

“It’s an opportunity!”

General Advice for the College Essay

- Relax! Enjoy the process of self-evaluation!
- Listen to all the advice you get, but, above all, “To Thine own self be true.”
- Be sure that the people who advise you know what’s required for a college essay.
- If you are given a prompt, answer the question posed!
- You are the expert; the subject is your life, so consider it an opportunity to share your interesting existence with others. Let your parents help jog your memory.
- No one formula works for everyone, but you may find comfort if you consider some of the “categories” into which essays can fit.
- Do not worry about finding an unusual approach that (you assume) has never been tried; your personal uniqueness should shine regardless of the approach.
- Admissions officers want honesty and enthusiasm! They want to learn who you are, not what you’ve done.
- Focus on what your activities and interests reveal about you.
- Unless otherwise specified, the completed essay should be one to two pages (double spaced). One and a half pages is ideal.
- **SHOW**, don’t tell!
- Keep the topic small; don’t try to tackle huge philosophical issues of religion, life, etc.
- If you choose to discuss any of “the four D’S,” (death, drugs, divorce, depression), you really need to show that you’ve grown beyond the experience. Draw a larger lesson and don’t appear to dwell on problems. Show positive growth.
- If the college offers an “optional essay,” DO IT! Consider it another opportunity. Sometimes this essay, because of its freedom, is the most lively and spontaneous.
- Don’t worry about searching for controversial issues. HOW you approach the subject is much more important than the subject itself.
- Do edit, but don’t edit the life and personality out.
- Clean up grammatical and/or typing errors. Make the final copy good-looking.
- Humor can be helpful, but don’t force it. Also, remember your audience (the readers are definitely older than you!) and any regional differences (e.g. some readers in New Hampshire may not understand surfer language or humor).
- Know, without any doubt, what personality traits you want the reader to perceive. Then, if your many sample readers (teachers, friends, etc.) say the essay reveals synonymous terms, you have a successful essay.
- Be cautious about the generic travel essay, the generic sports essay, the generic class officer essay, etc. It’s entirely acceptable to use one of these subjects, but don’t fall into predictable cliched ideas. I have student samples that work well.

GETTING STARTED / BRAINSTORMING

Collect and recollect data about yourself (who you are, what you've done, where you're going). Sometimes the simplest daily event can turn into a wonderfully revealing essay. Making specific lists on these subjects will also help you be more articulate during college interviews.

Addressing the following suggestions may help you.

1. List all your activities for the past four years, including (1) school activities, (2) community services, (3) other activities (lessons, work, travel), (4) awards and honors.
187840192. Record major travel and/or educational experiences, noting your strongest impressions and how they affected you. Write down specific reasons for your impressions.
187839472. Think of one or two sayings that you've heard your whole life, then explore how these aphorisms have shaped you.
187839520. Describe an accomplishment that you had to struggle to achieve. Include how you tackled it and how it changed you.
168135968. List any shortcomings in your school record and explain why they occurred. If you could relive the last four years, what would you do differently and why?
187839424. What personality traits do you value most in yourself? Examine how these traits have helped you.
187840576. What three (or more) adjectives describe you best?
187840672. What would your strongest critic say is good about you?
187840624. What do you hope to be doing at age 40?
187840384. What does "success" mean to you? How do you plan to achieve it?

WRITING THE FIRST DRAFTS

- Allow "thinking time" between brainstorming and the first draft.
- Talk out possible topics with friends or parents. Short conversations can sometimes help you discover what you most want to express.
- Know which personality traits you want the reader to glean from the essay. (See number 7 above.)
- Consider using one of the common approaches or gimmicks I will share with you. (See page three.) Especially for students who "just don't know what approach to take," it can give a focus, a formula with which to begin. Don't worry about being unique—just get a draft on paper. You can always change your mind later or use another approach.
- Plan the essay (perhaps via an outline) so that you'll know what you want to write about and the order of presentation (organize EACH paragraph separately).
- Don't think too much or second-guess yourself while you write. Instead, try to write fluently.

INITIAL FEEDBACK AND EDITING

- Let the essay sit for a few days (at LEAST overnight!)
- Read it aloud; let your ear pick up troublesome spots.
- Let others read and comment on it. Ask them to tell you what adjectives describe the writer (you're looking for a match to your pre-chosen traits), how you come across as a person, where you need more detail, where less detail, where it is boring or repetitive, and most important, what parts are best. Strive to get specific comments from your readers, not vague generalizations.

POLISHING FINAL DRAFTS

- Now is the time to focus on style, mechanics, and grammar.
- Reread it aloud again, or even better, have someone read it to you.
- Consider if you should add more detail or cut redundant ideas.
- Consider combining some sentences and shortening others; strive for sophistication in sentence structure (which includes an occasional short, pithy sentence).
- If a word, a sentence, or paragraph bothers you, rewrite two new versions. One will please you.
- Proofread for ANY spelling or mechanical errors. Get someone to help with this; too often we are the worst proofreaders of our own work. (At least I am!)
- Remember your audience; you're introducing yourself to a *college admissions officer*.
- Consider adding any poetic devices that can provide a flair, a sense of style. (See attached list.)
- Type it neatly, double spaced.

SOME COMMON APPROACHES/GIMMICKS

1. "An incident," no matter how big or how small, can provide opportunity for reflection. Explain the incident's greater significance. The incident itself is, in many ways, insignificant; what you reveal about yourself because of the incident is much more important.
2. "Box o' goodies." A look into your junk drawer or the shoe box that holds your assorted "I have to keep this item because it reminds me of..." articles can be fun. Each of these gems (old movie stubs, a broken toy part, etc.) reveals your values and life.
187840336. "An object you like." I've had students write about one object, like a chair or a tea pot that has special meaning; again what it reveals is most important.
187840337. "Your room description" Let us know what posters you have on your walls, what items sit on your desk, and why it appears as it does.
187840338. "Something you observe in others" allows us to see you in perspective. One student described his brother's baseball game (and his pride in the younger sibling); another wrote about a troubled youth he met while on a sailing expedition.
187840339. "The Metaphor" can be intellectually engaging. One student wrote about how calculus reflects his life; another wrote about how she resembles an apple.
187840340. "A Conversation" can present clear personalities, both in you and the person with whom you converse.
187840341. "A Journey," especially one that changed you significantly. I'll discuss these in class, and provide some samples of students who used travel effectively.
187840342. "An Activity" can also be the focus. Again, I can provide examples that handle activities without being banal.
187840343. "The List" can be quirky and allow you lots of breadth. This one can be risky, but we'll talk about it.

SOME STYLISTIC DEVICES
REMEMBER THAT STYLE SHOULD REFLECT CONTENT

Specific devices you can include:

- Alliteration reinforces meaning and supplies a lovely musical sound. Be sure to use sounds that match the emotion you want to portray. I'll explain.
- Allusion makes you appear very intelligent. Most are historical, literary, mythical, or religious.
- Hyperbole (or its opposite, understatement) can add irony or humor.
- Imagery comes from all of your senses: visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory, olfactory. These images produce your best descriptive writing and can be combined to great effect.
- Metaphor (and extended metaphor or motif) can show great sophistication, intellect, and critical thinking.
- Onomatopoeia is good for sound effects. It adds a degree of real life, "down-to-earth" language.
- Oxymoron can be milked for confusing periods of life.
- Paradox can, like oxymoron, explain situations that seem contradictory.
- Parallel Construction adds organizing force, attracts attention, and supplies musical rhythm. This device adds delightful sophistication.
- Personification adds vivid detail; the essay comes more alive with it.
- Repetition of a sound, a word, a phrase, or a clause adds a grammatical pattern that, like parallel structure, gives a nice rhythm.
- Simile adds unusual comparison.
- Wit is amusing language that delights in its verbal power; it adds ingenious perceptive remarks.

General ideas to consider:

- Avoid too many linking verbs and overuse of the word "I" (I'll point them out!).
- Strive for variety in your sentence structure.
- Be aware that readers spend only about one to two minutes reading the essay. Eliminate any "wasted words" or any phrases or sentences that don't propel the essay forward. Think of the essay as a metaphor for a car: put it in gear (as opposed to neutral!) and move to your destination as opposed to spinning your wheels.
- Use concrete detail and descriptive phrasing.
- Try to grab the reader's attention with the very first sentence.
- Understand the importance of your introduction and conclusion.