College Essay Writing: From Collegeboard.com

When you apply to college, you’ll need to complete an essay as part of your application. This is your opportunity to show admission officers who you are and to provide information about yourself that didn’t fit in other areas of your application. The essay also reveals what you can do when you have time to think and work on a writing project.

The number one piece of advice from admission officers about your essay is “Be yourself.” The number two suggestion is “Start early.” Check out these other tips before you begin.

**Choose a Topic That Will Highlight You**

**Don’t** focus on the great aspects of a particular college, the amount of dedication it takes to be a doctor or the number of extracurricular activities you took part in during high school.

**Do** share your personal story and thoughts, take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren’t covered in other parts of the application, like your high school records.

Top two tips: Be yourself and start early

**Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal**

**Don’t** try to cover too many topics. This will make the essay sound like a résumé that doesn’t provide any details about you.

**Do** focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are. Remember that the readers must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask a parent or teacher to read just your introduction and tell you what he or she thinks your essay is about.

**Show, Don’t Tell**

**Don’t** simply state a fact to get an idea across, such as “I like to surround myself with people with a variety of backgrounds and interests.”

**Do** include specific details, examples, reasons and so on to develop your ideas. For the example above, describe a situation when you were surrounded by various types of people. What were you doing? Whom did you talk with? What did you take away from the experience?

**Use Your Own Voice**

**Don’t** rely on phrases or ideas that people have used many times before. These could include statements like, “There is so much suffering in the world that I feel I have to help people.” Avoid overly formal or business-like language, and don’t use unnecessary words.

**Do** write in your own voice. For the above example, you could write about a real experience that you had and how it made you feel you had to take action. And note that admission officers will be able to tell if your essay was edited by an adult.

**Ask a Teacher or Parent to Proofread**

**Don’t** turn your essay in without proofreading it, and don’t rely only on your computer’s spell check to catch mistakes. A spell-check program will miss typos like these:

* "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to get a summer job."
* "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

**Do** ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes. You should also ask the person who proofreads your essay if the writing sounds like you.

*Adapted from* [The College Application Essay](http://store.collegeboard.com/sto/productdetail.do?Itemkey=009874) *by Sarah Myers McGinty.*

# Students Speak: How I Conquered the Application Essay

#### The college application essay is the perfect place to give admission officers a picture of who you are beyond grades, test scores and a list of extracurricular activities. But many students struggle to get started or to come up with ideas. Read about how these students approached their essays.

##### What did you write about?

My Common Application was about my heritage. The other ... essays I wrote ... were about my views on the death penalty, my thoughts on the Nevadan education system, my favorite academic experience at Girls Nation and how I define true success.
—Wen Hui, high school senior

I wrote my college essay on not believing in the word *regret*. The essay discussed taking chances and learning from each experience [and] never regretting a single thing that you choose to do.
—Sara, college senior

One prompt basically said, “Newton’s first law of motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force.” My first reaction was, “I’m not a science guy. How do I write about this?” But in essence, it simply asked me to reflect on my background and think about how an external force has ... caused me to change direction. I thought of so many things to say about the overly protective community I live in.
—Alexander, high school senior

I decided to write about my family's car accident. Although it was a painful essay to write, I feel the judges were able to get a better view of my personality from it.
—Michelle, high school senior

##### From your experience, what advice would you give students about approaching the essay?

I think that letting the readers get to know you on a personal level is something everyone should strive for in writing an admission essay. Reveal your true self.
—Michelle, high school senior

I began by searching Google to find ways to format a college essay. Over time, I found helpful blogs that eased my anxiety. I started to jot notes down and formed an outline with my answers, and from there, I transitioned those thoughts into my college essay.
—Bianca, college senior

Do not let the thought of college application essays scare you. Some of the topics, in my opinion, have been fun ones to tackle. ... Some of the questions asked me to write about my hobbies. Because the questions were personal and related to what I enjoy, it made the process fairly painless.
—Alexander, high school senior

Write your college essays as though you are talking to a new friend about who you are and what your goals are.
—Jose, high school senior

When I met with an admission counselor at the University of Maryland, the thing she most emphasized was to be creative and different. She said that they too often get the same essays over and over again, so the creative ones that come by really stand out.
—Jen, high school senior

# Sample College Application Essay 1

### You Be the Judge

Read the following application essay. See if you can figure out this essay's strengths and weaknesses. Then keep reading to see our critique.

### The Essay

From the time I was able to realize what a university was, all I heard from my mother's side of the family was about the University of Michigan and the great heritage it has. Many a Saturday afternoon my grandfather would devote to me, by sitting me down in front of the television and reminiscing about the University of Michigan while halftime occurred during a Michigan Wolverines football game. Later, as I grew older and universities took on greater meaning, my mother and uncle, both alumni of the University of Michigan, took me to see their old stamping grounds. From first sight, the university looked frightening because of its size, but with such a large school comes diversity of people and of academic and non-academic events.

In Springfield High School, non-academic clubs such as the Future Physicians and the Pylon, both of which I have belonged to for two years, give me an opportunity to see both the business world and the medical world. These two clubs have given me a greater sense of what these careers may be like. In Future Physicians, I participated in field trips to children's hospitals and also participated in two blood banks.

Currently I hold a job at Maas Brothers. This lets me interact with people outside my own immediate environment. I meet different kinds of people, in diffrent moods, with different attitudes, and with different values. This job teaches me to be patient with people, to have responsibility, and to appreciate people for what they are.

In the community I am active in my church Youth Group. As a high school sophomore, I was our church's representative to the Diocesan Youth Fellowship. I helped organize youth group events, the largest being "The Bishop's Ball," a state-wide event for 300 young people. I also played high school junior varsity soccer for two years. As a senior I will be playing varsity soccer, but in the off-season. As a junior I coached a girls' soccer team for the town. This gave me a great deal of responsibility because the care of twenty-four girls was put into my custody. It felt very satisfying to pass on the knowledge of soccer to another generation. The girls played teams from other parts of Florida. Though their record was 3-8, the girls enjoyed their season. This is what I taught them was the greatest joy of soccer.

The past three years of my life have given me greater visions of my future. I see the University of Michigan as holding a large book with many unread chapters and myself as an eager child who has just learned to read. I intend to read and probe into all the chapters. The University of Michigan offers me more than the great reputation of this fine school, but a large student body with diverse likes and dislikes, and many activities, both academic and non-academic, to participate in. With the help of the University of Michigan, I will be successful after college and be able to make a name and place for myself in our society.

### The Critique

Admission officials consider how you write your essay, not just what you write about. Try to critique your own essays in the same way this sample essay is critiqued below.

#### The Introduction

The introduction seems to have a lack of focus: Where's the writer going with this paragraph? Where's the writer going with this essay? Also, the writer needs to tighten the phrasing (e.g., "while halftime occurred" to "at halftime" or "From first sight" to "Immediately").

#### The Body

There is a very abrupt transition from the first paragraph to the second: How did we get from Michigan's diversity to the writer's clubs? The second paragraph also includes general statements with little evidence: How did these activities reveal career paths?

Can the writer be more specific? What does "participated in two blood banks" mean? Did he drive volunteers from across town, sign people in all day on three Saturdays every month except August or spend 15 minutes one Thursday afternoon in the nurse's office giving blood?

In the third paragraph, we have to ask: What does the writer do at Maas Brothers? "Interact" needs definition. What here shows that the writer has thought about the time spent at Maas Brothers? Also in this paragraph, there is a misspelling of different ("diffrent"): The writer did not proofread thoroughly.

The information in the fourth paragraph (as well as the previous two paragraphs) appears elsewhere in the application. Essays that simply run down your accomplishments don't add to your application. And does the reader need to know that "the girls played teams from other parts of Florida"?

The writer would be better off focusing on one of the things discussed in this essay, such as working with the girls' soccer team. What he did to make Jennifer and Gretchen and Courtney enjoy soccer even though they won only three of their games would be more vivid and focused than a lot of talk about passing things on to future generations.

#### The Conclusion

The conclusion returns to the earlier idea of diversity at Michigan, but this idea was not developed in the body of the essay. It's not necessary to mention "the great reputation of this fine school." Instead, the writer should give specific, programmatic reasons Michigan offers the kind of education he needs.

#### Overall

This essay seems full of information and demonstrates basic essay organization, but it lacks focus and proof. The reader gets a laundry list of activities rather than a clear sense of who the writer is and what he cares and thinks about.

The writer also repeats some phrases. He mentions the “University of Michigan” six times and repeats “academic and non-academic” twice.

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# Sample College Application Essay 2

### You Be the Judge

Read the following application essay. See if you can figure out this essay's strengths and weaknesses. Then keep reading to see our critique.

### The Essay

My most important experience sought me out. It happened to me; I didn't cause it.

My preferred companions are books or music or pen and paper. I have only a small circle of close friends, few of whom get along together. They could easily be counted "misfits." To be plain, I found it quite easy to doubt my ability to have any sort of "close relationship."

After the closing festivities of Andover Summer School this past summer, on the night before we were scheduled to leave, a girl I had met during the program's course approached me. She came to my room and sat down on my bed and announced that she was debating with herself whether she wanted me to become her boyfriend. She wanted my reaction, my opinion.

I was startled, to say the least, and frightened. I instantly said, "No." I told her I on no account wanted this and that I would reject any gestures she made towards starting a relationship. I would ignore her entirely, if need be. I explained that I was a coward. I wanted nothing whatsoever to do with a relationship. I talked a lot and very fast.

To my surprise, she did not leave instantly. Instead, she hugged her knees and rocked back and forth on my bed. I watched her from across the room. She rocked, and I watched. Doubts crept up on me. Opportunity had knocked and the door was still locked. It might soon depart.

"I lied," I said. "I was afraid of what might happen if we became involved. But it's better to take the chance than to be afraid."

She told me she knew I had lied. I had made her realize, though, how much she actually wanted me to be her boyfriend. We decided to keep up a relationship after Andover.

Even then, I was not sure which had been the lie. Now I think that everything I said may have been true when I said it. But I'm still not sure.

I learned, that night, that I could be close to someone. I also realize, now, that it doesn't matter whether or not that person is a misfit; the only important thing is the feeling, the closeness, the connection. As long as there is something between two people — friendship, love, shared interests, whatever else — it is a sign that there can be some reconciliation with fear, some "fit" for misfits. And it shows that fear need not always win, that we can grow and change, and even have second chances.

I am still seeing her.

### The Critique

Admission officials consider how you write your essay, not just what you write about. Try to critique your own essays in the same way this sample essay is critiqued below.

#### The Introduction

The introduction is brief and memorable. The reader is drawn into the rest of the essay.

#### The Body

The second paragraph shows that the essay has a clear focus: his anxiety about relationships. The next two paragraphs use a style that is simple and direct. They employ short sentences and simple words to tell a simple story.

We see that he is thoughtful by the way he narrates the next several paragraphs. The story of his conversation with a girl is a way for the writer to show us about himself — that he's conservative and shy but willing to take a risk.

#### The Conclusion

He concludes with a strong summary paragraph and end sentence. Like his introduction, his ending is simple yet memorable.

#### Overall

Boyfriends and girlfriends can be risky essay topics. However, this writer skillfully employs the story of the beginning of a relationship to illustrate a larger point — the power of love to overcome fear.

This essay enriches an application full of academic achievements, scores and grades. It's definitely not something found elsewhere in the application. It's short and to the point. It's interesting because it's believable.

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