

# Acing the College Essay

**Strategies for Writing College Admissions Essays**

# What is the College Admissions Essay?

The admissions essay is the part of the college application where you get to hold the attention of the admissions' person reading your essay and talk about who you are. This is the portion of the application where the university gets to know the person behind the GPA, the standardized test scores, the grades and coursework. Remember, colleges may receive tens of thousands of applications. This is *your* opportunity to make a statement. Use it to highlight the best version of who you are and what you intend to bring to their university. Make the most of this opportunity!

**“Fitting in and standing out are the goal of your college essays”**

# College Admissions Essays

- ❖ **Personal Statements (Private Colleges and Universities):**
  - Common Application (Choose 1 prompt out of 5-7 available options)
  - Coalition Application
  - Universal Application
- ❖ **Insight Questions (University of California):**
  - Insight Questions
- ❖ **School Specific Prompts**
- ❖ **Supplemental Essay Prompts**

# Common Application Essay Prompts 2020-2021

- 1) Some students have a background, identity, interest or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story.
- 2) The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- 3) Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- 4) Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma—anything of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
- 5) Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- 6) Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
- 7) Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

# Types of Essays

## ❖ **Dynamic Essays–narrative story telling**

- Informal tone.
- Take the reader on a journey.
- Written in first person.
- No formula involved (Forget the 5 paragraph essay!)
- Stand out in your voice, tone and authenticity.
- Example: Recount a time when you faced a challenge.

## ❖ **Categorical Essays–require opinions and facts.**

- Asks for a specific response to a prompt.
- Example: Elaborate on why you are choosing to apply to this college?

# University of California Insight Questions

- ❖ 8 questions, students must address four
- ❖ 350 words or less for each response
- ❖ View as a personal interview on paper
- ❖ There is no advantage or disadvantage to choosing certain prompts over others.
- ❖ Select questions that are most relevant to your experience and that best reflect your individual circumstances.
- ❖ For some practice writing, check out the 2019–2020

[UC Personal Insight Questions](#)

# Qualities of a Good Essay

## ❖ **Tone**

- Think about your audience and required tone. Formal vs. Informal & Mature vs. Immature.

## ❖ **Voice**

- Is your unique style of communication coming across in your writing?

## ❖ **Organization**

- Make sure your writing has structure and a cohesive flow: Beginning, Middle and End.

## ❖ **Entertaining**

- Craft strong opening sentences that grab and sustain the reader's attention. Engage them!

## ❖ **Persuasive**

- Be as specific as possible.

## ❖ **Authenticity**

- This is personal! Remember you are 17-18 years old and the comments, word choice and language you use in the essay should reflect this. Just be you!

# What Not to Do...

- ❖ Don't write a 5 paragraph essay.
  - This is not for an English class!
- ❖ Beware when using humor!
- ❖ Don't use word choice and language that is not your own.
  - While consulting the dictionary and thesaurus is good, experienced readers know when a student relies too heavily on these tools. Let your unique voice and words come through!
- ❖ Be careful if writing about sensitive or controversial topics.
- ❖ If you are writing about a challenge you've faced don't get trapped there!
  - Move on to talk about how you overcame it and what you learned along the way.
- ❖ Don't overshare.
  - Details are critical, but give just enough to get your point across to the reader.
- ❖ Don't go over the word account!



# Writing Tips to Get You Started

1. Brainstorm-Identify the characteristics that define you. Choose the top 2-3.
2. Identify a time when you demonstrated those top characteristics.
3. Identify a good story that demonstrates a time when you faced conflict, hardship, challenges and needed to demonstrate your character.
4. Write about the problem and how you overcame it using your top characteristics. (Show and Tell)
5. Give structure to your narrative.
6. Stay on message and always bring it back to you and your defining qualities.
7. Conclusion: Talk about what you learned from facing this particular problem.
8. Edit, Edit, Edit! Check for grammar, spelling, flow, word choice, content.

# Writing Tips and Reading Resources from the Experts

[Tips for Writing an Effective Application Essay](#)

[Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay](#)

[Johns Hopkins: Essays That Worked](#)

[Hemingway Editor App](#)

*College Essay Essentials: A Step by Step Guide to Writing a Successful College Admissions Essay* (Ethan Sawyer)

*The Better College Essay: Fitting In and Standing Out* (Elizabeth Stone)

*Fiske Real College Essays That Work* (Edward Fiske et. al)