

College Application Essays and Personal Statements

Application essays and personal statements allow you to tell a narrative about your experiences, interests, and/or expectations for the future. They give admissions and scholarship committees a more complete view of your qualifications than an application form, resumé, or transcript can provide. They also allow the committee to evaluate your writing skills—your ability to engage readers, to convey personality, and to organize, develop, and communicate ideas clearly. Prompts range from general (e.g. “Please write an essay that demonstrates your ability to develop and communicate your thoughts”) to specific (e.g. “Tell us more about one of your extra-curricular, volunteer, or employment activities”).

Questions to ask

- What experiences have you had that make you unique? Can you describe—or better yet, demonstrate in your writing itself—characteristics that would make you a valuable member of the college or university community for the next four years?
- Have you overcome any obstacles in your educational career? Or, have you hit any speedbumps (failed courses, problems with the law, etc.) that you need to explain?
- What is “missing” from your application file? Think from the perspective of your readers. What information do they already have about you? If they have a transcript, there is no reason to waste words telling them about your high grades. If they have a list of your awards and activities, there is no need to simply re-list them here. You want everything in the personal statement to ADD information to your file. Is there something special about one of your activities that doesn’t come through in a list alone?

Actions to take

- **Read the prompt.** Although many schools require the Common Application or Universal College Application, some schools may have additional essay questions. Read each prompt carefully, answer its questions specifically, and follow its guidelines accurately. If you apply for several programs, make sure each essay satisfies the individual prompts, and do research on the different schools if necessary.
- **Put yourself in the place of your readers.** Your essay will be one among dozens if not hundreds of others they’ll have to read, so it’s important to grab their attention from the get-go. Avoid clichés and avoid stating the obvious. (E.g. “This scholarship would provide me with an excellent opportunity to realize my dream of....”).
- Writing about oneself can be difficult, but now is not the time to be bashful. Your essay needs to promote you. If **brainstorming** for your personal statement leaves you wondering how you ever even managed to get through high school, try the following exercises:

- Make a list of your ten greatest accomplishments. At this point, no one expects you to have traveled the world, found a cure for cancer, or won an Olympic medal. An accomplishment can be defined on a personal level and doesn't necessarily need to demonstrate how you compare to other people. After you write your list, pat yourself on the back—you really *have* done a lot!—then hone in on one or two items that are most relevant to your application. How might you turn these accomplishments into narrative anecdotes?
 - Make a list of the ten adjectives that best describe you. (Not eight or nine: ten.) Pat yourself on the back—you're more interesting than you remembered!—then hone in on one or two that are most relevant to your application.
- Now **identify a theme**. The key to a successful personal statement is focusing your accomplishments and adjectives into a strong theme, resulting in a coherent essay rather than a list.
- **Avoid taking a “life history” approach.** An engaging story will do a better job captivating your readers and giving them a glimpse of who you are.
- **Write with confidence;** use decisive, not hypothetical language. Be honest, write about what you know, and let your personality shine through.
- **Maintain a modicum of modesty.** Overconfident pronouncements may ruffle a reader's feathers (e.g. “I am extremely well qualified and would clearly be an asset to your program”).
- **Consider taking risks.** One way to set yourself apart from other applicants is to take risks in your writing—risks in style and risks in content. Balance the benefits of going out on a limb with how important getting into the program is to you and how strong you feel as a candidate.
- Once you have a draft, **read your essay out loud**, paying attention to what you're saying. This is a tried and true way to catch errors. If you trip over your words, readers likely will too; if you have to inhale several times in one sentence, you likely have a run-on.
- **Revise, revise, revise.** If you can't answer all of the following questions definitively, revamp your essay until you can.
 - What is the overall theme of the essay?
 - Does that theme become apparent near the beginning of the essay (most likely in the first paragraph)? Is there text you can underline that convinces you of that?
 - Do the body paragraphs support the theme? Can you identify sentences in the text that explicitly refer to and develop the theme?
 - Do you provide ample evidence to demonstrate the claims you are making?
 - Are your descriptions vivid?
 - Do you begin the essay with a catchy opening—something that grabs readers' attention immediately?

- Does your essay provide a sense of closure at the end? Does the concluding paragraph reflect on or offer new insights on your theme, or does it simply rehash what you've already written?
- **Share an essay draft with readers whose opinions you trust** and ask them to give you constructive feedback. Take their feedback into consideration, incorporating helpful suggestions and rejecting feedback you disagree with (but be sure you understand why you disagree with it!). Remember that you don't need to satisfy every reader all the time: as the author, you are ultimately in charge of the voice you convey in your essay.

Helpful links

<http://www.conncoll.edu/admission/essays.htm>

The Admissions office at Connecticut College likes essays that demonstrate “creativity and fluency.” Several successful essays are offered on this website.

<http://apps.carleton.edu/admissions/essay/>

What do admissions committees look for in essays? Here's a list of tips from experienced readers at Carleton College.

http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-07-12-college-essays_N.htm

This recent article in USA Today examines the relative role of the application essay in the admissions process.