay

## Why it's important?

Many students feel overwhelmed by the task of writing a personal essay for college applications. But this essay is their opportunity to reveal their best qualities and to show an admissions committee what makes them stand out from other applicants.

A 2006 report published by the National Association of College Admission Counseling (NACAC) found that while grades, admission tests, and [class rank](#) remain the top factors in the college admission decision, a majority of colleges and universities consider the essay to be a key factor in determining which academically qualified students they would choose.

In other words, when all else is equal between competing applicants, a compelling essay can make the difference. A powerful, well-written essay can also tip the balance for a marginal applicant.

## What are colleges looking for in an essay?

College admission officers look to the essay for evidence that a student can write well and support his or her ideas with logical arguments. They also want to know something about the personality of the student.

## What are the different types of essays?

There are typically three types of essay questions: the "**you**" question, the "**why us**" question, and the "**creative**" question.

### The "you" question

This question boils down to "**Tell us about yourself.**" The school wants to know the student better and to see how she will introduce herself.

**Example:** "UVM values a diverse student body. What contributions might you make to our campus community outside of academic achievement?" (University of Vermont, 2005)

**Plus:** This type of direct question offers students a chance to reveal something about themselves other than grades and test scores.

**Danger:** The open-ended nature of these questions can lead to an essay that's all over the place.

### The "why us" question

Some schools ask for an essay about a student's choice of a school or career. They're looking for information about the applicant's goals, and about how serious his or her commitment is to this particular school.

**Example:** "How did you become interested in American University?" (American University, 2007)

**Plus:** This type of question provides a focus for the essay; why the student chose this particular school or path.

**Danger:** Any factual errors in the essay will reveal that the student really hasn't thought deeply about his or her choice.

## The "creative" question

The goals of the "creative" question are to evaluate a candidate's ability to think and write creatively and to assess the breadth of her knowledge and education.

**Example:** "Sharing intellectual interests is an important aspect of university life. Describe an experience or idea that you find intellectually exciting, and explain why." (Stanford University, 2007)

**Plus:** This kind of question gives students an opportunity to convey their personalities and views.

**Danger:** Some students may take the "creative" aspect of the question as license to be obscure, pretentious, or undisciplined in their writing.

## How much help is too much help?

Admissions officers have expressed concern about how much assistance students receive in preparing an essay. Many institutions now ask applicants to sign a statement vowing that the essay submitted is their own work.

## 10 College Essay Tips

1. Don't "recycle" essays. An essay that sounds like it has been used before will blend with everyone else's.
2. Captivate your audience. Make your essay engaging and memorable. Include a quick, enticing intro; give a reason to finish reading it.
3. Be yourself. Choose a topic that is meaningful to you. Use your own voice. Show off a side of yourself that your application does not; don't simply write what you think an admissions office wants to hear.
4. Accentuate the positive. When writing about a personal experience, emphasize how the experience changed you for the better.
5. Write in the active voice. Doing so will make for a clearer, more concise essay.
6. Don't overextend. Your essay is not a term paper. Stay focused on your topic.
7. Ask people for input. Whether it's a teacher, counselor, friend or parent, ask someone you respect for some candid feedback. Is it confusing? Boring?
8. Leave time for rewriting. Look for weak or dull spots and spelling and grammatical errors. Never let your first draft be your final draft.
9. Revise, reword. Improve on your first draft through various rewrites. Read the essay aloud to find awkward sentences or problems.
10. Pursue perfection. Have someone else look it over. Type your essay carefully.