

The College Essay

The college essay is an opportunity for the applicant to share more about him/herself with the admission committee. It is the voice of the application. Below are a few helpful hints to think about when writing:

A GOOD ESSAY SHOULD:

- ✓ Answer the question at hand – all of it!
- ✓ Give the reader a clear sense of why the writer chose that particular topic – why it is important to him/her?
- ✓ Show the reader *how the student has grown/changed* as a result of the experience discussed in the essay.
- ✓ Be clearly organized and concise. Avoid “flowery” language and extensive scenic descriptions, remember The Common Application only allows 650 words!
- ✓ Be proofread carefully; spellcheck with not catch everything.
- ✓ Be re-written several times and not saved for the last minute!
- ✓ Be written in the writer’s own words and voice. The essay should reveal the writer’s self. A funny person can write a funny essay, but someone who is not should not attempt to be.

WHEN WRITING A COLLEGE ESSAY, AVOID

- ✓ Answering only half the question. Don’t just “reflect on a time when you *questioned* or challenged a belief or idea” without also making sure that you describe “What prompted your *thinking*? What *was the outcome*?”
- ✓ Allowing someone else to correct and re-write the essay. Asking for feedback is expected, but the changes must be made by the writer!
- ✓ Using words that are not part of the everyday vocabulary. This is not an opportunity to practice SAT words.
- ✓ Using text language – “lmao, omg, ikr...etc” and words from “Urban Dictionary”.
- ✓ Cutting and pasting the same essay to fit every college application, as it usually will not work. The Common Application makes this less of a problem, but avoid inserting the names of colleges in an essay the wrong essay could end up at the wrong school!
- ✓ Reusing position papers and research papers. It is *very* obvious when a student is re-using an essay s/he wrote for a class which isn’t helpful because it’s not about the student. Likewise, poetry and creative writings are not useful essays.
- ✓ Listing all of your extracurricular activities.
- ✓ Writing about a change in your grades.

TO TEST THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE ESSAY, ASK YOURSELF:

- ✓ What am I trying to say?
- ✓ If I had to summarize the whole essay in two sentences...
- ✓ How does it start and end? Am I still talking about the same thing?
- ✓ Does this really sound like me?
- ✓ What does the reader know about me after reading this?

ESSAY 1

Saving Hummingbirds

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.

Word Count: 434

They said it was going to snow, but all I could see so far was the kind of drizzle that turns everything grey. I saw the hummingbird; I had been watching my feet on the pavement, tracing the cracks in the sidewalk with my eyes. I stopped when I saw it, a tiny green bird no larger than my thumb, silent and quivering with the cold.

This was a female Anna's. There's a pair of Anna's hummingbirds living in my backyard fig tree, and some morning I watch my mother sit next to the red feeder and close her eyes, waiting patiently for the male to buzz inquisitively about her head.

Yet this hummingbird sat so still. She was alive – I could see her hasty breaths – but she was silent. Her lids were half closed. She looked as if she were able to fall into a deep sleep.

My first instinct was to pick her up, hold her tenderly, keep her warm and dry, find a home for her. Then sudden thoughts of bird flu leapt to mind. Finally I settled on middle-ground: I couldn't take her home, but I also couldn't leave her there, crouching beneath an awning in the middle of the sidewalk. Using the driest leaf I could find, I lifted her into my palm. She clung feebly to its stems with her tiny slender toes like eyelashes.

For a moment I held her.

Her warmth surprised me. Her heartbeat hummed. Those bright feathers were so soft. I was afraid I might ruin her, the way touching a moth ruins its papery wings. I was afraid that I'd find the dust of her beauty on my hands once I set her down. I could almost see the candle within her. That candle shone through her dark eyes, but began to flicker and grow dim. I knew I might witness her light fade. I knew that I might hold her, alive and warm, only to see her die my hands in an instant. Just like that, her flame would be extinguished.

After a moment I set her down.

There were no nearby bushes, nowhere to hide her from the elements, just a brick windowsill around a nearby corner. That was where I placed her. She was silent, still breathing, still clutching the leaf.

I checked my watch - I was late for work, and soon customers would walk past the window displays and wonder why the shop's lights weren't on. Still, I couldn't leave this poor little bird. Without thinking, I drew my phone from its pocket and pressed one, speed dial for home.

ESSAY 2

Just One More Page

Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

Word Count: 619

Bookworm. Nerd. Homebody. Geek. Growing up, these words would have instantly popped into the head of my friends and family when asked to describe me. I would have defended myself against the injustice of these accusations, but it was true. My face was constantly buried in a book. I was rarely without one and even attended family dinners with a fork in one hand and the other reserved for page turning. Yes, I brought books to public restaurants, and yes, I did receive odd looks. But from an early age reading has been as vital as breathing and not to be outdone by the necessity of eating.

During my younger years I would resist sleep at all costs to read Mary Pope Osborne's *Magic Tree House* series every night and experience the adventures of Jack and Annie. I was convinced that with the right amount of sincere wishing, my bed would transform into a magic carpet and transport me to some far away land. Much to my disappointment, the mattress remained stationary, but the image was enough. The possibility was enough. These escapades made me curious about the world and my place in it. Where would I one day find myself and what would I learn? From a young age reading developed an inquisitiveness that has continued to shape my life.

At age ten I entered the world of witchcraft and wizardry through J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series and began secretly hoping for a letter of acceptance to Hogwarts. It never came. But the characters and the struggles that they endured captured my imagination. Hermione Granger, a studious and clever girl, remains strong and levelheaded even amidst the most dangerous situations. It is she who employs wit and determination to rescue Harry's uncle from certain death. Her daring nature allowed me to feel as though I could reach beyond my level of comfort as well. I admired her courage when confronted with adversity and I believed that I could brandish a wand with the same sassy confidence.

Recently, my English teacher introduced me to *Wuthering Heights* by Emily Bronte, and since then I have been swept up by the winds of the English moors. Each time that I scan the pages, I connect on an emotional level with Heathcliff's heartbreak when he loses the only person he cares about. Bronte drew me in and made me believe in her characters from the very beginning of her novel, and her talent inspires me to move others the way she has moved me. Many books have made me think, but few have made me feel. *Wuthering Heights* broke my heart and then fixed it, but most importantly it made me realize that I want to include writing in my future. I want the power to connect with a reader so strongly that he or she walks away feeling a little bit changed.

Books like *Magic Tree House*, *Harry Potter*, *Wuthering Heights*, and many others made lasting impressions on me and guided my development as a person. Each time I connected with a character or situation, I learned a little about myself. Reading helped me emerge from the shell I was encased in. It allowed me to mature, gain confidence until I was ready to face the world with Jack and Annie's magic carpet or Hermione's wand. These characters and authors have taught me strength and instilled curiosity that will take more than a lifetime to satisfy. Even though I am becoming involved in activities of an adult, I will always have a book in my purse or under the seat in my car, because reading will always remind me of how far I've come and where I still want to go.

ESSAY 3

Some students have a background story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
Word Count: 603

Since the divorce of my parents about eight years ago, I have gotten to know more about each side of my family. The examples of the different lifestyles I have seen due to the divorce have heavily influenced what I want to become in the future.

First of all, I do love both sides of my family, but on my Father's side I do not want to be like them at all. They all love to drink and smoke even when it is detrimental to their health because they have type-2 diabetes as well as many other medical issues that are exacerbated by this behavior. In addition, only one of them has ever graduated from a University and some don't even have a high school diploma. Visiting my paternal Grandfather over the summer caused me to realize the immense amount of complications that come from harmful activities, because now he has a gangrene infection in his foot and it is killing the tissue and creeping up his body. If he continues to lie to himself and says he is going to get better he will either lose most of his leg or his life. This has shaped the person I want to become because I never want to put someone through the task of taking care of me as one would a child due to my poor choices. My paternal Grandfather is a perfect example of a path I never want to go down.

On the opposite side of the spectrum, I have my Mother's side of the family. My maternal Grandparents had to work at very low paying manual labor jobs as immigrants coming from Portugal, so they could provide a higher level of education for my Mother and Uncle. My maternal Grandmother and Grandfather have both always been the ideal example of what I would like to become when I'm older. They have always saved every penny they could from their jobs as a railroad worker and a seamstress since the day they arrived in New Jersey. This long-term planning allowed them to invest in their children's education and still have a comfortable retirement. They are the ones that I have to thank for my understanding of the needs to save even when it is the most appealing to spend. The Smith side of my family has provided me with the positive role models and useful lessons to improve my life.

My Uncle on my Mother's side is who I have to thank for the clear path I have mapped out for my future. I have researched his job in international finance carefully and have been able to ask him a lot about what I need to do in order to work in his field. Also, my Uncle is more than willing to help me and other aspiring students as he recognized the need for help early on in one's career. Growing up I am lucky to have my Uncle serve as my role model as he has shown me the value of hard work and dedication. By following his example, I will be the second male on my Father's side of the family to graduate from college.

In conclusion, I have always had these polar opposites of parents and relatives, such as my Mom enjoys staying in and reading books while my Dad loves to go out drinking with his buddies. During this past summer I have realized that I don't want to be like my Dad when I grow up. I would much rather be like my Mom, and this is a decision I am now confident in.