

Writing Your College Essay

A Service of
RANDOLPH-MACON COLLEGE
*a coeducational, liberal arts college
in Ashland, Virginia*

Introduction

If you are like most students, you see the college essay as another hurdle that you must jump on the way to being accepted at the college of your choice. In fact, the essay is not a hurdle but a *sure opportunity*; it is a chance for you to "talk" directly to the college's admissions committee and to help them see you as a thinking and feeling person, rather than simply a set of impersonal statistics. Except for the interview, it is your only chance to share your thoughts, insights, and opinions; to highlight your accomplishments; and to convey your maturity and outlook on life. If you see the college essay in this way — as an opportunity — then it is clearly worth the effort to put some extra time, thought, and energy into writing it.

Purpose of the Essay

The college essay is extremely important for two major reasons:

1. It enables the college admissions office to evaluate your communication skills. Through your essay they can assess the clarity of your thinking and your ability to convey your thoughts in a written form.
2. It enables the admissions office to learn more about you as a person, beyond what grades and SAT scores can convey. A well-written essay can speak worlds about your attitudes, feelings, personal qualities, imagination, and creativity. For the admissions staff, it adds another important piece to the puzzle because it distinguishes you as an individual, different from any other student who is applying.

Choosing a Topic

The choice of a topic is frequently not an issue, because many colleges and universities will either give you a topic to write about or present several rather specific topics from which you must choose. Other colleges may simply "suggest" broad general topics or give you total freedom to write about something that interests or concerns you. Regardless of whether you must respond to a prescribed topic or come up with one of your own, here are a few general hints about the most effective way to approach your topic:

- Narrow your topic and try to be as specific and illustrative as possible.
- Relatedly, the easiest topic to write about is yourself. No one knows more about you than you. Since one important purpose of the essay is self-revelation, it is no place to be shy or modest, although you should not exaggerate. If you choose to write about yourself, remember that little incidents and facts are often the most revealing of character and outlook.
- Do not be afraid to write about something you think is a little different. A unique topic or approach is often refreshing to a college admissions officer who has been reading applications all day. Further, an unusual or off-beat essay is an excellent way to show your creativity.

Preparing to Write

Before actually sitting down to write a first draft of your essay, spend some time organizing your thoughts. Develop a frame-

work for your essay so it will have a smooth and logical progression from one idea or incident to the next. Consider your purpose in writing, what you want to convey, and the tone that you think is most appropriate for the topic. Decide on a style that is comfortable for you, not one that you think the college admissions committee prefers. Finally, remember that organizing your thoughts and deciding on a framework does not mean you must be overly rigid at the start; leave room for flexibility and creativity as you actually begin writing.

Writing the Essay

You do not have to get it right the first time! Instead, write the first draft of your essay with the main focus on content — communicating your thoughts. Then set it aside for a day or two, reread it with a fresh perspective, and make any necessary changes. This is also the point at which you should consider matters of organization, style, grammar, spelling, and tone. Once you have rewritten your first draft, you may wish to try it out on your family, friends, English teacher, or guidance counselor. While the final product and final "voice" should be yours, they may be able to offer helpful suggestions for technical or other improvements.

Within this general outline for actually writing the essay, there are some "do's" and "don'ts" which I would like to highlight:

Do's

- Do think "small" and write about something that you know about.
- Do reveal yourself in your writing.
- Do show rather than tell. By giving examples and illustrating your topic, you help bring it to life.
- Do write in your own "voice" and style.

Don'ts

- Don't write what you think others want to read.
- Don't exaggerate or write to impress.
- Don't use a flowery, inflated, or pretentious style.
- Don't neglect the technical part of your essay (grammar, spelling, sentence structure).
- Don't ramble — say what you have to say and conclude.

Your college essay, along with your high school record, standardized test scores, and extracurricular involvement, will provide the bases upon which the college makes its admissions decision. A thoughtful, well-written essay can affect in a very positive way that final decision. Keep this in mind and take full advantage of the opportunity which the college essay affords you.

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The first step to writing a stellar personal essay on your college application is to understand your options. Below is a discussion of the six essay options from the [Common Application](#). Also be sure to check out these [5 Application Essay Tips](#).

Option #1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

Note the key word here: evaluate. You aren't just describing something; the best essays will explore the complexity of the issue. When you examine the "impact on you," you need to show the depth of your critical thinking abilities. Introspection, self-awareness and self-analysis are all important here. And be careful with essays about the winning touchdown or tie-breaking goal. These sometimes have an off-putting "look how great I am" tone and very little self-evaluation.

- [Read Drew's essay, "The Job I Should Have Quit," for an example of option #1](#)
- [5 tips for essay option #1](#)

Option #2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

Be careful to keep the "importance to you" at the heart of your essay. It's easy to get off track with this essay topic and start ranting about global warming, Darfur, or abortion. The admissions folks want to discover your character, passions and abilities in the essay; they want more than a political lecture.

- [Read Sophie's essay, "The Allegany County Youth Board," for an example of option #2](#)
- [5 tips for essay option #2](#)

Option #3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

I'm not a fan of this prompt because of the wording: "describe that influence." A good essay on this topic does more than "describe." Dig deep and "analyze." And handle a "hero" essay with care. Your readers have probably seen a lot of essays talking about what a great role model Mom or Dad or Sis is. Also realize that the "influence" of this person doesn't need to be positive.

- [Read Max's essay, "Student Teacher," for an example of option #3](#)
- [6 tips for essay option #3](#)

Option #4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

Here as in #3, be careful of that word "describe." You should really be "analyzing" this character or creative work. What makes it so powerful and influential?

- [Read Felicity's essay, "Porkopolis," for an example of option #4](#)
- [Read Eileen's essay, "Wallflower," for another example of option #4](#)

- [7 tips for essay option #4](#)

Option #5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

Realize that this question defines "diversity" in broad terms. It's not specifically about race or ethnicity (although it can be). Ideally, the admissions folks want every student they admit to contribute to the richness and breadth of the campus community. How do you contribute?

- Read Carrie's essay, "[Give Goth a Chance](#)," for an example of option #5
- [5 tips for essay option #5](#)

Option #6. Topic of your choice.

Sometimes you have a story to share that doesn't quite fit into any of the options above. However, the first five topics are broad with a lot of flexibility, so make sure your topic really can't be identified with one of them. Also, don't equate "topic of your choice" with a license to write a comedy routine or poem (you can submit such things via the "Additional Info" option). Essays written for this prompt still need to have substance and tell your reader something about you.

- Read Lora's essay, "[Eating Eyeballs](#)," for a sample of option #6
- [4 tips for essay option #6](#)

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