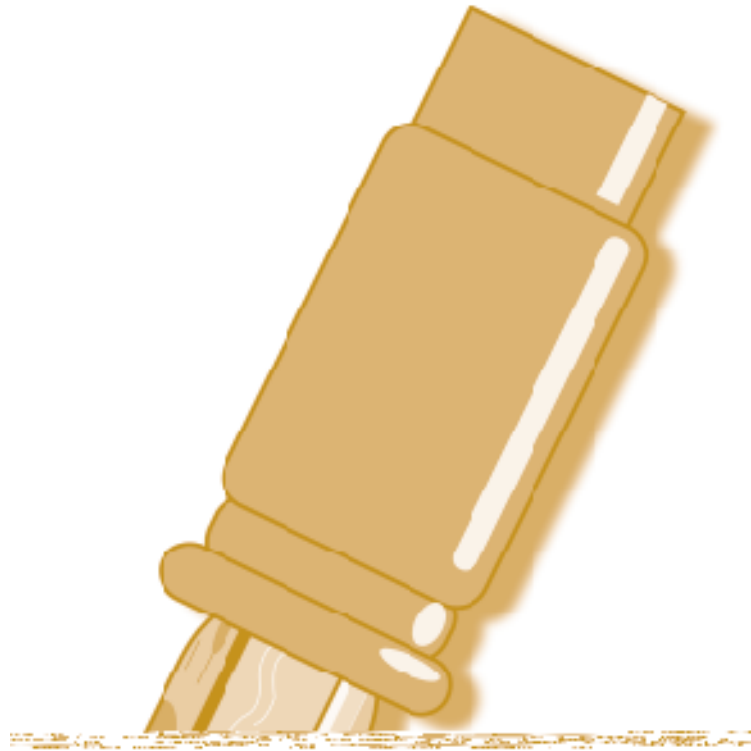


ADMISSION COUNSELING SERVICE

# Writing the College Admission Essay

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# Writing the College Admission Essay

By Madeleine R. Eagon  
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## Why an essay?

Perhaps the most intimidating part of the college application process, once you have decided where you will apply for admission, is responding to essay questions. As the parent of a successful college applicant, I can attest to the angst that develops over "What do they want?"

When colleges ask you to provide essay responses, they are really asking for two things. First, they want to know if you can write; meaning, can you produce prose that is accurately spelled and grammatically correct with paragraphs and topic sentences? Second, what kinds of ideas do you have? In other words, can you write, and do you have anything meaningful to say? That doesn't make it any less intimidating, does it?

The best approach is to think of your essay as a means to introduce yourself personally to the admission committee. As an individual, you are far more than a collection of high school courses and grades, SAT and ACT scores, school activities and community involvements. Although your academic record will be the single most important piece of your application for admission (courses taken as well as grades earned), the essay enables you to differentiate yourself from all the other prospective students. Think of it as a means to open a small window into the way you think and feel for people who don't know you. Contrary to what you may believe, admission officers genuinely care about applicants for admission. We look for ways to understand what motivates you and what you really care about. Your essay will help us make the connection between you as an intellectual being and your personal qualities. The key is to write about yourself in a way that is personal, sincere, and will draw in the reader.

## Think of your audience

One of the greatest challenges as you plan your essay is that you are writing for people you don't know. You have no idea about their interests, opinions or values. Admission committees run the gamut from senior admission staff who have read thousands of essays, to young staff members closer to your age and experience who haven't yet read it at all, to faculty members who are always focused on academic excellence. The one thing you may assume is that they value good writing, broadly defined.

Good writing means well-written prose on a subject that matters to you. There is no sure formula for a successful essay, even one that is well thought-out and written. Thus, you waste your time trying to "psych out" what an admission committee would like to read. Rather, you should focus your energies on writing about something that is of real interest to *you*. If you are passionate about your topic, your energy will be apparent in your writing and draw in the reader. There is nothing more depressing than reading an essay

Madeleine Eagon is a well-known presenter who often speaks to professional associations and families about the college admission process. The college essay is one of her favorite topics because it is the one area of the application over which the student has real and immediate control. Admission committees may find the student essay to be a wonderful description of an interesting person, or painful prose that does not advance the case for admission. We hope the following will help you find your voice.

from a student who has decided what we would like to read and then writes that essay. Typically, they have guessed wrong; we find their topic dull, and their writing does not achieve the desired end.

One thing to keep in mind is that admission committees as a group read many essays. That means they get tired, and it is harder to capture and keep their attention. That isn't very reassuring, is it? Once again, the burden is on you to write something of genuine interest that will engage the reader and keep him or her going. Outstanding essays really stand out in the crowd, and your readers will appreciate your effort. Your goal is to write an essay that will make your audience want to include you in the incoming class.

## Choosing your topic

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Many colleges suggest two or three possible essay topics. The choices often ask you to reflect upon a significant experience. The topics on the Common Application used by more than 225 colleges nationwide are these: "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement or risk that you have taken and its impact on you." "Discuss some issue of personal, local or national concern and its importance to you." "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence." "Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you." Do any of these topics strike a chord with *you*? Notice that the common theme in all these questions is you. Regardless of your choice of topic, your essay should provide the reader insight into who you are, how you think and what matters in your life.

Admission committees want you to discuss an issue of *significance* or *importance* in your essay. It can be a challenge to figure out what constitutes significant or important to an admission committee. The key, again, is determining what is significant to *you*. Exercise care as you select your topic. Every year there are a number of overused subjects that students choose. Imagine how many essays admission officers have read about "My Family Trip to Europe." Another favorite with student athletes is writing about "The Big Game." Unless you have a truly original approach to the experience, you may wish to consider other options. Remember that if an idea occurs to you quickly, it likely also occurs to thousands of other high school seniors, some of whom are no doubt applying to the same schools.

If specific questions are offered for your response, read them carefully and think about your possible response. Can you get a sense of what is wanted? What approach might you use to respond? Reflect on your background, your experiences and your interests. What sets you apart from other applicants? What details about yourself will create a favorable impression?

Increasingly, colleges are asking open-ended questions, those that allow you to frame your essay around a topic of your choosing. Although this allows you the freedom to be creative, many students find that the lack of a specific question leaves them directionless. If you are provided the opportunity to tell the admission committee anything you like about yourself, again, consider your possible responses. Perhaps you have had a life-changing experience you wish to share. Perhaps you have real enthusiasm and involvement in a specific activity that has shaped who you are. Choose wisely, as your choice of topic will say as much about you as a potential member of a university community as the words you use to describe it.

After you have considered how you will respond, write down a few thoughts or ideas that may become the basis of an outline. These will help you organize your approach later.

Final thoughts: don't be afraid to be humorous if you have that capacity. There is nothing more delightful than a well-written humorous essay. The admission committee members will thank you for a good laugh. And don't be afraid to be controversial. If you have strong feelings about a closely held value, you should consider sharing them. It is a mistake to tell your readers what you think they want to hear just so you won't offend them.

## Composing your essay

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Don't try to write your essay in a single sitting. Sure, it's tempting to write it once and think you have it over with, but trying to get it right on the first attempt may cause writer's block. Writing is easier if you take it in stages. Of course, this implies that you have not waited until the night before your application is due to begin your essay! Some students write sufficiently well that they can submit a first draft as a final product, but it is far fewer than those who think they can.

Consider presenting your material in narrative form. Remember that readers like stories, and this may help you organize your thoughts. You may want to organize your essay around one or two themes and give some specific examples. For example, you may want to write about your commitment to volunteer service or your receptiveness to new experiences. Keep in mind that it is not just what you say in your essay that matters, but how you say it. Use vivid, descriptive language to capture your reader's interest. Examples that demonstrate your involvements and contributions are more effective than saying "I'm involved in student government."

Although you wish to present yourself in the best possible light, this is not the moment to write as though everything good that happens in your school or community is due to you. You want to convey a sense of competence and accomplishment without sounding immodest. Admission officers are well aware that most projects involve a team rather than an individual, and that sharing credit for a successful conclusion is not only smart, it is honest. Don't use a string of superlatives to describe yourself. And don't even think of beginning every sentence with "I." You don't have to be superhuman to gain admission to college. What admission committees seek are accomplished students who have made substantive contributions to their school or community and will bring that same energy to their college experience.

## Revising your essay

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Remember that all writing improves with revision. Write your draft and then put it away for a few days. Come back to it with the understanding that the principal challenges in writing your personal statement are:

- to convey a great deal of information in a limited number of words;
- to convey personality and a sense of self;
- to write about your qualities and achievements without sounding immodest; and
- to engage the reader without sounding cute or contrived.

Some distance will help you more easily evaluate whether or not you are covering your topic well and with interest.

Because it's so hard to determine whether or not your essay says something important and distinctive about you, consider asking several people – teachers, friends, parents – to read and respond to your draft. They will help you take a fresh look at your prose. Does it describe you in an interesting way? Does it represent your best work? Does it sound like you? Get a variety of reactions, and decide how you want to revise your work.

Be sure to examine the overall structure of the essay. Is your opening engaging but not contrived? Is your style concise and conversational? Did you avoid clichés such as "really exciting" or "very unique." Did you use relevant, concrete examples? Is your writing carefully structured with paragraphs and topic sentences? Do you use effective transitions between paragraphs? Do you tie all secondary points to your main argument? Does it have a provocative opening statement and then fizzle, or does it steadily build in interest and intensity? Have you made clear the relationship between your ideas? Will the reader, who doesn't know you, understand you better when he or she is finished?

## Target: Perfection

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Proofread, proofread, proofread! Your essay should be as perfect as you can make it as inferences will be drawn about your quality of thinking and writing. Grammatical and spelling errors will ruin the impression you are trying to make in your application. Type your essay carefully on your computer, and consider submitting an online application. Ask someone who is good at it to proofread, and remember to check for errors in context. Grammar and Spell Check will not always catch errors in your nuances or meaning. If required to do so, write your essay neatly by hand. Don't let mechanical errors undo the quality of your excellent writing!

Important note: spell the name of the university to which you are applying correctly; to not do so is very annoying to admission officers. Also, spell the name of your intended major correctly. You have no idea how many people can't spell business or psychology correctly that want to study them in college!

Finally, good luck. With thought and careful crafting, your essay may be the compelling piece of your application that gets you into the college of your choice.

## For further information

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If you have further questions, feel free to call us at 800.447.2495. An admission officer will be pleased to speak with you.

## Planning Your College Choice? We'd Like to Help

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As a public service, DePauw University's Office of Admission provides advice to middle and high school students and their parents about a variety of topics. This service is designed to help you prepare for all aspects of the college selection process and to guide you as you make your college choice.

## Other Publications of the DePauw University Admission Counseling Service:

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Planning Your High School Academic Program

Planning Your College Search

Selecting a School of Music

The Audition

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The College Bound Student-Athlete

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