

Six Simple Steps to a Strong Essay

It's Always About You

No matter what the essay topic is, the real topic is **you**. The people who read your essay want to get to know you. Use the essay prompt to show your personality, humor, and ability to learn from your experiences.

There's a huge amount of advice on writing college application essays. Here are some basic guidelines to get you started.

1. **Read the instructions and stick to them.** It's amazing how many students throw themselves into the essay without understanding the assignment. Analyze the essay question and requirements carefully. If you are asked, "Who is your favorite neighbor and why?" don't forget to explain the why! Note any rules, such as word count.
2. **Get started.** Many students procrastinate when starting their essay, making their anxiety—and their results—even worse. One way to get going is to talk through your topic. Record your thoughts or have someone type them as you speak.
3. **Show your thoughtfulness.** Colleges look for students who seek challenges and learn from them. As Harry Truman said, "It is what you learn after you know it all that counts." Many successful applicants write about situations in which they weren't so successful but learned a lot.
4. **Develop your topic like a story.** Begin with a great opening sentence that sets the stage. Then tell your story from beginning to middle to end (Outlining your essay will help you lay out a strong story line). Bear in mind that even a small incident can lead to a compelling essay. As one admission counselor explained, "It's amazing how much you can share in 250 words or less."
5. **Be consistent with the rest of your application.** Your essay should bring to life the same person revealed by your grades, scores, recommendations, and extracurriculars. Don't leave the admission reader wondering if your essay "wandered over" from another application.
6. **Revise until it feels right.** Ask people you trust to read your essay for coherence. They may have some ideas for improvement, but don't let anyone change your writing style or what you are trying to say. Don't send it to the college until someone with excellent grammar skills, such as a teacher or parent, proofreads it.