

### **What's the purpose of this essay, a college essay?**

One purpose, obviously, is to give us a sample of your writing. Liberal arts colleges place a premium on strong writing skills. We look for a mastery of the mechanics of writing (grammar, syntax, and organization) as well as for fluency and originality. Your essay gives us a taste of the maturity of your thinking and writing, and of your readiness for a competitive liberal arts program.

A second purpose is to enable you to share something of yourself that may not be reflected in your academic record or in your recommendations.

### **Some Tips for Writing**

1. Offer us some insight. This is the time to recount a powerful experience or significant relationship (such as tutoring a handicapped child or discovering a passion for medieval art) that has changed your perspective or challenged your beliefs. Instead of merely giving us a chronology of your bicycle trip through France, you might explain how your responses to the culture altered your perceptions of your own country and yourself.

One applicant shared his urban upbringing by taking us with him on a daybreak run through the city streets. Another sent a journal she kept while she was living as an exchange student with a Greek family. Yet another applicant wrote about how playing a varsity sport helped him appreciate the value of teamwork in an otherwise individually competitive high school environment.

2. Be careful of the obvious. For instance, "How my trip to France taught me independence" is a bit too easy. But, if reflective, anything - travel, a significant personal struggle, a family experience - can be an impressive subject.

3. Social and political topics should be tied to previous interests or experiences. An essay that ponders the effects of poverty as perceived while volunteering to build a house in Appalachia could work. An essay on devotion to environmentalism as an abstract idea carries little weight.

4. Demonstrate your intellectual interests. Consider writing about your response to works of a particular author, research in certain areas, or ways in which you as a student have reached beyond your curriculum. In fact, we encourage you to submit additional writing samples (perhaps a copy of a term or research paper, poems, or even an in-class essay) that reveal an ability to organize thoughts and defend ideas under the pressure of time.

5. Write and rewrite! The essay is the closest possible model to a principal form of college writing, the term paper, so treat it as an example of your college readiness.

6. Keep an eye on presentation. The essay should be neat, readable, handwritten or word processed

## The Essay Writing Process

Okay, boot up your computer and let's get to it. To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you'd use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

### Prewriting

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- **Brainstorm:** Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on strengths of personality, not things you've done. For example, you are responsible (not an "Eagle Scout") or committed (not "played basketball"). If you keep drifting toward events rather than characteristics, make a second list of the things you've done, places you've been, accomplishments you're proud of; use them for the activities section of your application.
- **Discover Your Strengths:** Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline:** Now, next to each trait, list five or six pieces of evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections:** Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?

### Drafting

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."
- The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- The conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

An application essay doesn't need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the Congress of Vienna, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main points.

There are three basic essay styles you should consider:

- **Standard Essay:** Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence. Choose things not apparent from the rest of your application or light up some of the activities and experiences listed there.
- **Less-Is-More Essay:** In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.
- **Narrative Essay:** A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two narrative paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

### Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool:** Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?
- **Feedback Time:** Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- **Edit Down:** Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- **Proofread Two More Times:** Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.