

## Tips for Writing College Essays

1. **Answer the Question.** You can follow the next 12 steps, but if you miss the question, you will not be admitted to any institution.
2. **Be Original.** Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. If writing about a gymnastics competition you trained for, do not start your essay: "I worked long hours for many weeks to train for XXX competition." Consider an opening like, "Every morning I awoke at 5:00 to sweat, tears, and blood as I trained on the uneven bars hoping to bring the state gymnastics trophy to my hometown."
3. **Be Yourself.** Admissions officers want to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions. If you do this, your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you. Unless a philosophy or societal problem has interested you intensely for years, stay away from grand themes with which you have little personal experience.
4. **Don't "Thesaurize" your Composition.** For some reason, students continue to think big words make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate contexts with complex styles.
5. **Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose.** If you are not adept with imagery, you can write an excellent essay without it, but it's not easy. The application essay lends itself to imagery since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details. Appeal to the five senses of the admissions officers.
6. **Spend the Most Time on your Introduction.** Expect admissions officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.
  - o **Don't Summarize in your Introduction.** Ask yourself why a reader would want to read your entire essay after reading your introduction. If you summarize, the admissions officer need not read the rest of your essay.
  - o **Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction.** It is not necessary or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.
7. **Body Paragraphs Must Relate to Introduction.** Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.
8. **Use Transition.** Applicants continue to ignore transition to their own detriment. You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay. Transition is not limited to phrases like *as a result, in addition, while . . . , since . . . , etc.* but includes repeating key words and progressing the idea. Transition provides the intellectual architecture to argument building.

9. **Conclusions are Crucial.** The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary since the essay is rather short to begin with; the reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words before. Also do not use stock phrases like *in conclusion*, *in summary*, *to conclude*, etc. You should consider the following conclusions:
- Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
  - Consider linking your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
  - Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
  - End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not **try** to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
  - Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
  - Remember, your essay need not be so tidy that you can answer why your little sister died or why people starve in Africa; you are not writing a sit-com, but should forge some attempt at closure.
10. **Do Something Else.** Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.
11. **Give your Draft to Others.** Ask editors to read with these questions in mind:
- What is the essay about?
  - Have I used active voice verbs wherever possible?
  - Is my sentence structure varied or do I use all long or all short sentences?
  - Do you detect any clichés?
  - Do I use transition appropriately?
  - Do I use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid?
  - What's the best part of the essay?
  - What about the essay is memorable?
  - What's the worst part of the essay?
  - What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
  - What parts of the essay do not support your main argument or are immaterial to your case?
  - Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This **MUST** be the case.
  - What does the essay reveal about your personality?
  - Could anyone else have written this essay?
  - How would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more \_\_\_\_\_."
12. **Revise, Revise, Revise.** You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely. If H.D. Thoreau couldn't write a good essay without revision, neither will you. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Do you use transition? Are your introduction and conclusions more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?
- Allow for the evolution of your main topic. Do not assume your subject must remain fixed and that you can only tweak sentences.
  - Editing takes time. Consider reordering your supporting details, delete irrelevant sections, and make clear the broader implications of your experiences. Allow your more important arguments to come to the foreground. Take points that might only be implicit and make them explicit.