

THE COLLEGE ESSAY

(Ta-daaaa!)



ALL COLLEGES WILL REQUIRE IT!

- Often very important, so make it count!
- Shows personal characteristics
- Shows good thinking
- Shows good writing
- Explains your current position in life and the world
- Helps you stand out from others who have the same GPA!





THE AWFUL PROMPT

- Some colleges will give you a specific prompt. It will feel as bad as CSAP prompts. Or worse.

Common prompts include:

- “Describe a significant experience in your life.”
- “What is your biggest fear?”
- “Describe an obstacle you had to overcome, and what you learned from it.”
- “What makes you a positive addition to _____ campus?”



EVEN WORSE: THE OPEN-ENDED PROMPT

- Some colleges will just ask you to include an essay on the topic of your choice. Aack! No structure!
- It seems scary, but it's actually nice when colleges do that, as you can likely write ONE really good essay, and submit it to multiple colleges



THE WORD COUNT

- The majority of colleges want short but well written essays—usually there is a maximum of 500 words.
- That's right: 500 words. That is quite short.
- Aack. Only 500 words?
- This means efficiency, strong word choice, and no overly-wordy writing.
- Also, use logical paragraph breaks to provide a visual break for the reader. Short sentences and short paragraphs work best for the college essay.



ESSAY=YOU

- The essay is your chance to come alive—be more than a number, or a piece of paper.
- Your writing must be polished, edited, proof-read...as good as you can get it.





PROMPTS TO CONSIDER

- Describe the hands of someone important to you.
- What is the biggest obstacle you've ever had to overcome? Have you grown? If so, how?
- Describe the person who has had a significant influence on you.
- If a book were written about your life, what would be on page 180?
- What are you most afraid of?
- What is the best thing about you? What talents do you bring to the campus?
- List 10 things about yourself. Format: I am a _____(noun) who _____(verb, with extra info).
- Describe an ethical dilemma you've had to face and the choice you made, and why.
- Describe a significant experience in your life, and what it's taught you.
- Write a list of at least 10 "rules for living." See Olivia Joules.
- Is there an object which has meaning to you? Or, is there an object which would make an excellent metaphor for you?
- Flight or invisibility? Why?
- What is your PASSION? Why does it matter to you, to the campus, to the world?



BEGINNING

- You need a HELLACIOUS first sentence.
- Drop your reader right into the moment. No introductions (i.e. Hello. My name is Portia Curlee. Allow me to...)
- Ex: “If I had to do it again, I’d wear better pants.”
- Ex: “Cars are not alive.”
- Ex: “I am an addict. I tell people I could stop at any time, but deep inside, I know I am lying. “I need to listen to music...”
- “Ten years from now, Tim Dickson won’t even remember my name.”





OTHER GOOD BEGINNINGS

- Enigmatic statement that makes the reader wonder what the rest of the essay will be about
- An obscure quotation (avoid, say, “To be or not to be” and other overly used quotations)
- A thoughtful question
- A trivial observation that anyone can relate to but that nobody else would ever think to mention in an essay
- A paradox
- A gross generalization
- A confession



THE FIRST HALF

- In concrete detail, describe the person, the moment, the situation...the “answer” to the prompt.
- Use strong verbs and adjectives.
- Try to give the reader a clear sense of your experience, how you felt, etc.



THE SECOND HALF: BRAG WITHOUT LOOKING LIKE YOU'RE BRAGGING!



- You must save a few paragraphs at the end for reflection.
- If you describe a positive experience or role model, then also describe how you are better and stronger, how maybe you've taken on some of those characteristics.
- If you describe a negative experience, obstacle, learning, etc, explain how you've grown, what you've learned, and how ultimately you had a positive outcome.
- This portion of the essay **REQUIRES** that you brag about yourself. Why are you awesome, amazing, and brilliant? Why are you the best choice for that college? Shed your modesty. Explain that you rock. Don't be overly humble. But be subtle so that you're not arrogant, either.





ENDING

- Provide closure: it's nice to provide bookends, so that you refer in your conclusion back to your opening statement; the reader must feel you've come full circle
- Use the final sentences to end any suspense and answer all questions the reader might have
- Don't use "all in all" or other concluding phrases
- Use short, forceful sentences to end
- Don't address the committee or ask them to please admit you





TOPIC TIPS

- Essays about personal relationships and influences: many people choose family members and best friends. Consider writing instead about a teacher, a coach, your arch-rival at school, a neighbor, etc.
- Essays about issues: keep in mind that lots of people write about the environment, world peace, prejudice and discrimination, drugs, and crime.
- Essays about personal qualities: avoid writing a song about your favorite things. It's not a new idea. You must brag with subtlety. Don't be off-putting (i.e. "I'm so determined that I always get exactly what I want!") Instead, look inward for quirky or even seemingly negative traits. Write about: little habits of yours that annoy your family, the time you completely put your foot in your mouth, a personal possession to which you are irrationally attached (e.g. Curlee STILL sleeps with her teddy bear that is now 18 years old).





WORD CHOICE

- Avoid overly used positive descriptors, like responsibility, interact, goal, role, integrity, leadership, etc. *Everyone* uses those words.
- Avoid slang. NO TEXTLISH. No “*I know, right?*”
- **No** waffle words, like these: maybe, somewhat, rather, it seems, perhaps.
- Cut these OUT: “I think,” “I believe,” “My feeling is that,” or “Personally...”.
- Avoid thesaurus overload. An essay culminating in the display of your predilection for platitude may become garish, therefore coming across as haughty or superfluous. See?
- DO use creative analogies and metaphors.





DO:

- Write honestly. Write what you know.
- Think “Scattergories” and “Boggle.” (If you have the same answer as someone else, you both lose the point, right?) If it’s an essay someone else could write, try a new topic.
- Convey a positive overall message. Avoid bitterness, sarcasm, aggressiveness, or boasting.
- Strive for depth, not breadth. You can’t write about your whole life. Just write really well about one very specific thing.
- Write about something you feel strongly about.





DON'T:

- Let others—especially your parents and (ahem) your teachers—help you decide what to write about. That job is yours alone.
- Be afraid to admit that you're full of questions, or insecurities, or that you don't know it all yet. Wanting to learn and experience, rather than seeming to know everything, makes you appealing to a group of people who want to teach you, right?
- Submit a scholarly essay. This is personal.
- Appear overly idealistic. World peace is a really nice idea, but avoid coming across as preachy or fanatic.
- Don't waste your time explaining away that one low grade you got that one time. Defending your record is not the most important thing.
- Don't write something that might embarrass the reader or feel uncomfortable. There's nothing wrong with addressing sensitive issues, but do it gingerly and use a respectful tone.





FINAL TIPS:

- Look up the prompts at the colleges you want to attend. Find a common prompt. Write to that.
- Don't try too hard to be funny. Just be real.
- Short is better than long!
- The essay involves writing, not video journalism, drawing, cartooning, singing, or even poetry. The admissions board wants to see that you can successfully—and powerfully—string sentences together. *Legally Blonde*: cute idea. But not realistic.
- Just because you want to be a doctor doesn't mean your college essay should appear on a prescription pad. You want to be a lawyer? Don't write your essay as a courtroom document. Get it?





FORMATTING

- Package appropriately. If your essay looks poor, an admission board might not even bother reading it.
- Use plain, white, high quality normal sized paper. **Present in MLA format.** NO CUTESY fonts. Sorry.
- Pay attention to school's word limit. But 508 is okay. Just don't exceed by more than 10%.
- Comply with college requirements. Don't use a smaller font to fit it all on one page, for example—edit and shorten your essay instead.

