



How to Write the College Essay

One of the most important aspects of the college application process is the college essay. In many ways, it is the best indicator of who you are. It is your chance to set yourself apart from others and to show admissions officers what you can genuinely offer to their school. Do not look at the essay as an obstacle but as a key to getting into college.

JOURNAL ENTRY

Many times, college applications or scholarship applications require you to write about yourself. In your journal, write a page about who you are, your likes, dislikes, strengths, weaknesses, what is important to you, things you have been involved in, and what you would like to do with your life. Remember, this is for your eyes only.

Essay

A short written composition on a particular theme or subject

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You will probably be asked to write something about yourself and your experiences. When thinking about an essay response, take some time and think through what you would like to say. On the following pages you will find a step-by-step guide to writing a college essay. You will be given pointers on how to develop your essay, and then you will actually write one. Do not allow yourself to think that you are a *bad* writer. Everyone can write, and if you follow the guide and the help of your mentor, you will write a good essay. Keep these things in mind:

- *College admissions officers want to gain insight into who you are as a person.*
- *They want to know what is important to you.*
- *They want to see your writing skills and how well you communicate.*

Great writing skills can impress admissions officers. So can honesty and sincerity. College admission officers are interesting in learning as much as they can about who you are and what matters most to you. If your unique story shines through in your admission essay, admissions officers are more likely to remember you as they make their decisions.

Beginning Your Essay

The first thing you need to remember when writing a college essay is to allow yourself enough time to write it well. If you wait to the last minute, you will not have time to revise or edit, and this will be evident in your final product. Coming up with a topic or idea is usually the most difficult step because you want your composition to be original, genuine, and engaging. When you are writing an essay to send with an actual application, you will need a couple of weeks to complete it, if you wish to do your best.

Understanding the Question

Look closely at the essay question being asked of you by the college. Some schools will ask general questions, such as, “Write about an event that changed your life in a positive way,” or “Discuss your goals for the future.” Other schools may be more specific. In any case, make sure you understand what the question is asking. You will not impress an admissions officer if you respond to a question that was not given, even if it is the most outstanding essay ever written. If you are unsure about the question, ask for help.

Brainstorming

A process of developing ideas by writing down many possibilities without judgment

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Thesis

A statement put forward as a main idea; the focus of the essay

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The Writing Process

For the rest of the lesson, you are going to begin writing a college essay. You will follow the steps of the writing process, which include the following:

- Brainstorming or pre-writing exercises
- Outlining and organizing
- Writing a rough draft
- Revising
- Editing
- Writing the final draft

If you think this sounds like a lot of work, you are right. Do not worry, however; this unit will give you a step-by-step guide to writing your essay.

Your topic is stated below. Look it over carefully.

Topic: In an essay of about 500 words, discuss an event that changed your life in a positive way. Explain what the event was and how it changed you.

1. Brainstorming

Do not rush into your essay. You should spend much of your time brainstorming ideas. As you write down your thoughts, you may discover that some of them are rather general. The key to writing a good essay is to keep the topic specific. If you do this, it will help you to remain focused. Also, remember that your idea must involve you personally. Do not write about an event that did not involve you directly; you want to keep it personal. Write down some of your ideas. It might be a good time to re-read your journal entries. Is there something in a journal entry you could use?

Now that you have written down some ideas, read them again, starring (*) the ones that seem most interesting. Choose a topic about which you can write honestly. Do not exaggerate. Also, there is no need to prove that you have learned a moral lesson based on the event. You are not trying to *prove* anything; you are simply trying to express something about yourself.

If you are a migratory student, it would be a good idea to write about your experience. This would show your diverse background and struggles, as well as address financial need and academic issues you might have encountered as your family moved from place to place.

TIPS FOR WRITING AN EFFECTIVE ESSAY

- **When you start, don't worry about perfection.** Once you have created an outline and come up with a list of ideas, let the ideas flow freely for your first draft. You can fix errors later.
- **Let structure guide you.** Not every essay has to have an introduction, body, and conclusion, but there's a reason schools like essays with this structure. It makes your ideas easy to read and understand.
- **Focus your main points.** By using specific examples that relate your personal qualities to the essay's requirements, you can better help admissions officers understand your goals.
- **Be creative.** Look for an unusual connection between your interests and the university, and make it a central point in the essay. For instance, if you admire a famous person who went there, go into detail about what that person means to you.
- **Be honest.** Write what you really think, not what you believe admissions officers want to hear. Some of the best essays tell authentic personal stories.
- **Get feedback.** Let a friend or family member review your writing. Ask for their honest opinion and use it to improve your essay.

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2. Organize Your Thoughts

After you have brainstormed some topics, choose two about which you think you could write something significant. You are going to explore the two topics that most interest you. Write one topic at the top of each column. After you do this, include the appropriate information for each item listed below for each topic:

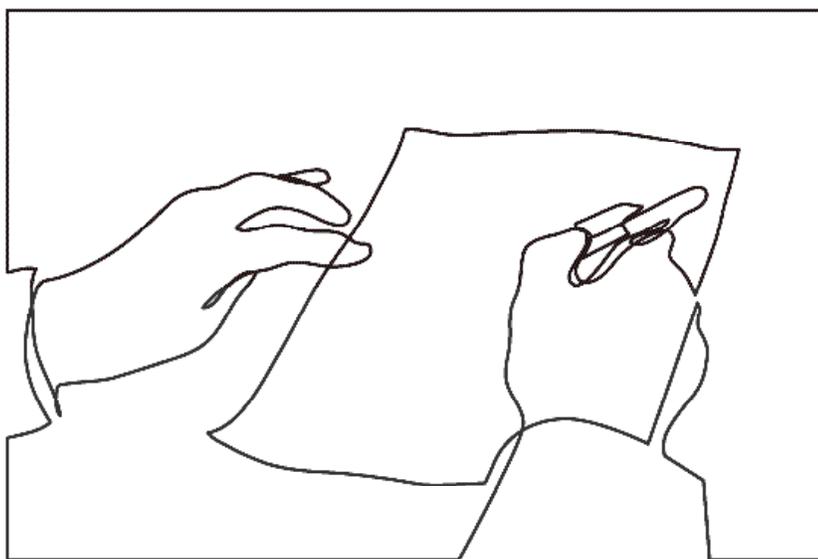
1. Identify the event that changed you.
2. Tell when the event happened to you.
3. Briefly state how the event changed you.
4. Briefly state why it changed you.
5. State if the event is still affecting you and how.

3. Outline two topics

Now that you have completed the list for both topics, look at your responses and ask yourself the following questions:

- Which topic has more information?
- Which one was easier to write about and caused the strongest emotional response?

Start the topic you would like to write about. Congratulations! You have now chosen a topic for your essay. The next part of the lesson will be the step-by-step process of turning your topic into a college essay.



TOPIC OUTLINE 1

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

TOPIC OUTLINE 2

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.



← Introduction

↕ Body

↗ Conclusion

Your introduction and conclusion hold your essay together, and the body contains the delicious ingredients in between.

Parts of the Essay

Your essay will have three major parts: introduction, body, and conclusion. Below is a description of each, including how you should deal with your topic in each part. The essay basically follows the same format as the formal writing you have done in the past.

Introduction

The introduction needs to be focused and should catch the reader’s attention right away. Your introduction must clearly state what you will discuss in the essay. Remember, an introduction explains your topic to your reader, so start with some general statements about what you are talking about. Your paragraph should end with your thesis statement, which is a sentence or two that states the focus of the paper. The reader should be able to follow the progression of your paper by your thesis statement.

Body

The body of the essay is an extension of the introduction. This is where you provide all the details to support your thesis. This is where you would discuss how the event changed you and why it changed you, giving clear, vivid details.

Conclusion

The conclusion is considered by some to be the most important part of the essay. Here, you can tie together all your ideas and restate your thesis. You want to leave a lasting impression, so you may want to include a statement that leaves the reader thinking. You may want to think of a simile or metaphor that would reinforce your idea.

Introduction

The first part of an essay that typically catches a reader’s attention, provides a thesis statement, and summarizes examples

Thesis Statement

A sentence, usually in the introduction, that clearly states the essay’s focus

Body

Main points and examples in the essay that support the thesis statement, usually organized in three or four paragraphs

Conclusion

A final paragraph that reinforces your thesis statement and asks the reader to consider or take action upon your point of view

Creating a Working Outline

The next step in writing a good essay is to create an outline. In the past, you may not have taken this step, but it is an important one because it organizes your thoughts before you begin to write and provides you with something to which you can constantly refer if you lose your focus as you write. An outline format has been provided for you; all you need to do is to fill in the missing information.

Remember, when you actually write your essay, you will include more information than appears in your outline. Do not allow the outline to restrict you. It is simply a guide to remind you of the important points to include in the essay.

Outline

A structured summary used by writers to organize thoughts, focus examples, and plan research

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Elements of Your Outline

Use this format to create a working outline for your college essay.

I. Introduction (first paragraph)

- A. Describe when an important event happened, with whom, and by whom.
- B. Give a short description of the event.
- C. Thesis (how the event changed you)

II. Body of the Essay

A. Second Paragraph: How the event changed you (supporting details)

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

B. Third Paragraph: Why the event changed you

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

III. Conclusion (last paragraph)

- A. Explain again how the event changed you
- B. Expand the lesson to what others could learn from your experience.
- C. Invite the reader to think about a possible similar future event.

Plagiarism

You commit plagiarism when you use the ideas or words of another and present them as your own—and this is cheating. Colleges have means to discover essays written by others, and you would surely be turned down if you did this on a college application. Many colleges expel students who are caught plagiarizing in a course. Plagiarism can include copying a paper from a source without proper documentation. It can also include turning in a paper someone else has written for you or using someone else’s paper without his or her permission.

Buying a paper from a research service and turning it in as your own is also a form of plagiarism. Even paraphrasing (summarizing in your own words) without proper documentation is plagiarism. Colleges today have tools that analyze papers to find plagiarism, so be smart and don’t do it.

Putting it Together

Now that you have prepared an outline, you are ready to begin writing your first draft. You will do this on a separate sheet of paper or on the computer, using your outline as a guide. Remember that you must include an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. Follow the extra tips listed on the next page to help in writing your first draft.

1. *If you get stuck on the introduction, write the body first.* Sometimes it is difficult to write a good introduction, so do not be afraid to write the body of the essay first. After doing this you may then go back and write the introduction. However, the body of the essay must correspond to the thesis statement.
2. *Use double space.* Adding extra space between lines will give you room to insert information that you forgot to include in the first draft.
3. *Do not worry about grammar or spelling.* Do not correct your mistakes as you are writing. In this first draft, focus on getting your ideas organized and flowing. There will be time to edit and revise later.

Now, using the tips listed above, write your first draft. Let the creative energy flow and try not to be too “stiff” in your writing. Remember, this is a personal essay, so it leaves room to be a bit humorous or playful. You want to remain formal, but you can also reveal some emotions.

Plagiarism

To present the ideas or content of another as one’s own, on purpose or by accident

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Checking for Content

As you read your draft for the first time, make sure your *thesis* is clearly stated in the introduction. *Highlight your thesis*. Then check for sentences or phrases that do not stick to the topic, as well as for areas that need more examples or details. As you do this, cross off any unnecessary details and add some that strengthen your thesis. In the *body* of the essay, be sure that your ideas and details flow smoothly into one another and that the transitions between them are not choppy or confusing. In the *conclusion*, be sure that you have summarized your main point. Do not leave the reader hanging; offer some type of resolution or ending to your essay.

Answer the following questions about each essay you write:

- *Is the thesis clear? Find it and highlight it.*
- *Have you given examples that support the thesis?*
- *Did you summarize in the conclusion?*

Checking Your Grammar

After you have finished checking the content of your essay, check your grammar. Often, a writer's ideas are difficult to understand because he or she has written incomplete or run-on sentences. *Grammarly.com* is a free tool to help eliminate errors.

Answer the following questions about your essay.

- *Are all of the sentences complete? A good way to check this is to read your essay backwards starting with the last sentence. Also, check for run-on sentences.*
- *Is the punctuation correct? Check your commas, periods, apostrophes, quotation marks, semicolons, and question marks.*
- *Are there any words misspelled? Circle the words that you think might be misspelled and then look them up or use the spell check on your computer.*
- *Have you eliminated extra words and avoided words or phrases like "a lot", "very", "cool," "nice," clichés or current slang words? Have you overused a word?*

After you have done all this, ask another person to read your essay. You should do this because writers often miss their own mistakes.

THINGS TO DO WHEN CHECKING FOR CONTENT

- Use a different colored text when adding new content.
- Highlight the thesis.
- Cross off non-supportive details and add new ones in unused lines and margins.
- Check for smooth transitions between sentences and paragraphs, making sure that you are not confusing the reader with quick changes.
- Make sure you have summarized your essay in the conclusion and have not added new information.

After checking for content, rewrite your essay. (Yes, you will write it several times before you have a final product.) Leave out the parts you crossed off and add in the new information.

The Final Product

You will need to write at least one more draft of your essay. This is a lot of work for one essay, but when you receive your first acceptance letter from a college, the work will prove to be well worth it. Now, using all the corrections made in the last draft, rewrite your essay on the following pages. This time, really think about the grammar, sentence structure, and spelling because this is probably your final draft.

At the end, congratulate yourself on a job well done.



End of Lesson 7

Edit

To check the content; to revise by changing or adding to content as needed; also to proofread for spelling, grammar, sentencing, punctuation errors

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Cliché

An overused expression

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