<http://www.princetonreview.com/college/essay.aspx>

Most selective colleges require you to submit an essay or personal statement.

(Pause for moaning and groaning.) It may sound like a chore, and it will certainly take a substantial amount of work. But it's also a unique opportunity that can make a difference at decision time. Admissions committees put the most weight on your high school grades and your test scores. However, selective colleges receive applications from many worthy students with similar scores and grades–too many to admit. So they use your essay (along with your letters of recommendation and extracurricular activities) to find out what sets you apart from the other talented candidates.

Telling Your Story

So what does set you apart? You have a unique background, interests and personality. This is your chance to tell your story (or at least part of it).

The best way to tell your story is to write a personal, thoughtful essay about something that has meaning for you. Be honest and genuine, and your unique qualities will shine through.

Admissions officers have to read an unbelievable number of essays, most of which are banal and forgettable. Many students try to sound smart rather than sounding like themselves. Others write about a subject that they don't care about, but that they think will impress admissions officers.

You don't need to have started a company or discovered a lost Mayan temple. Colleges are simply looking for thoughtful, motivated students who will add something to the freshman class.

The Mechanics of a College Essay

Write about something that's important to you. It could be an experience, a person, a book–anything that has had an impact on your life.

Don't just recount–reflect! Anyone can write about how they won the big game or the time they spent in Rome. When recalling these events, you need to give more than the play–by–play or itinerary. Describe what you learned from the experience and how it changed you.

Being funny is tough. A student who can make an admissions officer laugh never gets lost in the shuffle. But beware. What you think is funny and what an adult working in a college thinks is funny are probably different. We caution against one–liners, limericks and anything off–color.

Start early and write several drafts. Set it aside for a few days and read it again. Put yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer: Is the essay interesting? Do the ideas flow logically? Does it reveal something about the applicant? Is it written in the applicants' own voice?

What you write in your application essay or personal statement should not contradict any other part of your application–nor should it repeat it. This isn't the place to list your awards or discuss your grades or test scores.

Answer the question being asked. Don't reuse an answer to a similar question from another application.

Have at least one other person edit your essay–a teacher or college counselor is best. And before you send it off, check, check again, and then triple check to make sure your essay is free of spelling or grammar errors.

http://www.princetonreview.com/college/essay.aspx