

## Components of a College Essay

Structured reflection is important. The college application process is a rare opportunity in life. Applicants shouldn't just go through it with the goal of getting into a school but with the mindset that they want to learn more about themselves -- learn more about their values, crystallize their aspirations, and identify the experiences that they need to make an impact on the world.

Your college essay is not a static piece of writing. It is a picture of who you are as an individual – in the past, present, and in the future. The essay is a representation of the “you” that is below the surface, that is more than your clothes, more than a list of activities. The essay should be dynamic, meaningful, and personal – only you could write it. If the essay prompt is asking about your family's impact on you – it is asking about the impact on you, not extensive information about your family. The essay is all about YOU!

### College Essay - What Should I Write? What Do They Want Me To Write About?

- Don't describe your science project in detail – describe your curiosity.
- Don't write what you think others want to hear. Answer the question honestly.
- Don't talk about Aunt Sally's death. Talk about how Aunt Sally's death affected you.
- If it's the first time you've thought about it, don't write your college essay about it.
- Write about something personal that you can be passionate about.
- Don't spend time/words on a travelogue - where you went and how you got there. If you visited a site where bombings occurred, for example, this could be a great chance to talk about how the violence in the world was now in your face and how you felt about it. Spend more time on connecting your feelings of violence with the bombings. Don't simply express sympathy for victims. Or relief that you live in a safe environment. You have to get way down inside yourself and express how you really feel.
- Don't ask "what does the admission committee want to read?" but instead ask yourself: "What is it about me that I want to be sure colleges know?"
- Show AND tell; don't simply write that you are a leader; i.e., show how you lobbied the administration to change the study hall policy.
- Essays show who you are, not simply what you've done.

### The following are ideas from college admissions counselors, who by the way, will be reading your essays.

- What we look for in an essay (in general):
  - sophisticated writing;
  - cogent communication;
  - passion;
  - content;
  - answer the question!
- Landmines - things to avoid or to be very, very careful with:
  - the "I" essay;
  - it's/its;
  - their/there/they're; etc;
  - trite phrases or words, such as myriad, plethora, broaden your horizons, etc;
  - using larger words that don't fit or are inappropriate.
- Risks (these topics might work well, but students should be warned of the inherent risks):
  - profanity;
  - drugs;
  - describing inappropriate behavior;
  - boyfriend/girlfriend;
  - shock value;
  - sympathy;
  - travel/community service ("those poor people")  
- not a warning to not write about these trips, just to be careful about tone when doing so;
  - humor (if you're not naturally funny, don't try to start now!; Some humor is good but too much can be bad);
  - writing about depression or other mental health issues;
- writing about religion;
- poetry.
- Do not rely on spell check!
- Online applications - don't treat informally like an e-mail; take care in crafting responses and looking for errors.
- Recipe for the College Essay:
  - 3 parts thinking to one part writing;
  - Write about something you care about (demonstrate passion and intellectual curiosity)
  - Be focused and provide detail rather than choosing too broad a topic and not getting specific enough (trying to solve the world in 500 words)
  - Attention to detail - avoid the landmines mentioned above and other careless errors such as spelling and grammatical errors, writing in different colored pens on the same application, having your parent or someone else fill out part and you fill out another (different handwriting). No sloppy applications!
  - Keep in mind your audience - 23 - 65 years olds with diverse backgrounds
  - Read your essay out loud.
  - Have two people review your essays but not more than that. Edit but don't overedit.
  - When having someone read your essay, recreate the situation will essay will face - have someone read it in about 2 minutes and then take it away. Ask them what you wrote about (to see if you are clearly getting your point across).

### More about what college admissions staffs say about the personal statement:

- “Write from your soul, write from your heart, and reflect upon your experiences.”
- Be personal.
- Select a subject you can write about with feeling and authority, yet unusual enough to distinguish you from the mass of other applicants.
- Use vivid and precise language; avoid typos, misspellings and grammatical errors.

- It is easy to write about one's parent(s) as influential, but it is difficult to make a defining difference between your wonderful parent and all the other influential parents the readers will snooze through.
- The death of a grandparent can be moving and emotional but not unusual.
- It takes time, thought and some intellectualism to write about a particular book, world/local issue or historical figure; perhaps you might interest the reader in your ideas, feelings and analysis of such items.
- Choice of topic is not as important as the level of insight, meaning and analysis offered.
- Tasteful humor is always appreciated; arrogance or fluff turns readers off.
- Personal adversity that affected your academic performance can be the topic of an essay but not as an excuse or to be whined about.
- The most successful essays show curiosity and self-awareness
- The best personal statements are not necessarily the longest.

#### From Johns Hopkins admissions counselors on "reading students' applications:"

- I approach each application thinking first about how a particular student will contribute to the campus community and then I examine their overall academic abilities and attributes.
- I tend to begin with the personal side of the application starting with the essay, the resume, and the recommendations. I look for students who have something to say. I look for students who are leaders and progressive thinkers. I like to review an application and gather a sense of: "I can't wait to see what this student is going to accomplish here at Hopkins and years to come!" From there I see if their academic success mirrors their personal success.
- One favorite essay? After over 1½ decades of reading them? Actually, I do have a favorite. One stands out. It starts with a description of the applicant and a group of his classmates trying to use a pinhole camera, and how this simple invention is really a tool to help us represent the world around us. The essay moves on to make the point that we need invention (like language, and mathematics and the sciences, and even faith) to understand the universe, as "Everything overwhelms us." Provocative ideas are expressed with a real poetry in that essay, too.
- Every applicant is smart. Every applicant boasts a pristine transcript coupled with countless community service hours and an extensive resume of leadership positions. For me, the most difficult part of reviewing an application is trying to distinguish what makes a student unique. What qualities does this individual have that will really help him or her succeed in this community? Will he or she make a sincere impact here at Hopkins both inside and outside the classroom? Every applicant can succeed in one dimension, but I think the students that are truly well-rounded are harder to find on paper.
- I look for signs of curiosity from the applicant. I love reading about what drives someone's interest and/or why they feel the university can help in their quest of higher learning. In the end, I have an affinity for someone who wants more than the prestige that comes from attending a top-tier university.

### Sample essay questions:

#### Common Application Personal Essay

Common App – [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)

Instructions: The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)

- Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Many Common App colleges also have a **supplement**. Following are examples of questions asked on supplements.

**Harvard:** Occasionally, students feel that college application forms do not provide sufficient opportunity to convey important information about themselves or their accomplishments. If you wish to include an additional essay, you may do so. **Possible Topics:**

- Unusual circumstances in your life
- Travel or living experiences in other countries
- Books that have most affected you
- An academic experience (course, project, paper or research topic) that has meant the most to you
- A list of books you have read during the past twelve months

**Emory University** offers students two academically equivalent, but geographically different options for beginning their undergraduate experience, Emory College of Arts and Sciences and Oxford College of Emory University. These individual campuses contribute to Emory University's uniqueness

in higher education. Please respond to the essay or essays below. Question 1 is required, and Question 2 is optional. Essays should be no more than 250 words each.

1. What are the unique qualities of Emory University, and the specific school(s) to which you are applying (Emory College, Oxford College, or both), that make you want to become part of Emory University? In what ways do you hope to take advantage of the qualities you have identified?
2. What is your favorite ride at the amusement park? How does this reflect your approach to life?

**Northwestern Statement** (required) What are the unique qualities of Northwestern—and of the specific undergraduate school to which you are applying—that make you want to attend the University? In what ways do you hope to take advantage of the qualities you have identified?

**Statement on Research** (optional) If you have done research or independent study outside of school, please include an abstract or summary of your work on a separate sheet.

**University of Virginia:** Required Essays for First-Year Applicants

1. We are looking for passionate students to join our diverse community of scholars, researchers, and artists. Answer the question that corresponds to the school you selected above. Limit your answer to a half page or roughly 250 words.

**College of Arts & Sciences:** What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way?

**Engineering:** If you were given a \$10,000 budget and the opportunity to build a small team of talented, motivated individuals, what would you propose to accomplish?

**Architecture:** Discuss an experience that led you to apply to the School of Architecture.

**Nursing:** Discuss experiences that led you to choose the School of Nursing.

2. Answer one of the following questions in a half page or roughly 250 words:
  - What is your favorite word and why?
  - Describe the world you come from and how that world shaped who you are.
  - Discuss your favorite place to get lost. (This question was written by U.Va. students who live in one of residential colleges, Brown College at Monroe Hill.)
  - In *The Dumbest Generation*, Mark Bauerlein asserts that social media and youth culture undercut the skills necessary to be a global citizen when he writes: "We need a steady stream of rising men and women to replenish the institutions, to become strong military leaders and wise political leaders, dedicated journalists and demanding teachers, judges and muckrakers, scholars and critics and artists. We have the best schools to train them, but social and private environments have eroded." Do you agree with his assessment or not?

## SUS – State University System of Florida

### University of Florida

Your essay is a very important part of your application. What you provide helps the university know you as an individual, independent of grades, test scores and other objective data. Please submit one essay. Remember to keep within the 500-word maximum length. The topic is:

In the space provided, please write a concise narrative in which you describe a meaningful event, experience or accomplishment in your life and how it will affect your college experience or your contribution to the UF campus community. You may want to reflect on your ideas about student responsibility, academic integrity, campus citizenship or a call to service.

### Florida State University

Florida State University is more than just a world-class academic institution preparing you for a future career. We are a caring community of well-rounded individuals who embrace leadership, learning, service, and global awareness. With this in mind, which of these characteristics appeal most to you, and why?

### University of Central Florida

Although optional, the essay assists the Admissions Committee in knowing you as an individual, independent of test scores and other objective data. We ask that you respond to two of the topics below. Your responses should be no longer than a total of 500 words or 7,000 characters.

1. If there has been some obstacle or bump in the road in your academic or personal life, please explain the circumstances.
2. How has your family history, culture, or environment influenced who you are?
3. Why did you choose to apply to UCF?
4. What qualities or unique characteristics do you possess that will allow you to contribute to the UCF community?

### Others:

- The 18<sup>th</sup>-century French philosopher Denis Diderot said, "Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things." Describe one of your passions and discuss its contribution to your personal growth.
- It is common knowledge that Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. Less well known is the fact that he failed 6,000 times before succeeding. Reflect on an accomplishment you achieved in an unlikely way.
- Newton's First Law of Motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and how it caused you to change directions.
- Tell us about an activity that is important to you, and why.
- Describe your academic interests and how you plan to pursue them at [college].
- Ask yourself a question and then answer it.

**Essays That Worked.** This information is from Connecticut College and their web site - <http://www.conncoll.edu/admission/essays.htm>. You can get a good idea of what colleges are looking for, as these students were admitted.

**Submit your essay to your counselor:**

On the Senior Page on the Stanton website, there is an option for students to submit their essays to their counselors to have them critiqued as if a college admissions officers might do. Please feel free to use this at anytime.