

# 10 Universal Tips for COLLEGE ESSAY WRITING



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## 1 WRITE ABOUT YOURSELF

- Admissions departments ask you to write an essay because they want to get a better sense of who you are, not only as a student, but also as a person. They want to know about your passions and interests, the way you think, and how you respond to challenges. These are the things that will hook your readers in.
- Before drafting your essay, self-reflect and consider who you are, what you care about, and what separates you from your peers. Don't tell your entire life story. Instead, focus on one important aspect of your life and explain how it has shaped you into who you are today.
- Try to avoid using any outside quotes unless you are directly asked to. Admissions officers want to read your words, not other people's.

## 4 START EARLY AND WRITE MULTIPLE DRAFTS

- Typically, you'll be able to read essay prompts months before you have to submit an application. The Common App releases its prompts on August 1 each year. So, you don't have to wait until the last minute.
- Writing a draft or two and waiting a couple of days to proofread can help you put together a compelling essay. With a clear head, you'll be able to pick up on any grammar mistakes and determine whether your essay is ready to submit.
- Starting early also gives you time to have teachers, peers, or family members proofread your essay. They can catch what you missed and tell you whether your essay is truly interesting from the perspective of an outside reader.

## 7 DON'T FAKE A SOPHISTICATED VOCABULARY

- You want your words to sound organic, like they are coming from you. Even more so than failed humor, a forced vocabulary can kill an application essay. Synonyms aren't interchangeable, so don't simply plug and place from Thesaurus.com. Every word has a distinct nuance to its meaning, and there is a time and place for every word.
- Admissions officers have read enough essays to know when writing is organic and when it isn't. Big words don't impress admissions officers, but deep thoughts do.

## 8 TRY TO STAND OUT FROM THE CROWD

- While writing your essay, try to be unique, not generic. Many colleges and universities, particularly the competitive ones, have to pick from a pool of a lot of qualified applicants. So, if your essay is generic, there's a good chance you'll be skipped over.
- You don't need to have endured a traumatic or life-altering experience to draft a unique essay. You should consider your application essay as a time to explain what makes you special and worthy of being accepted — something that the numbers in your transcript can't describe.
- Don't draft a meaningless conclusion by simply regurgitating what you already stated. Instead, use the conclusion as an opportunity to round up your thoughts and put a bow on your essay. Elegantly and succinctly remind the admissions officers reading your essay of your thesis statement and leave them with a lasting impression.

## 2 ANSWER THE QUESTION

- This may seem obvious, but whichever question(s) you answer, you must answer in full. Don't get caught up in the intro or go off on a side-tangent. Make sure you fully understand the question you are asked and continue to check back throughout the writing process to ensure that you're on track.
- Take this Common App question for example: "The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?"
  - The meat of this question lies in the second half. If you spend the entire time giving background, you may get sidetracked and miss out on explaining what you learned — the most important part of the question.

## 5 USE YOUR SPACE WISELY

- Essays should be tight and have strong narrative flow. Common App essays are restricted to 650 words, so use your space wisely and avoid redundancy or adding unnecessary information.
- Don't use up too many words in the intro or wait too long to get to the meat of your essay. This can be done by acknowledging your most compelling point during the brainstorming period prior to writing.

## 6 DON'T USE HUMOR IF YOU AREN'T FUNNY

- This may sound a bit harsh, but just because you heard somewhere that admissions officers like humor in the essays they read doesn't mean you should squeeze an awkward, cringe-worthy joke in your writing. Forced writing is easy to recognize.
- You shouldn't necessarily shy away from humor, but don't overuse it. You never know how admissions officers will perceive a joke. They could perceive it as confusing or even offensive. Don't make someone wince while reviewing your entry.

## 9 DON'T LET PROOFREADERS CHANGE YOUR MESSAGE

- Proofreaders are great. However, anyone who's proofreading your drafts — peers or teachers — should not alter or suggest any changes other than punctuation and grammar. It's your essay, and you should be the one writing it. Admissions officers want to know about your thoughts and experiences.

## 10 DON'T WASTE YOUR CONCLUSION

# Tips Writing College Application Essays

**Kim Lifton, Susan Knoppow**



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