

THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

The importance of the college application essay is often underestimated by students. It is a key factor in the admissions process. James W. Wickenden, former Dean of Admissions at Princeton University summed up the power of the essay with the following statement.

“The essays make the facts in a folder come alive for us. We don’t know the applicants personally. We haven’t taught them, coached them or counseled them. All we have is the image presented in the portfolio. The essays do much to shape our impression.”

Application essays offer the opportunity to discuss the kind of person you are, your aspirations, what is important to you and the struggles you have faced. You can use the essay to explain mistakes of the past (failed courses, low SAT scores) and the high points of your life (awards, special talents/activities). Best of all you can demonstrate that you know how to write well, an invaluable skill at any college.

How can you use this essay power to enhance your chances of being accepted at the college of your choice? Begin by realizing that the essay gives you an opportunity to present an honest insight into who you are and what events brought you to this point. Now is not the time for trying to falsely impress the admissions staff. As with the rest of your application, this is not something to just slam together at the last minute. A good essay takes planning and time.

An often asked question is some variation on, “Tell us about yourself.” You could prepare for this inquiry by putting together some notes about yourself. First, list all your school activities, community involvement, outside activities and awards/honors. Next list all the events in your life that had a particularly strong impact, like a special trip or project. Think of one or two sayings or philosophies of your family. How did these things shape you? Describe an accomplishment you achieved and the struggles you had to overcome. How did you tackle it and how did it affect you? Lastly, list any shortcomings in your school record and explain why they occurred. If you could, would you change the situation? How? Why? Using these notes you are ready for the first draft.

Once your first draft is finished, put it aside for a day. Come back to it with a fresh perspective. Your goal when you polish this first draft is to make it concise and to the point. Sharpen your focus. Did you cover the topics you had planned to include? Did the essay ramble without a focus point? Can you condense some ideas into shorter, simpler terms? You also need to know and apply the writing principle of “Show, don’t tell.” The rule is that you should give the readers such convincing evidence that they draw the conclusions you want them to draw. Give examples. Instead of saying, “I’m very responsible,” try something to illustrate the point such as, “Last summer I was put in charge of a project...”

Read the essay aloud. Your ear will pick up any awkward phrasing. Place yourself in the role of the reader and ask, "Was I bored? Confused? Did the essay go off the subject? Does my first sentence really grab attention? Does the whole thing make sense?"

Be sure to show your essay to others. An objective reader can pick up any weak spots. Your English teacher is also an excellent resource. Ask them to read over the essay and make suggestions. While other people can give you ideas for improvement, only you can decide what actually should be changed. Good essays reflect the writer and are clear, honest and concise. Good essays take time and effort. They are rarely created in a ten-minute session.