

Taming The College Application Essay

Warm Up Activity

— [List three of your fears.

— [List 3 strongest childhood memories.
Be specific.

— [List your 3 favorite places other than
in your house. Again, be specific.

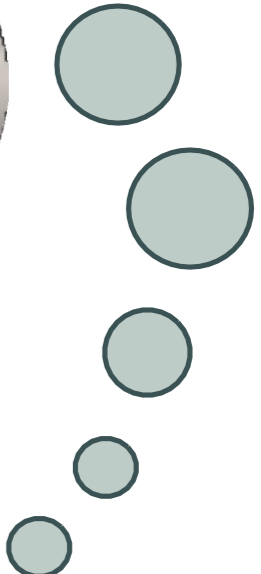
Our Goals:

- [How important is the college essay?
- [What is the college looking for?
- [What topic should I choose?
- [How do I start?
- [Who should read my essay?

How important is the essay?
What is the college looking for?



Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions
Brown University



THIS DOESN'T MAKE SENSE.

My kitchen window looks out over the side yard, and I love nothing more than to open my windows in fall, once I have removed the screens from the windows, and shout,

OMIT

"Heeeeeere chick - chick - chick - chick - chick!"

CHECK THE SAURUS

And the ladies come, flapping and running at the same time, their feet skittering over the fallen leaves, in a frenzied flock, toward the window. They wait underneath for the appearance of the bucket ~~or~~ a handful of scraps, and eagerly peck up the pieces. If the food is particularly wonderful - popcorn, bread, or cheese - they snatch up pieces in their beaks and run off to protect and ~~enjoy their booty out of reach of their greedy~~ sisters. They can't run and eat the larger bits at the same time, so it's hilarious to watch them tear around the yard, an entire strawberry pitched in their beaks, ~~afraid to stop for fear another of the~~ ladies will snatch it away and make it her own.

NEAREST PART

SMARTER WORDS - WORD CHOICE IS IMPORTANT !!

THIS IS OK

IS THIS TOPIC GOOD?

When I break open a still-warm egg from the coop nesting box, I see the



The Typical Essay

During the summer before my junior year of high school, I spent a weekend volunteering with the poor in post-Katrina Louisiana and realized that I am privileged. Most of what these people had had been ripped out from under them and life was very different there from my life in suburban Massachusetts. Amazingly, though, these people still seemed happy. I learned from this experience that money isn't everything.

Formula for Distress

“**I spent** [a summer vacation/a weekend/three hours] **volunteering with the poor in** [Honduras/ Haiti/ Louisiana] **and realized that** [I am privileged/I enjoy helping others/people there are happy with so little].”

Common Mistakes



Dean of Undergraduate Admissions
University of Virginia

Tired Topics

— [The time I won (or lost) the race, the championship, the Big Game ...

— [The death of....

— [The person I most respect

— [World Peace, Environmentalism, Civil Rights, Immigration...

— [The List or the “Un-Essay”

OK, then.

What **IS** the college
looking for?

Common App Essay Prompts

Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like **you**, then please **share your story**.

The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when **you** experienced failure. How did it affect **you**, and **what did you learn** from the experience?

Reflect on a time when **you** challenged a belief or idea. What prompted **you** to act? Would **you** make the same decision again?

Common App Essay Prompts (cont.)

Describe a problem **you**'ve solved or a problem **you**'d like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma-anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. **Explain its significance to you** and what steps **you** took or could be taken to identify a solution.

Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of **yourself** or others.

Common App Essay Prompts (cont.)

Describe a topic, idea, or concept **you** find so engaging that it makes **you** lose all track of time. Why does it captivate **you**? What or who do **you** turn to when **you** want to learn more?

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.

We want to give all applicants--regardless of background or access to counseling --the opportunity to share their voice with colleges.

Every applicant has a unique story.

The essay helps bring that story to life.

What is the college looking for?

YOU*

not your transcript,

not your resume,

not something that will be included in a
teacher recommendation....

Something only YOU can provide

*in less than 650 words

Sample Essay #1



Assistant Dean for Diversity and Outreach
Stanford University

Sample Essay #2



Assistant Dean for Diversity and Outreach
Stanford University

“No Formula” for Success

Who is this person?

Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?

Is this person reflective? a growing, thinking person? self-aware?

Can this person write?

Brainstorming

From “Things” to “Qualities”

- Rather than Strengths, Experiences, Abilities: things you have done, things you enjoy, things you are good at
- Focus on Essential Qualities:
 - Who you are
 - How you think
 - What makes you YOU

Good ... Better... Best



“Aha!”/Reflection

Story

Facts



Essays that Worked

- Check out some great model essays by typing “Essays that Worked” into a search engine. You’ll find application essays posted as examples by major colleges and universities.
- If you want a bit more guidance here, I very much appreciated the collection put together by Connecticut College, so add that school to your search terms and see what you find!

Can I really write
an essay like the ones we just
read?

tips from your teachers

— [Tell a story!

— [Think small.

— [Give your reader one great image, one slice of your life, one moment to remember...then reflect.

— [Allow yourself to be less than perfect. It is good to see a person learning and growing from experience.

An exercise:

Identify one story you could tell for each of the Common App Prompts

Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. ...

The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. ...

Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. ...

Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. ...

Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. ...

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.

One more exercise:

Now, identify one snapshot of that story that could be the focus of your essay.

- one picture
- one moment
- one gesture
- one piece of dialogue

Drafting Workshop

NOW WHAT?

Live thoughtfully.
Relax.
Be you.