



Undergraduate College Application Essays

The **application essays** provide an excellent opportunity to make you really stand out to an admissions committee. As you are writing your application essays, remember that admissions committees look at hundreds to thousands of applications. Your application has a much better chance of standing out from the crowd if you have strong essay responses.

There are generally two types of application essays:

1. The *general, comprehensive personal statement*:
The prompt for this type of essay often says something like “Describe yourself and explain why you want to be admitted to our school.” By asking very broad, general questions, these personal statements enable you to take a wide range of approaches in your essay.
2. The **essay response to very specific questions**:
Sometimes applications will ask you to answer several specific questions instead of, or in addition to, a broad one. For this type of response, it is important to make sure that your essays answer the questions specifically, using concrete examples to support the claims that you make.

Before you start writing, consider the following questions:

- What makes you unique? How can you play up your experiences and/or character traits to set you apart from your peers?
- What skills or personal characteristics do you possess that will enable you to be successful in college? How can you use specific examples to demonstrate these skills and characteristics?
- Why are you drawn to this school? What do you know about the program to which you’re applying, such as the opportunities the school provides?
- Have you participated in activities during high school that demonstrate qualities that will be important to being successful in college? What other related skills have you developed in your life (for instance, by working, through extracurriculars, etc.)?
- Do you need to explain any inconsistencies in your academic record— i.e., great ACT/SAT scores but a mediocre GPA (or vice versa), or low grades early in high school and better grades once you were more experienced?
- What have you achieved, academically, personally, and professionally, that demonstrates that you will be a good candidate for this school? Have you overcome any particular obstacles (physically, social, economic, familial, etc.) to get where you are today?
- *Overall, how can you persuade the admissions committee to choose **you**? What makes you a stronger applicant over the others?*

When you begin writing...

1. **If you apply separately to each school, tailor your essay responses for each one- or, at the very least- for your top choices.** It’s more work, but the more you demonstrate how you are a good fit for each school and its specific programs, the more likely the admissions committees are going to agree with you.



- a. **Answer the questions that are asked.** You may find questions from different schools sound similar. However, it is important to figure out what is different about each question so that you can respond to what each school is asking.
- b. **Research the schools.** Browse the college or university website. Look for information about the program to which you are applying, as well as other opportunities and scholarships that the school offers. How does your identity, personality, strengths, and areas of interest fit in with and enhance each school?
2. **Find a unique angle from which to approach your story.**
 - a. Many people struggle with this aspect of the personal statement. Since most of us really lead pretty boring lives, it can be a challenge to figure out what your angle is. Still, remember that although many people may have had the same experiences that you have, no one responds to those experiences in exactly the same way. Tap into your own individuality to freshen up your description of those experiences. *Remember, however, that this is a formal academic document and the language you choose should still reflect that formality.*
 - b. **Be specific.** Use concrete examples to back up the claims you make about yourself. Livening up your statement with compelling examples will do two important things for you: first, it will give the committee *specific reasons* why you will be a good fit for their school, and, second, it will help to *keep the committee interested*. Essay responses that demonstrate a logical connection between your experiences and desired school and/or career path will be more persuasive, and an interested committee is far more likely to remember you when it comes time to decide who's in.
3. **Choose carefully what to include and where to put it.**
 - a. **Focus on the introduction.** The opening of your essay can make all the difference in the committee's willingness to spend time on your application. If you are able to grab your reader's attention from the very beginning, you are more likely to make yourself memorable. The first paragraph sets up the rest of the essay in terms of tone and topic.
 - b. **Highlight your knowledge and experience, but know what to include...** The body of your personal statement will describe classes you've taken, extracurricular activities, work and volunteer experience, and any other sources that illustrate what you would bring to the school.
 - c. **...and what to exclude.** As a general rule of thumb, there are two major things that you should avoid in your essay questions: (1) unnecessary references to controversial issues, and (2) references to activities, awards, or experiences in middle school or earlier. Keep your examples as current as you possibly can, and remember to stay away from topics and language that may offend your readers!
4. **Pay close attention to the mechanics of writing: spelling, grammar, and style.**
 - a. **Follow the instructions.** Stick to the word limit. Read the directions carefully and follow them. An application that does not follow the basic rules will not impress the committee.
 - b. **Proofread, proofread, proofread.** Have other people proofread your essay responses as well. You want to maintain every advantage possible as you are applying, and a meticulously constructed personal statement may be crucial to your success. Demonstrating that you have strong language skills will always be an advantage. A carelessly edited personal statement, on the other hand, could suggest to the committee that you would be equally careless as a student.