

Writing the Successful College Application Essay

Here's where you can learn about the three-step process for writing your college essay.

Gaining entrance to just about *any* college continues to get harder as more and more applicants are applying for a limited number of spaces. How can you improve your chances to being admitted to the college or university of your choice? By writing a stellar personal essay as part of your college application.

It may be only 500 **250** words, but the admissions essay(s) portion of a college application can mean the difference between acceptance and rejection. How you write your personal essay shows the admissions committee why you are different from everybody else. It provides information about you that test scores, grades, and extracurricular pursuits just cannot.

You can use the essay to describe a favorite activity, to tell a story about yourself, or even a story about your dog, but make sure to really *use* it -- in a way that captures the reader's attention and shows that you are exceptional.

So how do you write a college application essay? Writing the college application essay can be one of the most daunting parts of applying to college. To help you get started, we've published these college essay guides with thoughts on brainstorming ideas, choosing a topic, and how to write an effective and powerful essay.

Once you've gone through the three steps, then take a look at the five free sample college application essays.

[Step One: Brainstorming](#)

[Step Two: Selecting An Essay Topic](#)

[Step Three: Writing the Essay. Tips for Success](#)

Sample Essays:

- [Princeton sample essay](#)
- [Cornell sample essay](#)
- [Wellesley sample essay](#)
- [Harvard sample essay](#)
- [Stanford sample essay](#)

Brainstorming About the College Application Essay

Brainstorming

The most important part of your essay is the subject matter. You should expect to devote about 1-2 weeks simply to brainstorming ideas. To begin brainstorming a subject idea consider the following points. From brainstorming, you may find a subject you had not considered at first.

1. What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? Do not limit yourself to accomplishments you have been formally recognized for since the most interesting essays often are based on accomplishments that may have been trite at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.
2. Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?
3. Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
4. What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
5. Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
6. Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
7. Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with? These questions should help you realize what you love most.
8. Have you experienced a moment of **epiphany**, as if your eyes were opened to something you were previously blind to?
9. What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy? How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your admissions essay for you?
10. What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
11. What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
12. What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful? What people, things, and accomplishments do you need? How does this particular university fit into your plans for the future?

If these questions cannot cure your writer's block, consider the following exercises:

1. Ask for Help from Parents, Friends, Colleagues, etc.

If you cannot characterize yourself and your personality traits do not automatically leap to mind, ask your friends to write a list of your five most salient personality traits. Ask your friends why they chose the ones they did. If an image of your personality begins to emerge, consider life experiences that could illustrate the particular traits.

2. Consider your Childhood

While admissions officers are not interested in reading about your childhood and are more interested in the last 2-4 years of your life, you might consider events of your childhood that inspired the interests you have today. Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life, even if you recently lost interest. For instance, if you were interested in math since an early age and now want to study medicine, you might incorporate this into your medical school admissions essay. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they were shaped from your upbringing.

3. Consider your Role Models

Many applicants do not have role models and were never greatly influenced by just one or two people. However, for those of you who have role models and actually aspire to become like certain people, you may want to incorporate a discussion of that person and the traits you admired into your application essay.

4. Read Sample Admissions Essays

Before you sat down to write a poem, you would certainly read past poets. Before writing a book of philosophy, you would consider past philosophers. In the same way, we recommend reading sample admissions essays to understand what topics other applicants chose. ~~EssayEdge maintains an archive of over 100 free sample admissions essays. Click here to view sample essays that worked.~~

5. Goal Determination

Life is short. Why do you want spend 2-6 years of your life at a particular college, graduate school, or professional school? How is the degree necessary to the fulfillment of your goals? When considering goals, think broadly. Few people would be satisfied with just a career. How else will your education fit your needs and lead you to a fulfilling life?

If after reading this entire page you do not have an idea for your essay, do not be surprised. Coming up with an idea is difficult and requires time. Actually consider the questions and exercises above. Without a topic you feel passionate about, without one that brings out the defining aspects of you personality, you risk falling into the trap of sounding like the 90 percent of applicants who will write boring admissions essays. The only way to write a unique essay is to have experiences that support whatever topic you come up with. Whatever you do, don't let the essay stress you out. Have fun with the brainstorming process. You might discover something about yourself you never consciously realized.

About the College Application Essay

Selecting a Topic

Having completed brainstorming in [step one](#), you should now have a rough idea of the elements you wish to include in your essay, including your goals, important life experiences, research experience, diversifying features, spectacular nonacademic accomplishments, etc. You should also now have an idea of what impression you want to make on the admissions officers. We should remark that at this stage, undergraduate applicants have a large advantage over graduate school applicants. Whereas nobody questions a high school student's motivation to attend college, graduate and professional school applicants must directly address in their essays their desire to study their selected field.

You must now confront the underlying problem of the admissions essay. You must now consider topics that will allow you to synthesize your important personal characteristics and experiences into a coherent whole while simultaneously addressing your desire to attend a specific institution. While most admissions essays allow great latitude in topic selection, you must also be sure to answer the questions that were asked of you. **Leaving a lasting impression on someone who reads 50-100 essays a day will not be easy**, but we have compiled some guidelines to help you get started. With any luck, one or two topics, with small changes, will allow you to answer **application questions for 5-7 different** colleges, although admissions officers do appreciate essays that provide convincing evidence of how an applicant will fit into a particular academic environment. **You should at least have read the college's webpage, admissions catalog, and have an understanding of the institution's strengths.**

Consider the following questions before proceeding:

1. Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance in your life, with which you can use **vivid personal experiences** as supporting details?
2. **Is your topic a gimmick?** That is, do you plan to write your essay in iambic pentameter or make it funny? You should be very, very careful if you are planning to do this. We recommend strongly **that you do not do this**. Almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the admissions committee. Nothing is worse than not laughing or not being amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing.
3. Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention **GPA's or standardized test scores in your essay**.
4. **Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic?** If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with **concrete examples**, **you should probably choose a different essay topic.**
5. **Can you fully answer the question asked of you?** Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit, or will you end up writing a poor summary of something that might be interesting as a report or research paper? If you plan on writing something technical for college admissions, make sure you truly can back up your interest in a topic and are not merely throwing around big scientific words. **Unless you convince the reader that you actually have the life experiences to back up your interest in neurobiology, the reader will assume you are trying to impress him/her with shallow tactics.** Also, be sure you can write to admissions officers and that you are not writing over their heads.
6. **Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word?** The entire essay must be interesting, considering admissions officers will probably only spend a few minutes reading each essay.
7. **Is your topic overdone?** To ascertain this, peruse through old essays. However, most topics are overdone, and this is not a bad thing. A unique or convincing answer to a classic topic can pay off big.

8. **Will your topic turnoff a large number of people?** If you write on how everyone should worship your God, how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Republican or Democratic Party is evil, you will not get into the college of your choice. The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions. You can still write an essay about Nietzsche's influence on your life, but express understanding that not all intelligent people will agree with Nietzsche's claims. Emphasize instead Nietzsche's influence on **your** life, and not why you think he was wrong or right in his claims.
9. In this vein, if you are presenting a topic that is controversial, you must **acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.**
10. Will an admissions officer **remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays?** What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

After evaluating your essay topics with the above criteria and asking for the free opinions of editors, of your teachers or colleagues, and of your friends, you should have at least 1-2 interesting essay topics. Consider the following guidelines below.

1. If you are planning on writing an essay on how you survived poverty in Russia, your mother's suicide, your father's kidnapping, or your immigration to America from Asia, you should be careful that your main goal is to address your own personal qualities. Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college or graduate school student. You don't want to be remembered as the pathetic applicant. You want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. It is for this reason that essays relating to this topic are considered among the best. Unless you only use the horrible experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics, you will not write a good essay. Graduate and professional school applicants should generally steer clear of this topic altogether unless you can argue that your experience will make you a better business person, doctor, lawyer, or scholar.

2. Essays should fit in well with the rest of a candidate's application, explaining the unexplained and steering clear of that which is already obvious. For example, if you have a 4.0 GPA and a 1500 SAT, no one doubts your ability to do the academic work and addressing this topic would be ridiculous. However, if you have an 850 SAT and a 3.9 GPA or a 1450 SAT and a 2.5 GPA, you would be wise to incorporate in your essay an explanation for the apparent contradiction. For example, perhaps you were hospitalized or family concerns prevented your dedication to academics; you would want to mention this in your essay. However, do not make your essay one giant excuse. Simply give a quick, convincing explanation within the framework of your larger essay.

3. "Diversity" was the biggest buzzword of the late 1990's. Every college, professional school, or graduate school wants to increase diversity. For this reason, so many applicants are tempted to declare what makes them diverse. However, simply saying you are a black, lesbian female will not impress admissions officers in the least. While an essay incorporating this information would probably be your best topic idea, you must finesse the issue by addressing your own personal qualities and how you overcame stigma, dealt with social ostracism, etc. If you are a rich student from Beverly Hills whose father is an engineer and whose mother is a lawyer, but you happen to be a minority, an essay about how you dealt with adversity would be unwise. You must demonstrate vividly your personal qualities, interests, motivations, etc. Address specifically how your diversity will contribute to the realm of campus opinion, the academic environment, and social life.

4. Don't mention weaknesses unless you absolutely need to explain them away. You want to make a positive first impression, and telling an admissions officer anything about drinking, drugs, partying, etc. undermines your goal. EssayEdge editors have read more essays on ADD (Attention Deficit Disorder) than we would ever have imagined. Why admit to weakness when you can instead showcase your strengths?

5. Be honest, but not for honesty's sake. Unless you are a truly excellent writer, your best, most passionate writing will be about events that actually occurred. While you might be tempted to invent hardship, it is completely unnecessary. Write an essay about your life that demonstrates your personality.

Tips for Writing Your College Essay

Tips for Writing

Even seemingly boring topics can be made into exceptional admissions essays with an innovative approach. In writing the essay you must bear in mind your two goals: to persuade the admissions officer that you are extremely worthy of admission and to make the admissions officer aware that you are more than a GPA and a standardized score, that you are a real-life, intriguing personality.

Unfortunately, there is no surefire step-by-step method to writing a good essay. I will make my essay into an awesome, memorable masterpiece, but every topic requires a different treatment since no two essays are alike. However, we have compiled the following list of tips that you should find useful while writing your admissions essay.

1. **Answer the Question.** You can follow the next 12 steps, but if you miss the question, you will not be admitted to any institution.
2. **Be Original.** Even seemingly boring essay topics can sound interesting if creatively approached. If writing about a gymnastics competition you trained for, do not start your essay: "I worked long hours for many weeks to train for XXX competition." Consider an opening like, "Every morning I awoke at 5:00 to sweat, tears, and blood as I trained on the uneven bars hoping to bring the state gymnastics trophy to my hometown."
3. **Be Yourself.** Admissions officers want to learn about you and your writing ability. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions. If you do this, your essay will be unique. Many people travel to foreign countries or win competitions, but your feelings during these events are unique to you. Unless a philosophy or societal problem has interested you intensely for years, stay away from grand themes that you have little personal experience with.
4. **Don't "Thesaurize" your Composition.** For some reason, students continue to think big words make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate contexts with complex styles. Think Hemingway.
5. **Use Imagery and Clear, Vivid Prose.** If you are not adept with imagery, you can write an excellent essay without it, but it's not easy. The application essay lends itself to imagery since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details. Appeal to the five senses of the admissions officers.
6. **Spend the Most Time on your Introduction.** Expect admissions officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.
 - o **Don't Summarize in your Introduction.** Ask yourself why a reader would want to read your entire essay after reading your introduction. If you summarize, the admissions officer need not read the rest of your essay.
 - o **Create Mystery or Intrigue in your Introduction.** It is not necessary or recommended that your first sentence give away the subject matter. Raise questions in the minds of the admissions officers to force them to read on. Appeal to their emotions to make them relate to your subject matter.
7. **Body Paragraphs Must Relate to Introduction.** Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.
8. **Use Transition.** Applicants continue to ignore transition to their own detriment. You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay. Transition is not limited to phrases like "as a result, in addition, while . . . , since . . . , etc." but includes repeating key

words and progressing the idea. Transition provides the intellectual architecture to argument building.

9. **Conclusions are Crucial. The** conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary since the essay is rather short to begin with; the reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words before. Also do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in summary, to conclude, etc." You should consider the following conclusions:
 - Expand upon the broader implications of your discussion.
 - Consider linking your conclusion to your introduction to establish a sense of balance by reiterating introductory phrases.
 - Redefine a term used previously in your body paragraphs.
 - End with a famous quote that is relevant to your argument. Do not **try** to do this, as this approach is overdone. This should come naturally.
 - Frame your discussion within a larger context or show that your topic has widespread appeal.
 - Remember, your essay need not be so tidy that you can answer why your little sister died or why people starve in Africa; you are not writing a "sit-com," but should forge some attempt at closure.
10. **Do Something Else.** Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.
11. **Give your Draft to Others.** Ask editors to read with these questions in mind:
 - What is the essay about?
 - Have I used active voice verbs wherever possible?
 - Is my sentence structure varied or do I use all long or all short sentences?
 - Do you detect any clichés?
 - Do I use transition appropriately?
 - Do I use imagery often and does this make the essay clearer and more vivid?
 - What's the best part of the essay?
 - What about the essay is memorable?
 - What's the worst part of the essay?
 - What parts of the essay need elaboration or are unclear?
 - What parts of the essay do not support your main argument or are immaterial to your case?
 - Is every single sentence crucial to the essay? This **MUST** be the case.
 - What does the essay reveal about your personality?
 - Could anyone else have written this essay?
 - How would you fill in the following blank based on the essay: "I want to accept you to this college because our college needs more _____."
12. **Revise, Revise, Revise.** You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely. If H.D. Thoreau couldn't write a good essay without revision, neither will you. Delete anything in the essay that does not relate to your main argument. Do you use transition? Are your introduction and conclusions more than summaries? Did you find every single grammatical error?
 - Allow for the evolution of your main topic. Do not assume your subject must remain fixed and that you can only tweak sentences.
 - Editing takes time. Consider reordering your supporting details, delete irrelevant sections, and make clear the broader implications of your experiences. Allow your more important arguments to come to the foreground. Take points that might only be implicit and make them explicit.
 - **Have your Essay Edited.** The application essay is too important not to spend time and energy on its improvement.

Sample College Application Essay #1

Sample Essay #1

Accepted by Princeton

Hiking to Understanding

Surrounded by thousands of stars, complete silence, and spectacular mountains, I stood atop New Hampshire's Presidential Range awestruck by nature's beauty. Immediately, I realized that I must dedicate my life to understanding the causes of the universe's beauty. In addition, the hike taught me several valuable lessons that will allow me to increase my understanding through scientific research.

Although the first few miles of the hike up Mt. Madison did not offer fantastic views, the vistas became spectacular once I climbed above tree line. Immediately, I sensed that understanding the natural world parallels climbing a mountain. To reach my goal of total comprehension of natural phenomena, I realized that I must begin with knowledge that may be uninteresting by itself. However, this knowledge will form the foundation of an accurate view of the universe. Much like every step while hiking leads the hiker nearer the mountain peak, all knowledge leads the scientist nearer total understanding.

Above tree line, the barrenness and silence of the hike taught me that individuals must have their own direction. All hikers know that they must carry complete maps to reach their destinations; they do not allow others to hold their maps for them. Similarly, surrounded only by mountaintops, sky, and silence, I recognized the need to remain individually focused on my life's goal of understanding the physical universe.

At the summit, the view of the surrounding mountain range is spectacular. The panorama offers a view of hills and smaller mountains. Some people during their lives climb many small hills. However, to have the most accurate view of the world, I must be dedicated to climbing the biggest mountains I can find. Too often people simply hike across a flat valley without ascending because they content themselves with the scenery. The mountain showed me that I cannot content myself with the scenery. When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away from the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos. Similarly, despite the frustration and difficulties inherent in scientific study, I cannot retreat from my goal of universal understanding.

When observing Saturn's rising, the Milky Way Cloud, and the Perseid meteor shower, I simultaneously felt a great sense of insignificance and purpose. Obviously, earthly concerns are insignificant to the rest of the universe. However, I experienced the overriding need to understand the origins and causes of these phenomena. The hike also strengthened my resolve to climb the mountain of knowledge while still taking time to gaze at the wondrous scenery. Only then can the beauty of the universe and the study of science be purposefully united. Attaining this union is my lifelong goal.

Sample College Application Essay #2

Sample Essay #2

Accepted by Cornell

Question: Tell us about an opinion have you had to defend. How has this affected your belief system?

I chuckle to myself every time I think about this. I am perceived as a mild-mannered, intelligent individual until I mention that I am involved in riflery. It is interesting to watch someone's expression change. It is as if I instantaneously grew a pair of horns and a sharp set of claws. Believe me this gets worst; I am a member of the NRA. I try to tell these folks that I belong to the NRA to fire my rifle. "Oh my God! You fire real guns? With real bullets?!?" they remark with a perplexed look on their face. Besides having horns and claws, I now possess a tail and leathery wings.

This is how it began five years ago. I had played on a soccer team for several years. As I grew older I began having difficulty playing soccer because of shortness of breath. I was diagnosed as having mild asthma which ended my soccer career and eliminated my participation in most physical sports.

Shortly afterward, during a Boy Scout summer camp, I participated in riflery at their shooting range. This was the first time I had ever touched a firearm. To my amazement, I won the camp's first place award for marksmanship. I was more than eager when a friend of mine asked me if I would like to join a shooting club.

My parents were wary when I asked to join the rifle club. My mother feared guns, but my father felt there was no problem with trying this sport. Gratefully, he gave me the opportunity to try rifle marksmanship, despite secretly hoping that I would quit. Both of my parents were afraid of what people would think about their son's involvement with guns.

Like my parents a majority of people believe that all firearms are dangerous to our society. All they remember are the hysterical news releases of street violence and injured children. I am often asked how many deer I've shot. Frankly, I could never bring myself to injure another living creature and neither would most of the competitors I have met. Yet, I keep finding myself defending the sport from all of the misconceptions that surround it. Most people have developed a negative impression of the sport and I have found that these prejudices are difficult, if not impossible, to rectify.

Because of this conflict, I have become an open minded individual. I express my opinions without reservation, and I have learned to accept opinions and viewpoints contrary to my own. I do not intend to alter what I enjoy because of the ignorance of friends and acquaintances. If people have a negative view of me simply because of the sport I am active in, then they must be so superficial that they cannot see the person who I really am. I am no longer apprehensive of being perceived as a gun toting, trigger happy fanatic, even though I still endeavor to educate my friends and relatives on the beauty of this sport.

Sample College Application Essay #3

Sample Essay #3

Accepted by Wellesley

It took me eighteen years to realize what an extraordinary influence my mother has been on my life. She's the kind of person who has thoughtful discussions about which artist she would most want to have her portrait painted by (Sargent), the kind of mother who always has time for her four children, and the kind of community leader who has a seat on the board of every major project to assist Washington's impoverished citizens. Growing up with such a strong role model, I developed many of her enthusiasms. I not only came to love the excitement of learning simply for the sake of knowing something new, but I also came to understand the idea of giving back to the community in exchange for a new sense of life, love, and spirit.

My mother's enthusiasm for learning is most apparent in travel. I was nine years old when my family visited Greece. Every night for three weeks before the trip, my older brother Peter and I sat with my mother on her bed reading Greek myths and taking notes on the Greek Gods. Despite the fact that we were traveling with fourteen-month-old twins, we managed to be at each ruin when the site opened at sunrise. I vividly remember standing in an empty amphitheatre pretending to be an ancient tragedian, picking out my favorite sculpture in the Acropolis museum, and inserting our family into modified tales of the battle at Troy. Eight years and half a dozen passport stamps later I have come to value what I have learned on these journeys about global history, politics and culture, as well as my family and myself.

While I treasure the various worlds my mother has opened to me abroad, my life has been equally transformed by what she has shown me just two miles from my house. As a ten year old, I often accompanied my mother to (name deleted), a local soup kitchen and children's center. While she attended meetings, I helped with the Summer Program by chasing children around the building and performing magic tricks. Having finally perfected the "floating paintbrush" trick, I began work as a full time volunteer with the five and six year old children last June. It is here that I met Jane Doe, an exceptionally strong girl with a vigor that is contagious. At the end of the summer, I decided to continue my work at (name deleted) as Jane's tutor. Although the position is often difficult, the personal rewards are beyond articulation. In the seven years since I first walked through the doors of (name deleted), I have learned not only the idea of giving to others, but also of deriving from them a sense of spirit.

Everything that my mother has ever done has been overshadowed by the thought behind it. While the raw experiences I have had at home and abroad have been spectacular, I have learned to truly value them by watching my mother. She has enriched my life with her passion for learning, and changed it with her devotion to humanity. In her endless love of everything and everyone she is touched by, I have seen a hope and life that is truly exceptional. Next year, I will find a new home miles away. However, my mother will always be by my side.

Sample College Application Essay #4

Sample Essay #4

Accepted by Harvard

Of all the characters that I've "met" through books and movies, two stand out as people that I most want to emulate. They are Attacus Finch from *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham from *Field of Dreams*. They appeal to me because they embody what I strive to be. They are influential people in small towns who have a direct positive effect on those around them. I, too, plan to live in a small town after graduating from college, and that positive effect is something I must give in order to be satisfied with my life.

Both Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham are strong supporting characters in wonderful stories. They symbolize good, honesty, and wisdom. When the story of my town is written I want to symbolize those things. The base has been formed for me to live a productive, helpful life. As an Eagle Scout, I represent those things that Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham represent. In the child/adolescent world I am Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham, but soon I'll be entering the adult world, a world in which I'm not yet prepared to lead.

I'm quite sure that as teenagers Attacus Finch and Moonlight Graham often wondered what they could do to help others. They probably emulated someone who they had seen live a successful life. They saw someone like my grandfather, 40-year president of our hometown bank, enjoy a lifetime of leading, sharing, and giving. I have seen him spend his Christmas Eves taking gifts of food and joy to indigent families. Often when his bank could not justify a loan to someone in need, my grandfather made the loan from his own pocket. He is a real-life Moonlight Graham, a man who has shown me that characters like Dr. Graham and Mr. Finch do much much more than elicit tears and smiles from readers and movie watchers. Through him and others in my family I feel I have acquired the values and the burning desire to benefit others that will form the foundation for a great life. I also feel that that foundation is not enough. I do not yet have the sophistication, knowledge, and wisdom necessary to succeed as I want to in the adult world. I feel that Harvard, above all others, can guide me toward the life of greatness that will make me the Attacus Finch of my town.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

This essay is a great example of how to answer this question well. This applicant chose characters who demonstrated specific traits that reflect on his own personality. We believe that he is sincere about his choices because his reasons are personal (being from a small town, and so forth). He managed to tell us a good deal about himself, his values, and his goals while maintaining a strong focus throughout.

Sample College Application Essay #5

Sample Essay #5

Accepted by Stanford

When I look at this picture of myself, I realize how much I've grown and changed, not only physically, but also mentally as a person in the last couple of years. Less than one month after this photograph was taken, I arrived at the [school's name] in [school's location] without any idea of what to expect. I entered my second year of high school as an innocent thirteen year-old who was about a thousand miles from home and was a new member of not the sophomore, but "lower-middle" class. Around me in this picture are the things which were most important in my life at the time: studying different types of cars and planes, following Michael

Jordan' s latest move, and seeing the latest blockbuster show like " Phantom of the Opera" or " Jurassic Park" . On my t-shirt is the rest of my life -- tennis. Midway through my senior year at the special [school' s name] school, the focuses in my life have changed dramatically.

If there is one common occurrence which takes place for every single person in the diverse student body at [school' s name], it is that we all grow up much faster for having lived there. I do not know whether this speeding up of the maturing process is generally good or bad, but I definitely have benefited.

The classroom has become a whole different realm for me. Before, the teachers and students alike preached the importance of learning, but it was implicitly obvious that the most important concern was grades. At [school' s name] teachers genuinely believe that learning is the most importance objective and deeply encourage us to collaborate with each other and make use of all resources that we may find. In fact, in a certain class this year, my teacher assigned us to prepare every day of the week to discuss a certain book; there were only two require-ments in this preparation -- we had to maximize our sources, gleaning from everything and everyone in the school, but we were not allowed to actually look at the book. As a result, I know more about that book than any other that I have actually read. It is teaching methods such as this which ensure that we will learn more. Indeed, this matter of " thinking" has been one of the most important aspects of my experience. Whether in Physics or English, I' m required to approach every problem and idea independently and creatively rather than just regurgitate the teacher' s words. In discussion with fellow students both inside and outside of class, the complex thoughts flowing through everyone' s brain is evident.

However, I believe that the most important concepts that I have espoused in being independent of my parents for half of each year, deal with being a cosmopolitan person. The school' s faculty and students are conscious about keeping all of the kids' attention from being based on the school. Every single issue of global concern is brought forth by one group or another whether it be a faculty member, publication, ethnic society, or individual student. Along with being aware of issues of importance, after attending [school' s name] my personality has evolved. First, my mannerisms have grown: the school stresses giving respect to everyone and everything. Our former headmaster often said, " Character can be measured not by one' s interaction with people who are better off than him or herself, but by one' s interactions with those who are worse off." The other prime goal of the school' s community is to convert every single timid lower-classman into a loud, rambunctious senior. Basically, if you have an opinion about something, it is wrong not to voice that opinion. Of course, being obnoxious is not the idea. The key is to become a master of communication with teachers, fellow students, all of who are a part of the community, and most importantly, those who are outside of the community.

I do not want to make [school' s name] sound as if it produces the perfect students, because it doesn' t. But the school deserves a lot of credit for its efforts. Often, some part of the mold does remain. As the college experience approaches, I am still the same person, only modified to better maximize my talents. Although I still have some time to play tennis and see movies, perhaps one of the few similarities between this photograph and me now is my smile.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

This essay is fairly well written. The essayist makes boarding school his focus, using it to explain and describe how and why he has changed over the years. A lot of students write about what wonderful people they have become, but they fail to do a good job of understanding and explaining the forces that prevailed to make them change. This writer focuses on the strengths of the school itself. He demonstrates the sort of values it tries to instill in its students such as, "Encouraging us to collaborate with each other and make use of all resources that we may find," and "Giving respect to everyone and everything." Because the writer does so, the reader never doubts that the applicant possesses all the qualities that he credits to the school. Using this method has two advantages. First, the positive, upbeat attitude he has toward his institution is rare. Second, Stanford, for one, recognized that this would reflect well on his ability to adapt to and be a positive force at their school.