How to Conquer Your College Application Essay

While your SAT scores, high school transcript, and extracurricular experiences generally speak for themselves, they are not a complete representation of who you are. As a result, college admissions offices use your application essay to assess not just what you have done, but what you can do.

This realization may make the task of writing an application essay seem even more intimidating. But you can choose to see it as a positive opportunity. Your application essay is your chance to advocate for yourself. You can not only say that you are unique, but prove it.

To make this process a little less daunting, here are some steps you can take to guide you through the writing process.

**Stage 1: Plan**

**Know the restrictions.** Check the maximum word count and the application due date. If there is a prompt or guidelines, read it carefully and identify exactly what you should address. You want to make your essay purposeful.

**Schedule.** Create a timeline for the writing process. Set due dates for yourself: maybe have your background research on your college done in the first two days, then a first draft within a week, then a second draft a few days after that. Your timeline will depend on how long you have until your application is due, your personal commitments, and your own writing speed. Stay on schedule, and if you can, build in extra time for possible interruptions or issues that arise.

**Research.** Research the college you’re considering. If possible, talk to accepted students or alumnae/i about their application process. Brainstorm which features of the school you might want to reference. Your application should be clearly tailored for the college rather than generic to prove the level of your interest, as well as your research abilities.

**Review your application.** Talk through your transcript and high school experiences. You can highlight what you feel the application does not accurately reflect or emphasize, explain weaker aspects of your history (for instance, if your grades were affected by a medical issue or personal event, you might want to explain that), and illustrate connections between your experiences and interests and what the college is seeking.

**Seek others’ opinions.** If you find yourself struggling for things to say or have a hard time discussing your achievements, find someone close to you who knows you well. She or he can help you generate a topic or simply help you see yourself from a different angle.
Stage 2: Draft

**Write!** While a blank page can be intimidating, it will be a lot less unnerving if you get some ideas down. Remember, you do not have to immediately commit to anything you write, so allow yourself some freedom. Once you have some general ideas, you can sharpen and clarify them.

**Watch your tone.** Discuss your achievements without bragging or minimizing. That can be difficult. When talking about yourself, try to describe your accomplishments in terms of how they can help you contribute to your college and make you a stronger student rather than simply for the sake of congratulating yourself.

**Focus on growth, not just the past.** Emphasize your hard-won achievements by centering your essay on what you still can learn and how your experiences will influence your future. Tell the college what you can give them, not just what you have already done.

Stage 3: Polish

**Take a break.** Once you have a draft, leave it alone for at least 24 hours before you begin revisions. Revisiting it with a clear head will allow you to see mistakes you might otherwise overlook and give you perspective on the overall narrative.

**Ask questions.** Think of how the essay works as a whole. Is the tone appropriate – are you bragging, or making excuses rather than explaining? Does the essay flow logically? Have you hit on every point that you want to make? Is it balanced – or do you talk about some things more than others? Does it feel authentic? Have you effectively drawn out connections between your experiences and what the college offers? Have you emphasized what you can contribute as well as what you hope to gain?

**Make it shine.** Once the overarching issues have been addressed, really nitpick your essay. Read it aloud. Check diction, spelling, and grammar. Make sure it fits the word count restrictions and fully addresses the prompt if there is one. While this might seem like the easiest stage, allow yourself ample time to thoroughly proofread. In addition, always find one or two other people to look it over. Fresh eyes will often see the mistakes you naturally skip over. You know what you wanted to say; someone else will not and might be able to identify logical issues or missing words.

Ultimately, you want your essay to be polished and confident and to tell a compelling story about who you are, what you can do, and why you belong in the college to which you are applying. With a little confidence and the right tools, your essay is your opportunity to showcase your potential. Take advantage of your application essay — see it as a tool rather than a trial, and the chance to tell your story.

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