

College Essay Writing

Perspective

Last year, I asked a friend who is an admissions representative, how many essays she read that year. Her answer was 1,200.

That's more than 18,000 essays in her admission career.

In other words, these folks read a lot of words.

Terrible? Or Terrific?

- The most feared/loathed part of your application can be the most powerful
- The chance to make an impression on the admission committee
- Less about what you know and more about who you are

The real purpose of the essay

To demonstrate:

- Your ability and desire to be successful in college (and beyond)
- Your true intent to attend the school
- Your ability to think (and write) clearly, logically and abstractly

Before you sit at your keyboard
And pray for Divine Intervention...

Who's going to read this?



Look at the application as a whole

“What do I want the college to know about me that will not be apparent in the rest of the application?”

Define your purpose

What is the main point of your essay?

- To highlight your extra-curricular involvement?
- To explain a weak sophomore year?
- To show curiosity and intellectual spark?
- To demonstrate that you know what a Musketeer (or a Horned Frog) is?

Read the question and plan

- What are we asking for?
 - Key words: “list,” “define,” “explain,” “compare and contrast”
 - Word limitations (more is not always better!)
- How will you answer the question?
 - Format and structure
 - Rough draft
- Don't feel like you have to have the most earthshaking essay they've ever read! Be you!

Four kinds of questions

Personal Statements

Sample question:

Provide a one- to two-page essay on a subject that interests you.

For example, tell us about an experience or a person who has influenced you, or explain your perspective on an issue about which you feel strongly. Inform us of any circumstances that you would like the admission review committee to consider.

Academic Personal Statement

Sample question:

The academic personal statement should be approximately 500 words and should address the following:

- a. State why you feel Illinois State University is a good fit for your educational goals
- b. Identify and explain your academic strengths and weaknesses
- c. Explain any circumstances which affected your high school academic performance, if applicable

The Common Application

1. 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.
2. 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?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
4. 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.
5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Wild Cards

- **Find X.** (University of Chicago)
- **“How are apples and oranges supposed to be compared?”** (University of Chicago)
- **Sartre said, “Hell is other people”; but Streisand sang, “People who need people / Are the luckiest people in the world.” With whom do you agree and why? Don’t be icky.** (Amherst College)
- **You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.** (University of Pennsylvania)
- **“What do you hope to find over the rainbow?”** (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- **“Celebrate your nerdy side.”** (Tufts University)

Some Practical Advice

Dos and Don'ts

- DO use your own voice and verbiage
- DO make the piece compelling
- DO keep it to a reasonable length
- DO have good structure and grammar
- DO show
- DON'T ramble
- DON'T make your essay “true confession” time
- DON'T just sit at your keyboard and hope for the best
- DON'T forget the purpose of the essay.
- DON'T tell

A few topics to avoid

- “_____ changed my life.”
- “It was 4:41 a.m. and I was stuck in the airport.”
- “I knew I wanted to be an engineer ever since I got my first set of Legos.”
- “I trudged nervously down the corridor of the antiseptic white hospital.”

One of my favorites this year!

I try to write an essay for my college application about something "meaningful." My mind wanders. I fixate on the realization my baseball playing days are nearing an end. I am rounding third and headed for home.

For ten years, baseball has been a large part of my youth with offseason training and playing between April and September. I have marked time's passage thru baseball more than with any school year milestone. I am aware of the changes associated with my pending graduation. It now feels strange that I may be less

prepared to accept what the smaller things in my day-to-day life may be like without the routine I associate with baseball more than the life lessons learned through baseball.

The college school year schedule will replace the familiar high school academic calendar. But, what about the baseball year that transcends the seasons defined by the equinox and the solstice?

My baseball fall means practices too hot at the start and definitely too cold without a sweatshirt when they end. It is weekend doubleheaders played into the late afternoon when the sun's angle adds both intensity and a special quality to its light.

Fall season games end. Mud is cleaned from spikes. Sunflower seeds are emptied from the bottom of the bat bag. Baseball gloves are oiled. Equipment is moved to the basement furnace room. Fund raising to offset team expenses involves leaf raking at the homes of families supporting the team.

Winter means open gyms with indoor practices on slippery wooden gymnasium floors. Be careful and smart enough to bring a change of footwear. Start times are scheduled at annoyingly early weekend hours when the frigid air is invigorating but bone chilling at the close of practice. It involves trips to the indoor batting cage to take swings but also regularly scheduled conditioning sessions to strengthen core and enhance agility. Baseball catalogs arrive and I try to convince my parents a luxury acquisition, like a new bat, is a must-have for the upcoming season.

Spring tryouts start for me with Nokona classic glove conditioner and cleaning and preparation of my glove for the first day. It makes the glove look and smell great. I look forward to those first outdoor practices because of two specific sounds. First, it's that familiar clicking sound of metal spikes on the pavement as I walk to the field. Secondly, it's that reassuring thwack of the ball hitting your glove as you play catch outdoors for the first time in what seems way too long. I particularly enjoy the staccato of thwacks as we line-up with partners eight to ten pairs along a line. There is the anticipation for the season's start and the unbridled optimism for a successful season. Games begin and a season unfolds.

These things bring stability to my routine but what about my friendships and the encouragement received from coaches. Inevitably, friendships with teammates change. Opportunities to interact become fewer. Each of us goes forward with different plans after high school. We accept it somewhat sadly. We are assured by parents and older siblings we will still maintain some friendships as well as forge new, stronger bonds in college. I take comfort in that knowledge.

As a player, encouragement and reassurance received from coaches helps build and maintain my confidence. For me, a pivotal moment was the first time I stepped from the batter's box to check in with the third base coach and was allowed to hit away. It filled me with self-confidence. Since then, the hit away sign still has the same effect on me. My hope is this mental image will have its lasting impact and serve me in situations away from the diamond.

This writing exercise served as an epiphany for me. I have a keener sense of how important it is for me to cherish each aspect and phase of this final baseball season.

Another favorite

The Time I Almost (Almost) Died- A True Story

I was feeling spiffy in my new blazing yellow shoes. It was humid as I leisurely set out towards the starting line to stand with the other two brave ladies from our school. My stomach was churning and the sudden urge to tinkle came upon me like Niagara Falls.

The referee raised the gun, and I felt my heart jolt ahead of me as the trigger was pulled. The mass of girls shot forward and all I could think about was my dad's wise words, "Run fast, then run faster." I made my way towards the top ten runners; my excited legs took me there effortlessly. The key to distance running in my mind, was to persuade myself that I was not actually running 1.87 miles during my first middle school cross country race. My eyelids fluttered every once in a while and I imagined what my mom was making for dinner. The aroma of nutty brown dough, gravy puddling out of the small holes in the crust, and peas and carrots slowing softening into my favorite meal, chicken pot pie.

Too quickly chicken pot pie turned into the burning of lactic acid in my calves and reality set in. The palms of my hands felt like the epithelial tissue that surrounds raw chicken, slimy and nasty. I tried to divert my attention elsewhere, anywhere else: a tree, a bird, a speck of dust, at least it would be something. The speck of dust did not work, and my eyes were scrambling, searching, trying to find something to distract my brain. After a few minutes of struggling, the sun's reflected rays showered straight into my face, and the baldness of my father's head made it easier to see him than to hear him. "I can't do this, I can't, it's too hard," I half cried, half pleaded between the gasps of breath I was pushing my lungs to inhale. I looked up to meet my dad's face. He gave me the side eye, his eyebrow raised and an emotionless look on his face. "You're fine, keep running, you're not going to die. You're almost to the end, it's just around the corner." His stern face indirectly told me giving up and walking was not an option.

With a deep breath I dug my heels down and pushed myself up the small hill to just around the corner. My head was pounding, my temples beating so harshly I could feel the thumping. One hundred feet, 50 feet, 10 feet, I rounded the corner my feet slowly halting, but there was no finish line. MY DAD WAS A LIAR. My cheeks flushed, heat rising, becoming redder and redder. Anger carried my legs the whole last mile of the race, past the finish line and straight up to my dad's face. My brain was fumbling for words, my wrath about to come down. I opened my eyes, slowly registering the environment around me as I closed in on my target, my father's eyes, and I squinted. He smiled at me, gave me a huge hug and admired my 5th place ribbon. My wrath was quickly forgotten, and the relief of finishing my first meet flooded over me, along with the pride of my accomplishment.

Not so great

My life experiences have helped me become a better, more mature person. At a young age my parents divorced, I was only 10 years old. During that time I had to be someone who my younger sister could come to because the situation was difficult for us both. My parents were not always there for me so I learned to be independent and matured quickly over the years. I have always been able to learn and discover things for myself, without the help of others. Because the relationship between my mother and step-father weren't so good in the beginning, I took how they treated each other as a way for me to be a better person and learned to communicate effectively instead of arguing.

My academic achievements and personal interests go hand-in-hand. Little Miami High School offered the course for juniors and seniors called, BTTP (Business Technology Tech Prep). I have excelled in this class. My teacher nominated only one other student and me for a program called, Leadership Technology Prep. The experience has been rewarding because we have been able to communicate and learn from successful adults in the business world. I have gained a growing interest in what drives our economy and how a business operates.

Everything leading up to this point in my life has made me a better person. I always give everything my full effort; therefore, I feel the Xavier University would be a great fit for me.

Please don't (Lollapalooza):

It is now 8 PM. and the crowd anticipating the concert seems to sense that The Weeknd will be coming on soon and becomes increasingly unstable. People begin to angrily push others in a measly attempt to get closer to the front I could take it though, in a couple minutes it would all totally be worth it. Nothing could f--- up this day, nothing at all.

During all of this commotion I meet a girl. She has all her brown hair in a bun, a sweet tan and a vibrant smile. We talk for a while and she tells me she goes to Michigan St. I start to feel pretty cool because I'm chilling with a college girl! Around this time I start looking around and notice I've been separated from my friends. After a couple minutes of talking she offers me a sip of her water bottle. I take a sip and almost immediately spit it out in shock. This stuff is definitely not just water. It's probably vodka, or rum, well to be honest I have no idea because I've only tried alcohol like once or twice before. But anyhow she starts laughing and I kinda just start laughing as well. Suddenly, instruments begin to play. Fog machines begin to release huge amounts of fog onto the stage and out of the gloomy clouds comes out The Weeknd.

The time has finally come, after the long wait it's finally time! The atmosphere is simply incredible. Everyone is singing their hearts out and jumping around while The Weeknd is on stage going crazy. Not really thinking I begin to take large sips of the water bottle. Feeling the vibes I just think to myself "f--- it" and assume that enjoying the concert feeling a little buzzed would be a good idea. After a couple songs I notice the bottle has turned empty. As I continue to jump and sing everything begins to turn woozy.

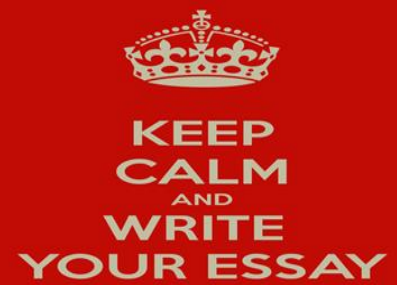
I can't recognize anyone and my legs are extremely wobbly. A little after this, the alcohol completely takes over. I don't really remember much besides an ambulance siren and muffled words. After what seems like only a couple minutes, I wake up in a hospital room, all by myself with nothing but the eerie "beep, beep, beep" from the heart monitor.

For four long hours I am by myself, with my own thoughts tormenting me. I really could care less about the punishment awaiting, or the fact that my "friends" had left me by myself in Chicago, or that I had wasted all that money I had worked so hard to get, what truly bothered me was the fact that I had destroyed my parents' trust.

After a nap I awake to the sobbing of a woman. I look to my right and see my mother crying on my father's shoulder. My father simply looks at me in shame and tells me to get up, pick up my barfed on shirt, and go to the car.

I refer to this day as the time I finally got my s--- together. I learned a lot about myself that day. Although all teenagers make stupid mistakes, I'm proud to say I learned from mine and have used them to become a better person. Sure I'm dumb for doing what I did, but hey, I don't care. I'm (Student's Name) and I'm proud of myself. My parents still do not trust me completely but I'm working on slowly rebuilding our trust. I AM still grounded and I work at (pizza place) where I continue to pay my hospital bill. This decision forced me to become mature fast. I now go to school from 8-3 and work from 5-10 which is very tiring. But hey, like my mother says, "If you're gonna make grown man decisions you're going to work like a grown man to pay your bills."

Things to remember:



- -Among the worst mistakes a student can make is to write their essay at the last minute and not have them reviewed. Start essay writing early and have others review them along the way.
- -When writing the essay, please make sure you answer the question.
- -Stay within the parameters. If they ask for 500 words, don't give them 1,000
- -Focus on your strengths, passions, and what makes you unique.
- -Explain why the college is a good fit for you. Look beyond their home page.
- -Make it about you. If they're asking who your biggest influence is and you use all 500 words to describe how great your mom is (and she is!); at the end they will probably rather admit your mom than you.

- Be creative. Admissions reps read thousands of essays per year. Try to stand out from the rest, they've already read a thousand essays about football.
- Focus on how you changed and grown throughout high school
- Don't just repeat what is in the application.
- Be wary of humor & tone. Sometimes jokes or sarcasm don't translate on paper.
- Recycling essays is okay, but be sure the college in the essay is the one that you're actually applying to!!
- Have at least 3 readers review the essay, one of which should be an English teacher, who will be a invaluable resource.

17,000 essays later...

- Spell check is good, but proofreading is better.
- They want to know your story. There is no “right answer.”
- Surprise is good. Shock is not.
- Know your audience--engage them!
- You are the best you there is.