

Some colleges require a personal essay as part of their application. The college may ask you to write a general essay or answer several questions.

General Suggestions

- Check whether the college requires a general essay, answers to several questions, or neither. Most will have a word count or character limit—be sure you know what they are.
- Start early (at least a month or two before the due date) and revise your essay many times. At different points during your revisions, have teachers, counselors, friends and/or parents provide feedback about the clarity, writing, and “story” you tell.
- Ask yourself if your essay reflects who you are apart from your grades and test scores.
- Do a final spell check and read your final essay carefully for accuracy and clarity.

A strong essay

- Answers essay questions clearly.
- Uses active-voice verbs.
- Distinguishes you from other applicants. Ask yourself, is this a story only you can tell?
- Tells a cohesive story—every sentence should contribute to the overall meaning of your essay.
- Reflects your life experiences, achievements, and personal characteristics that relate to your commitment to higher education.
- Shows the depth of your interests and accomplishments by detailing experiences gained in your life. Illustrates how the experiences changed your outlook on life, attitudes, or beliefs.
- Shows your enthusiasm, passion and commitment. Be professional and non-judgmental as some people may not have the same beliefs as you.
- Explains why you are unique and how you will contribute to their college.

Avoid

- Lying or exaggerating about your experiences—admissions officers are highly experienced.
- General statements that anyone could write (e.g., “I want to be a doctor so I can help people”).
- Typos and grammatical errors—this reflects carelessness.
- Listing all of your qualifications and awards—these are listed elsewhere on your application.
- Trying to cover everything you did in high school. Emphasize important and significant experiences.
- Humor that may be offensive or taken the wrong way.

College Application Essay

- Using “big” words that are not in your own voice. Using words incorrectly or unnecessarily will detract the reader’s attention from your essay.
- Slang terms, clichés, overly casual language.

Ideas for Essay Topics

Scholarly experiences: Details about significant research projects, class assignments, academic challenges you overcame, educational opportunities outside of normal schooling.

Life experiences: Key aspects of childhood that have motivated you, personal challenges (e.g., illness of a friend, working to provide for your family while in school, taking care of younger siblings/elderly grandparents, etc.).

Intellectual curiosity: Topics that especially interest you and why (how you developed the interest, what event/person triggered the interest, how you pursued the interest, and how it will shape your future plans).

Character: Positive aspects of your character (e.g., determination, compassion, leadership, optimism) and how these help you through difficult situations.

Humanitarianism/caring experiences: School and community service and how these made an impact (include what you learned and how these experiences relate to your future goals).

Leadership: Leadership roles in your community, school, family, or peer groups (e.g., beginning a tutoring club, directing a church play, leading a school project).

Work/Volunteer experiences: Work or volunteer experiences related to your career goals, lessons you learned from working (e.g., balancing school and work, taking on more responsibilities), what you learned about yourself and others from these experiences.

Vision: What you want to do in the future and how you plan on achieving it, your career goals, and how the school you are applying to can help you achieve this vision.

Influential people: How a mentor encouraged you to pursue higher education, family members that emphasized going to college, teachers who worked to make sure you received the best education possible, etc.

Interest in the specific college and potential contribution: Your knowledge about the college and why it is the right place for you, and what you will contribute to the college.