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## INTRODUCTION

# The Definitive College Essay Course

I've always been passionate about written expression. I earned my first \$100 at age of ten when I won a state-wide essay contest. Oddly, I don't remember what my story was about, perhaps because words always flowed so naturally to me. I do remember clutching the certificate tightly to my chest and whispering, "First prize, first prize, first prize." That was the moment that the world knew I was a writer; it was no longer my secret pastime.

Years later, I graduated from college with a double major in English and secondary education, spending five years as an English teacher at a sprawling suburban high school. As a writing teacher, my primary goal was not in ensuring grammatical correctness or the inclusion of elaborate vocabulary, it was in helping my students **find their voice**. I longed for the moments of creativity and personal expression; the free writing, the open-ended prompts, the moments in which my students' stories spilled onto paper.

When I left the classroom to pursue college counseling, I immediately fell in love with the college essay, also known as the **personal statement**. Many of my students expressed feelings of stress about tackling this important piece of the college application process. "It's so open-ended," said one. "I kind of feel naked." She's not wrong. The personal statement is open-ended and is designed to reveal aspects of you that aren't visible in other parts of your application.

**Your words are powerful.** Your lived experiences are different from every other college applicant; you have a story to tell, and no one can tell it for you.



Over the years, I've supported hundreds of students through the college essay process. I'm passionate about higher education, and I've dedicated my career to expanding access for students from all backgrounds. I believe that every student should have the chance to succeed in college, and the personal statement is a great place to start that journey.

These days, my approach to the college essay is twofold: I want students to better understand what admissions officers are looking for, and I want students to be **empowered to find their voice**.

I look forward to taking this journey with you. Welcome to the *Definitive College Essay* course!



## BEFORE YOUR WRITE

# Understanding the Personal Statement

Close your eyes for a moment and imagine your college application as a jigsaw puzzle. Your academic transcript, activities, personal statement, supplemental essays, test scores, and teacher recommendation letters are all important pieces of the puzzle; each unique piece illustrates an aspect of who you are as an individual.

## Why do colleges request a personal statement? What purpose does it serve in the admissions process?

Your **personal statement** is one of the most distinctive aspects of your college application. This is your opportunity to create a personal story that highlights elements of your life and individuality that aren't reflected in the other parts of your application. The personal statement goes beyond the data points of grades and test scores, allowing you to share a meaningful glimpse into your life that might otherwise go untold. What do you want a team of college admissions officers at your dream school to know about you

Usually, students create one thoughtfully crafted personal statement, which is designed to be submitted to multiple schools. While this essay should be personal to you, it should *not* contain any college-specific information (for example: "My dream is to earn a nursing degree at Cornell.") Many universities require school-specific supplemental essays, where you'll have the opportunity to share more specific information about your interest in that college. The personal statement, however, should stay focused on *you*!



## What makes a great personal statement? What are colleges looking for?

Who are you? What makes you come alive? If asked, how would your loved ones describe your personality? What events have shaped your life?

Let's consider Keith and Maria, two high school seniors in California who are applying for admission at the same top-ranked university in the northeast. Both have an unweighted 3.85 GPA, multiple AP classes, and a lengthy list of extracurricular activities, including several with a STEM focus. Both have expressed interest in pursuing a degree in computer science. Keith and Maria are both applying as test-optional applicants. They pretty much look the same on paper.

Maria's essay statement focuses on her experiences with self-directed learning. She describes how she worked to acquire the English language at age ten, after immigrating to Los Angeles from Guatemala, and then she taught herself to code at age fifteen. The tone is reflective and serious, and the essay reveals a great deal about Maria's perseverance. Keith's essay recounts a day at the carnival, and how momentarily getting stuck in a rollercoaster taught him the meaning of friendship. The tone is light-hearted and humorous.

Both essays are well-written, but suddenly, Maria and Keith no longer seem so similar.

Colleges are looking for a personal statement that reflects your voice and gives their admissions team a glimpse into who you really are—your personality, your unique accomplishments, and the experiences that have impacted you. There is not one single road map writing to a great college essay; excellent personal statements are just as unique as the students they represent.

## When I submit my college application, who reads my personal statement?

It only takes a few quick clicks to send your college application into the abyss, but it can feel a bit overwhelming to know that a mysterious stranger will



be reading your personal story. When I was teaching writing as a high school English teacher, I would often tell my students, “Know your audience.” This is true for many forms of written expression, and the personal statement is no exception.

Your college essay will be read by an admissions officer (or, in some cases, an admissions team.) Exactly how your essay is evaluated and how it impacts your overall application can vary from one institution to another. However, regardless of which colleges you apply to, admissions officers read your essay to learn more about *you* and to evaluate whether you’d make a good addition to their campus community.

Admissions officers have been highly trained in reading college essays and eliminating personal bias in their scoring. While you may not know who that person is, you can be sure of this: they are reading your college essay to get a full picture of who you are and what you’ll bring to the table.

**Your essay should share something impactful about who you are that cannot be found in other parts of your application.**

Now, let’s start writing!



## PICKING THE PERFECT TOPIC

# For Your Personal Statement

When it's time to start writing your college essay, picking a topic can be half the battle! Summing up your entire personhood in 650 words can feel like a daunting task, especially when the stakes are high. So, where do you begin?

To start, I encourage you to *relax a bit*. Listen to some soothing music, engage in physical movement, or catch up with a friend. The best essay ideas will likely come to you on an ordinary Thursday while you're snacking on Oreos, not while you are trapped inside a pressure cooker.

Ready to start brainstorming? Here are a few quick activities to get you started.

### The “I am” free write:

“Hey Siri, set the timer for ten minutes, please.” Now, turn off your WiFi, get out a blank sheet of paper, write “I am” at the top, and begin writing freely. You can use words, phrases, or complete sentences to get your thoughts out; just keep writing, and don't put your pen down until the timer goes off. (If timed writing activities feel stressful for you, eliminate the timer and take as much time as you need.) The goal here is really to write without stopping and get your ideas out, without regard to formal sentences, grammar, or other constraints.

Great. Now, circle five words or phrases that feel most significant to your identity. What do you notice about yourself? Now that you have a little more time to look over your words, what are you missing?





### Brief prompts:

Ready for a new pre-writing activity? Create a few words (or a few sentences, if you prefer) in response to each of these brief prompts. The goal is to jog your thinking.

- ✓ A favorite place from your childhood or adolescence
- ✓ The best day of your life
- ✓ The worst day of your life
- ✓ A random talent (what are you good at?)
- ✓ Something you believe in strongly
- ✓ A significant relationship in your life
- ✓ The greatest obstacle you've overcome
- ✓ A time you won (or lost)
- ✓ What makes you smile
- ✓ Your favorite object or possession

Which prompt felt easiest for you to write about? Where did you get stuck? Circle 2-3 prompts that came to you most naturally.

### Event mapping:

Start with a stack of sticky notes and jot down significant or memorable events that have occurred in your life, one per sticky note. These events can be either positive or negative in nature (examples: the birth of a sibling, your first international trip, death of a family pet, winning a cross country tournament, baking your first loaf of sourdough, coming out to your mom.) You decide what feels significant!

When you can't think of any more events, count your sticky notes. If you've completed more than ten, you'll want to decide which memories feel most



significant, so you can limit your list to ten. Then, arrange your sticky notes in approximate chronological order. It may be helpful to walk through your sticky note event map with a parent or other family member, to see if they suggest an additional important event that you've missed. These strategies are a good starting place. Now that you've jotted down some ideas, it's time to narrow down a topic.

### **If you had three minutes to meet with the Dean of Admissions at your dream school, what would you want them to know about you?**

Consider this question when narrowing down the topic for your college essay. As a college counselor, I often worked with students who felt eager to share stories that they thought might be memorable or would make them **stand out** in the admissions process. This makes perfect sense; after all, students are often told that the essay is their chance to **stand out** to the admissions team. However, I would often find myself gently challenging my students to really consider what it means to create a memorable personal statement.

A powerful college essay is one that really captures your voice. It's the essay that I don't want to put down, because I feel like you're right there with me as I'm reading. It's the essay I'm still thinking about a day later, not because it was the most conspicuous topic or because you shared your darkest secret, but because I walked away from reading your words feeling like we were all already acquainted.

I've read many powerful college essays throughout my career, and they have spanned a wide variety of different topics, from dramatic to seemingly mundane. What are the most memorable college essays I've read recently? One was by a young woman who quit ballroom dancing after she realized that this hobby (and her quest for perfection) had taken over her life. Another was by a young man who described the unexpected friendship he formed with a much older co-worker while working his summer job as a busboy. While these topics



may not sound especially memorable, in both cases, I was thinking about their stories the next day. Words are powerful. It's not just having a big story to tell; it's *how* you tell it. It's your voice.

A question that has come up often for me is:

*“Are there certain topics students should stay away from when writing their college essay?”*

The answer is yes and no. Your voice is critical in the writing process, and ultimately, your essay is yours. There are, however, some topics that I generally suggest that students steer away from.

### **Example of clichéd or overused topics:**

*(Just ask any admissions officer!)*

- **An international service trip and how it changed your life** (this generally falls into the category of a “privilege essay.” Is this the best aspect of yourself to share?)
- **An essay about all your accomplishments** (this is what the “Activities” section on the Common Application is for!)
- **Trauma** (example: abuse, divorce, or another tragedy. I’m very sorry that this happened to you and believe that processing your experience is important, but is a college essay the right place to do so? Could your story be unintentionally triggering to someone reading it?)
- **Moving** (yes, this may have impacted you, but it’s actually pretty common.)
- **A sports injury** (or winning or losing a game.)
- **A person you look up to** (while writing about an interpersonal relationship can be powerful, the danger here is that essay can drift away from *you*.)

This list certainly isn’t black and white. Throughout my career guiding students through the college process, I’ve read successful essays on many of these topics.



If you are determined to write about a potentially overused topic, it's important to ask yourself a few questions:

- What am I hoping to share about myself?
- Why is this topic important to me?
- How will I use my unique voice to make my story stand out?

There are a few additional topics that many college essay professionals advise students against, due to their content potentially sending up “red flags” to an admissions officer.

### Example of “red flag” topics:

- **Sexual content** (yes, admissions officers were seventeen once, too, but they don't want to know any intimate details of your life. Your college essay is not intended to be salacious.)
- **Illegal or illicit behavior.** (Perhaps you once had a shoplifting habit that you've kicked. I'm glad you've overcome this, and I hope you've learned from it, but is this the most important information that you want an admissions team to know about you? Is there any potential it could sow seeds of doubt about whether that habit has really been tamed and if you'll be a good member of their campus community?)
- **The “party animal” essay.** (Refer back to illegal and illicit behavior. An admissions team is evaluating you based on your ability to join their academic community, not on your ability to contribute to the off-campus party scene.)
- **Mental health issues.** (This is a tricky one! As a licensed counselor, I am personally a fierce advocate for student mental health and recognize that mental health struggles play a role in the lives of many young people. However, you want to be very careful to present your writing in such a manner that does *not* leave admissions officers wondering whether their campus can adequately support you.)



And now for a gentle reminder: **your college essay is not a confessional.**  
Are you ready to write?



## THE ADMISSIONS ESSAY

# It's Not as Hard as AP English

When you are writing an admissions essay, simply adhering to the rules of grammar you learned in middle school and using vocabulary words you picked up during SAT prep will not cut it. In fact, if you feel you need a thesaurus, then the writing is probably already bad. What you need is to keep in mind common pitfalls and these tips on structuring your essay.

### Common Writing Tips

- ✓ **Avoid Passive Voice:** You have probably heard this many times over, but you hear it many times over because people do not listen. While not every use of “is,” “was,” and “are” are weak (case in point), you want to minimize it as much as possible. If it sounds natural in the active voice, keep it that way; if it sounds wordy and clunky, passive voice is (probably) OK.
- ✓ **Avoid clichés:** Often, we hear people say they worry their essay is boring, does not display their passion, or feels like a slog to read. If the content and messaging works, nine times out of ten, this has to do with an over-reliance on clichés. “I gave it my all,” “I read between the lines,” and “the time of my life” do not work because they do not specifically describe you. If you had an internship, for example, that really was “the time of your life,” do not just say that. Show us how it was the time of your life.
- ✓ **Avoid generalized language:** The other common pitfall in “boring” writing comes from general language. “I was sad when I did not get the internship” only gives us a vague idea of how you felt (not to mention



it uses passive voice). Show us how you walked for an hour in silent disappointment; show us how you immediately got up and applied to another five internships; show us how you picked up the phone and called the internship director to make your case. The more you show details that would separate your experience and story from others, the stronger your writing will be.

## The Power of Story: The Most Effective Medium

*“To involve people at the deepest level, you need stories.”*

*-Robert McKee, Author*



The next time you read a long-form journalism article, notice how almost all of them start with a small anecdote or story that leads into the overall message. Nonfiction authors will also do this, opening their books with stories that, absent the context, could read like fiction. Why?

Because stories engage.

Because stories are relatable.

Because stories are the most effective way to get and then keep a reader’s attention.

At times, we advise clients to think of the essays less as essays and more as a chance to tell a personal story because it will encourage them to write appropriately. So how do you tell a good story, then? One example is you:

- ✓ **Show:** The time for “Because of this experience, I learned...” is at the end of your essay, not in the middle of the story. For everything up to the conclusion, show us what happened.



- ✓ **Use dialogue:** If you're going to talk about a person who influenced you, show us a scene and what they said.
- ✓ **Start with the “Inciting Incident”:** When you first learned about storytelling, you probably learned about the five stages of writing. Because of limited space, start “in media res.” (Latin for “in the midst of things”) It will immediately suck the reader in and make them curious to learn about the context of the scene.
- ✓ **Build toward the climax:** In your personal statement, this is when you realized you needed to do whatever it is you want to do. This moment should arrive with tension and reflection or questions—do this, and the rest will come naturally.

Once you've told your story... then what? How do you properly end your essay?

## Bring it Full Circle

In those same long-form journalism articles or nonfiction books you read, you may notice something interesting about their conclusions—they usually bring back the opening narrative or story.

*“The easiest way to get that sense of closure and emotional catharsis is to bring the book full-circle.”*

*-Holly West, Editor at Macmillan Publishers*



That is no accident. Just as the “Hero’s Journey” from Joseph Campbell is literally represented as a circle, great storytelling often entails coming back to where you started. You end at the beginning but with the benefit of wisdom. The same is true with your essay—circle back to where you started, reflect on how far you have come, and summarize it all. If ever there is a spot to “tell” instead of “show,” your last couple of paragraphs are it. Sometimes, you may find a pithy, one-line sentence to end the essay on, but in general, a concise, three-to-five sentence closing paragraph should work fine.





## FATAL FLAWS

# Mistakes to Avoid in Your College Essay

Since writing a college essay can feel a bit nerve-racking for many students, here's some good news for you: *there isn't one "right" way to write a college essay*, no pun intended. Successful college essays come in a wide array of topics, representing a myriad of student voices. Wait, does that basically mean that anything goes? Nope! While there are many *right* ways to craft an essay, there are also quite a few *wrong* ways. If you're wondering exactly what not to do, you came to the right place. Here, we'll dive into some common mistakes that can inadvertently send your essay right to the bottom of the stack.

### **Mistake #1: *Your essay is vague or entirely lacks substance.***

Have you ever mindlessly read through 650 words and literally finished with no idea about who the writer is and what they trying to convey? Unfortunately, I have. An essay can be vague for a variety of reasons: you didn't answer the prompt, you didn't cite any specific examples, you didn't reveal any feelings, motivations, or emotions, or you repeated the same information without adding anything new. If you spend three paragraphs writing about how your determination is one of your greatest qualities, yet you provide no specific examples of how this trait has shown up in your life, you've entirely lost your reader. To be completely honest, they've probably tossed your essay aside and moved on to the next.



## **Mistake #2: Your essay overuses cliché words or phrases.**

Here are a few examples that I've observed in the first drafts of my students' college essays:

*"Horseback riding is my passion; when I enter the barn, I'm like a kid at the candy store."*

*"This year, I learned that **time heals all wounds.**"*

*"As an aspiring scientist, **thinking outside of the box** is one of my strengths."*

Clichés are cliché for a reason: they're popular phrases, so they've become a bit *too popular*, and instead, come across as unoriginal and overused. Comparing yourself to a kid at the candy store tells me very little about *you*, and I'm reading your essay because I want to know *your* words and *your* story. When you use cliché phrases in your writing, you risk sounding corny and inauthentic. Please, do college admissions officers everywhere a favor and leave the clichés right where you found them.

## **Mistake #3: Your personal statement lacks structure.**

Your college essay allows for unique creativity and self-expression in a way that some highly structured writing assignments do not. You *don't* have to follow the five-paragraph essay format that you likely learned in school. In fact, in advising on the college essay process, I often urge my students to think beyond what they learned in high school English class. After all, a personal statement is *personal*; it doesn't require MLA citations, topic sentences, or a thesis statement (thank goodness!) Even though you do have some flexibility, it is still very important to still create structure within your essay, even though you are not following a cookie-cutter template. The structure makes your writing coherent and allows your college essay to read like a story. You *do* need an opening, a body, and a conclusion (even if that doesn't exactly amount to five paragraphs.)



You *do* want to utilize transitions to make one paragraph flow to the next. Without structure, you risk creating a maze of words that don't quite flow together.

**Mistake #4: *Your essay isn't really about you.***

Perhaps in brainstorming your favorite places, you begin jotting down childhood memories involving your grandmother's kitchen. You remember the feeling of warmth and comfort that kitchen evoked, and how much you loved to drink hot chocolate while watching your grandmother make peach cobbler. Boom! You have the perfect essay topic, so you begin writing. Yet, after scribbling down 650 words, rich with vivid descriptions, you realize this essay is really a tribute to your grandmother's life and isn't actually about at all. Now, I'm sure your grandmother was a lovely person and deserves a well-written tribute, but your college personal statement isn't the time or place for that. If you select a topic that involves another person's significant impact on your life, make sure that you truly stay focused on that; this writing shouldn't be about them; it should be about you.

**Mistake #5: *Your essay is a verbose description of what's on your resume.***

So, you have a resume? That's awesome! Your resume will come in very useful when you complete the *Activities* section on the Common Application; some colleges also request a resume attachment or request that you expound a bit on one or more of your extracurricular activities. *Your personal statement, however, is not your resume.* Take a moment to reflect on the analogy of your college application as a giant puzzle; while your extracurricular activities and your college essay are both critical puzzle pieces, they are not the same piece. As tempting as it may be, do not use your personal statement as an opportunity to showcase the extracurricular activities you've engaged in as a high school student. This is your opportunity to share a different aspect of yourself and your identity that isn't already evident in other aspects of your application.



### **Mistake #6: Your essay is tone-deaf.**

As you begin writing your personal statement, ask yourself, “*Who am I? What aspects of myself do I want to share through my writing? What do I want a college admissions team to learn about me?*” Your college essay should showcase your individuality, while maintaining a tone that is thoughtful and appropriate, given the context of this writing. Attempting to be overly humorous, dry and cynical, or extraordinarily confident can all backfire. As you write, imagine your audience. If a topic or word choice feels controversial or questionable to you, it probably is. You don’t have to add any gimmicks or quirks into your writing to grab your reader’s attention; instead, be authentically yourself and tell your story, imagining how you want to be understood and what you’d like your reader to know about you.

Understanding what not to write is important. You have 650 words (or less) to make a great impression, so don’t let any of these potential essay flaws take you on a detour.



## THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

# Writing a Winning Introduction

The opening paragraph of your college essay is a critical example of why first impressions matter. Writing a vivid, compelling introduction “hooks” your reader and draws them in, making them *want* to read to know the rest of your story. So, how do you create a winning introduction?

Here are a few suggestions:

- 1. Pick a starting point.** For many writers, the introduction is the hardest part. Even if you have brainstormed a topic and have a general idea of what you want to say, starting the writing process can be tough, especially when the stakes are high. You may find it helpful to “write your way into” an introduction. If you need to start in the heart of the essay and work your way backward, you can certainly do so! You can also write the first introduction that comes to mind, knowing very well that you intend to go back and edit it heavily. Either way, it’s important to start somewhere and just begin writing.
- 2. Throw away what you learned in English class!** Okay, so don’t throw away *everything* you learned in class; some of it will be very helpful in the college writing process. However, it is important to understand that a personal statement doesn’t need to adhere to a formulaic structure, like the five-paragraph essay you’ve likely been taught to write in school, and you don’t need a formal thesis statement. Think of this more as a *story*.



- 3. Focus on using vivid, descriptive language.** This may include using dialogue or creating a detailed, colorful description using the five senses. Ask yourself, “If I were reading a stack of essays, would this paragraph stand out to me? Would I want to read further?”

Let’s consider a few successful college essay introductions.

### **Example Introduction #1: Using colorful imagery**

*“Instinctively, I hold my breath. The pungent fragrance of roasted coffee beans and the shrill sound of steam whistles from the espresso machines force my senses into overload. Before me are mounds of freshly baked goodies and colossal stacks of books piled on bookshelves as high as the ceiling. Pressing my nose against the glass cover, I don’t budge until the ginormous chocolate-chip cookie is within my possession. With one hand holding my cookie, I collect as many books as my chubby arms can hold and plop into my favorite blue armchair. I would look forward to this routine: every Saturday, when the big hand hit six, my parents would take me to Timothy’s, their coffee shop, and I would begin the day’s quest.”*

This essay, written by a student who was accepted at John Hopkins, opens with memorably vivid imagery: “the pungent fragrance of roasted coffee beans,” “the shrill sound of steam whistles,” “colossal stacks of books piled high,” “ginormous chocolate-chip cookie,” “chubby arms.”

This introduction evokes emotion, even though the topic is pretty simple. The student’s ability to share her Saturday routine in a descriptive manner draws the reader in, causing me to feel as if I am right there with her.

It’s not always an extraordinary essay *topic* that matters; it’s *how* you tell an ordinary story.



## Example Introduction #2: *Using an anecdote*

*I stood frozen in the produce aisle at ShopRite, wondering which of the five varieties of oranges to buy. Valencia, blood orange, organic, Florida navel – what were the differences? When I asked my mom which variety she was looking for, she responded curtly, “It’s your choice. Pick what you want.” The thing was, I didn’t know what I wanted.*

This essay, written by a student who was accepted at Harvard, opens with a powerful anecdote. The student uses vivid imagery to describe his experience selecting oranges at a supermarket. As readers, we also gain clues about his relationship with his mother (a bit strained, perhaps?) and his uncertainty about his decision-making skills. This introduction paved the way for an essay that contrasts the student’s freedom and self-direction as a first-generation American with the rigidity experienced by his parents, who grew up in China and immigrated to the United States. This simple story about selecting oranges became a powerful metaphor for the student’s decision-making processes, and the colorful language made the opening lines stand out.

While your statement will likely focus on a completely different topic, opening with a vivid anecdote can be a powerful way to get your reader’s attention, regardless of what you choose to write about.

## Example Introduction #3: *Using dialogue*

*“No, no, no, you’re all doing it wrong! The secret to developing realistic drawings lies in your ability to study every nuance of the object in front of you,” my art teacher advised. “Try sketching with one eye closed; it’s all about perspective, people!”*

This essay, written by a student who was accepted at John Hopkins, opens with strong dialogue, as she directly quotes her art teacher. From reading this



brief introduction, the reader does not yet know that the topic of this student's essay is how navigating a visual impairment has helped her to see far and wide. This essay is a compelling example of the power of storytelling in the college application process.

Do not underestimate the power of dialogue in your essay's introduction.

Conversation can serve as the entryway to a thoughtful, well-crafted personal story.

### **Example Introduction #4: *Incorporating an element of mystery***

*"I walked down the pale pink stone pathway, up a ramp, past the library building, and towards the Student Activities Center of the college campus, carrying a large brown cardboard box. People might've taken note of the load I was carrying, and particularly the other high school students with whom I ate my dinner. Out of the box I grabbed my meal, which was wrapped in two separate plastic airplane meal style trays; one container for the side and one for the main. I tried not to call attention to myself as I unwrapped the tight double wrapping of plastic around both trays."*

This essay, written by a student who was accepted to Princeton, weaves an element of mystery into the introduction. After reading further, the reader learns that this mysterious box, containing the double-wrapped plastic trays, is a reference to her kosher meals; her essay focuses on her internal questioning about the religious customs she's grown up with,

What's important in this introduction is that the student leaves the reader with a bit of a puzzle to solve; after all, we want to know the significance of the box and the contents it holds. Incorporating an element of mystery into an introduction is a powerful way of grabbing your reader's attention.





When it comes to writing a winning introduction, here are a few questions I'm often asked:

- 1. I'm feeling extra creative.** Can I open with a song, a poem, or a less traditional opening? Creativity in the writing process should be applauded, but there is such a thing as *too creative* when it comes to creating a personal statement. I have read a few very successful essays that had less than traditional introductions, such as lines from a self-authored poem or even a simple recipe. Be careful here, though. Trying to be too unconventional can backfire and cause the admissions team to not get what they came for.
- 2. I want to open with a famous quote that's meaningful to me. Is that a good idea?** Nope! That is not a good idea. While you may have learned this strategy while creating a five-paragraph essay in high school, this does not translate to the college essay process and can come across as cliché and unoriginal. Unless a university explicitly asks you to analyze a quote as a supplemental essay prompt, stay away from famous quotes.
- 3. Does my opening paragraph need to contain five sentences?** No, it does not! Successful essay introductions can look a lot of different ways. In some cases, it may be one powerful sentence. Throw away what you've learned about five-sentence paragraphs; they are not required here.

Your introduction is the best opportunity you have to make a lasting first impression. Make it count!



## THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

# Writing the Perfect Conclusion

So, you've written a mesmerizing personal statement, capturing your unique story while allowing your personality and voice to shine through. Yet, one question looms in your mind: "How do I end this thing?"

Concluding your essay is a critically important step in your writing process, but it can also be one of the most challenging parts. Students are eager to leave a great impression in the mind of their reader, but can risk trailing off without any real closure or, perhaps even worse, concluding with a few trite sentences that take away the impact of all the words that came prior, leaving an admissions officer to wonder, "Was this essay that great after all?"

Here are a few do's and don'ts to consider when crafting a compelling conclusion.

### DO:

- **Be intentional!** Just because you hit the magical 650-word count doesn't mean that it's time to stop writing. Be thoughtful about how you want to conclude.
- **If appropriate, refer back to an anecdote or description from your introduction.** Depending on your topic, this full-circle approach can help tie your essay together.
- **Don't be afraid to end with dialogue or a vivid description.** Some basic strategies for writing essay introductions actually apply to conclusions as well.



- **Show. Don't tell.** Many college essays end reflectively, which is usually very appropriate for this type of writing. Show your reader what you learned and how you've grown.
- **Recognize that this is your last chance to make an impression on the admissions committee.** Your goal is to “clinch” them.

### DON'T:

- **Don't summarize your essay.** This is not a five-paragraph essay, and there is no need to summarize or restate a thesis statement. (After all, a thesis statement shouldn't exist in the context of a personal statement!) Think of your conclusion as writing a powerful ending to a great story.
- **Don't ruin a great essay by over reflecting.** You don't need a long, wordy paragraph to end an essay successfully.
- **Don't use cliché phrases.** Consider your words carefully before resorting to phrases such as “I think,” “I learned,” or “The most important thing.” You risk sounding cliché, and your story can easily get lost in the shuffle.

Now, let's consider some examples of successful college essay conclusions.

### Example #1: *Simple, yet powerful storytelling*

*When class ended each afternoon, I would cap my blue dry-erase marker, give high-fives to the students as they walked out the door, and watch as their parents picked them up. I was confident that when my students were asked the inevitable questions of “Did you learn something today?” and “Did you have fun?” their answers would be a resounding yes. And even as their teacher, I learned and had fun too.*

This essay, written by a student accepted at Harvard, depicts his summer spent as a volunteer instructor at a public speaking camp for elementary students. His



language is simple, but his story comes to life. In this concluding paragraph, he provides important details that help his story come alive (for example, capping the blue dry-erase marking and giving his students high fives.) This is mixed with a touch of reflection (“And even as their teacher, I learned and had fun.”) Although he could have rambled for another paragraph about everything he learned, he kept it thoughtful and concise. This conclusion is the perfect example of the fact that often in the college essay process, **less is more**.

### **Example #2: *Bringing the story full circle***

*Despite my many failed attempts at making tortillas throughout my life, I have discovered the key ingredient to the tortilla recipe, and ultimately the recipe of life: persistence. If trying to make tortillas has taught me anything, it is that: it's not about the shape of the tortilla, it's about how the tortilla faces the hot griddle of life.*

This essay, written by a student accepted at John Hopkins, opens with a childhood memory about making misshaped tortillas by hand. The student uses this simple yet descriptive anecdote to provide a glimpse into her personal experiences with multiculturalism. In her conclusion, she refers back to the tortilla reference from the introduction, bringing the story full circle. Her conclusion is brief but powerful, and she offers a poignant metaphor without feeling the need to over-explain it.

### **Example #3: *A glimpse into goals for the future***

*Initially, my goal was to catch trout. What I landed was a passion. Thanks to that first morning on Fall Creek, I've found a calling that consumes my free time, compels me to teach fly fishing to others, and drives what I want to study in college.*

*I will be leaving Fall Creek soon. I am eager to step into new streams.*



This essay, written by a student accepted at Hamilton College, describes learning how to fish and how a unique friendship sparked from this hobby. The writer weaves his hopes for the future into his essay's conclusion in a manner that is creative and intentional. He *shows* the readers his future goals and ends with a catchy metaphor.

Conclusions are as unique as the essays themselves; there are many different ways to create an impactful finale to your writing. If at first you don't get it right, rewrite that closing paragraph again!



## THE PERSONAL STATEMENT

# An Editing Checklist

Waves of relief wash over you as you write the final words to your college essay. You're finished! Go ahead and breathe a big sigh of relief.

As tempting as it may be to hit “submit” on your applications without taking another glance behind you, editing your essay is a very important part of the writing process. Here's a foolproof editing checklist to make sure that your finished draft is flawless.

### Your Essay's Content:

Does your essay tell the story you were hoping for? What does your writing say about you? Were you able to represent yourself, your background, and your values effectively?

- ✓ **Review your introduction.** Does it grab the reader's attention? Does it begin to tell a story?
- ✓ **Review the structure of your essay.** Consider carefully reading the first sentence of each new paragraph. Do you use transitions effectively? Does your story flow? Are the paragraphs in the right order, or should any content be sequenced differently?
- ✓ **Review the conclusion.** Is your ending strong and effective? Do you tie your story together in a manner that is memorable, yet concise?



- ✓ **Did you answer the prompt?** While answering a specific prompt effectively is less important for Common App essays, it is critical for supplemental essays that ask a specific question. Make sure you've answered it.

## Word Choice, Grammar, & Sentence Structure:

Read through your essay, focusing on word choice, sentence structure, and grammar.

- ✓ **Do you use a variety of sentence types?** If every sentence looks the same, you'll need to make some edits! Quality writing features a variety of different sentence types, which helps to keep the writing fresh and interesting.
- ✓ **Are there any grammatical errors or spelling errors?** The impact of a grammatically flawless essay can be a critical deciding factor in the college admissions process. Proofread, proofread, proofread!
- ✓ **Is your verb tense consistent?** If you open your essay with a story in the past tense, keep it that way! Switching around the verb tense can cause your writing to sound scattered and incoherent.
- ✓ **Do you use a variety of different words, especially verbs and adjectives?** The online thesaurus is your friend! Of course, you want to be intentional about exactly which words you use, and it's important to keep your sense of voice strong throughout the essay. There's no need to plop down a "big" word just to sound fancy; instead, find ways to weave more elevated vocabulary throughout your writing.
- ✓ **Does your essay fall within the word count?** If not, read through again carefully, focusing on keywords, sentences, and phrases that aren't adding meaning or context to your writing. You'll often be surprised by just how many words you can successfully shave away, without impacting your story's meaning.



## Using Another Set of Eyes:

Getting an additional set of eyes (or two) on your writing is essential to creating a flawless final draft.

- ✓ **Ask a relative, teacher, or counselor to read your essay and provide their feedback on the content.** This honest critique can help you identify whether you were able to get your point across, or if there are areas that you need to tweak.
- ✓ **Next, ask for feedback on grammar, spelling, and other mechanics.** (Make sure you pick someone who feels confident in this area!)
- ✓ **Avoid having more than 2-3 people edit your essay.** You may assume that the more proofreaders you have, the better your final product will be, but that's simply not true. Instead, having multiple people proofread your essay has the potential to provide conflicting feedback and can also dilute your sense of voice in the writing process. An essay can be “over-edited!”

Your essay is *yours*, and ultimately, you get to decide which suggestions to keep and which to discard. Read through it carefully one last time, and then hit “submit,” knowing you put forward your very best work.





WRITING THE

## “Why Us” Supplemental Essay

So, you’ve finished a stellar Common Application essay. What’s next? It’s likely that some of the colleges you’re applying to require one or more **supplemental essays**. A supplemental essay is a school-specific writing prompt and can range drastically in word count and content, depending on the institution and the prompt. A very common supplemental essays is the “Why Us” essay. In this type of prompt, a university attempts to zero in on exactly *why* a student has chosen to apply.

Let’s consider a couple of examples.

### Example 1: *Yale University*

#### What is it about Yale that has led you to apply? (Maximum 125 words)

If the “Why Yale” supplement were a food, it would be a few tiny bites of an appetizer. So, before you go mapping out a lengthy manifesto outlining your love for this picturesque campus and the academic rigor that unfolds there, take a moment to remind yourself that a **125-word essay is a very, very short essay**. While you aim to create an impactful supplemental essay, you’re working with a minimum word count. The admissions committee is already well versed in Yale’s prestige, but they’re wondering why you would choose Yale over another highly selective institution.

The key here is to focus on a few **specific details** and that reveal how your interests align with Yale specifically. Here are a few additional suggestions:



- **Focus on specific opportunities that would not be available elsewhere;** this could include a specialized course offering, club, or research opportunity. For example, “As a young woman of color, I am eager to participate in Yale’s STARS program, which would allow me to pursue my passion for engineering while building meaningful connections with other students traditionally underrepresented in STEM.” Show how your unique passions connect with the university’s offerings. For example: “I’m interested in Yale’s Walden Peer Counseling program,” tells an admissions officer very little about you. “My passion for wellness and personal commitment to active listening skills makes me the ideal fit for the Walden Peer Counseling program; I look forward to supporting my classmates through participation in one of the most renowned peer counseling programs in the country.”
- **Consider your impact carefully before name dropping specific professors.** This may be appropriate to include if the professor’s research covers a specific academic interest of yours or if you’ve read a book they’ve published. However, steer away from browsing the school’s website just to drop in a professor’s name. While this may show you’ve done some research, it can come across as a bit misplaced.

## Example 2: *Tulane University*

**Please describe why you are interested in attending Tulane University (optional; 50 word-800 words.)**

This prompt is wide open! Here are a few questions that may immediately come to your mind:

1. **Is this prompt really “optional?”** Yes and no. While your application would technically be complete without a written response to this question, I highly advise students to thoughtfully respond to all supplemental essay prompts, even the optional ones. Not responding is throwing away a great opportunity



to showcase your interests and why you'd be a great fit on that particular college campus.

- 2. How long should my essay be? 50-800 words feels like a really wide range.** That's right—it is a pretty wide range. My suggestion is always to aim for somewhere in between these two extremes. A 50-word essay is very short and doesn't allow you to fully express yourself, while an 800-word essay is pretty lengthy for this type of prompt, and you may risk restating the same content.
- 3. Can I mention how much I love the city of New Orleans? The geographic location is one of the reasons I want to attend.** While the geographic location may feel important to you in the college search process, I recommend being cautious about how you incorporate this aspect of interest into your essay, especially if you are applying in an urban area (for example Los Angeles, New York City, Boston, New Orleans, Chicago, Atlanta, etc.) You want the admissions committee to fully recognize your interest in the university itself, not just in the surrounding areas, so this probably isn't the best time to mention your love for beignets or Mardi gras. However, if you can connect a personal interest or passion to the geographic region, it may be worthwhile to do so. Here's an example:

*“Other than a trip to Quebec during my freshman year of high school, I've had few opportunities to use my French-speaking skills. I look forward to joining the Tulane Undergraduate French Association (TUFA,) and joining my classmates on a trip to New Orleans' French Quarter; the language, food, culture, and architecture provide the perfect backdrop to my collegiate experience.”*

Make sure you proofread your essay very carefully before submitting it! The “Why Us” supplemental essay is designed to be relatively brief, and there is no room for error. As tempting as it may be, do not copy and paste information from one college's supplement to another. Each of these schools is unique, and your essay in response should be unique as well.



## WRITING THE

# “*Why This Major*” Supplemental Essay

Many selective colleges use supplemental essay prompts as an opportunity to learn more about your specific areas of academic interest. Here are a few examples:

### **Example 1: University of Pennsylvania**

*How did you discover your intellectual and academic interests, and how will you explore them at the University of Pennsylvania? Please respond considering the specific undergraduate school you have selected. (300-450 words)*

### **Example 2: Carnegie Mellon University**

*Most students choose their intended major or area of study based on a passion or an inspiration that's developed over time—what passion or inspiration led you to choose this area of study? (300 words)*

### **Example 3: University of Southern California**

*Describe how you plan to pursue your academic interests at USC. Please feel free to address your first and second choice major selections. (250 words)*

### **Example 4: Tufts University**

*It's cool to love learning. What excites your intellectual curiosity? (150-200 words)*



While each prompt is slightly different, they share a similar focus. What are your intellectual interests? What specific college major interests you most and why? How did this interest develop?

In some cases, colleges are factoring your choice of major into an admissions decision. In other cases, they may just be using this question as an avenue to learn more about you.

Consider these two brief examples:

**Option A:**

*“I’ve always known that I wanted to help people, so my goal is to major in elementary education. I’ve selected this major because I hope to become a first-grade teacher.”*

**Option B:**

*“It was at the age of seven that I discovered my true calling in life when I invented a one-person game, which I lovingly named ‘School.’ In this game, I would line up my dolls and stuffed animals and teach them lessons, going so far as to attend to behavior modifications and provide individual academic support; after all, they were the students, and I was the teacher. Although I’m quite sure that my dolls grew tired of this childish game, my desire to lead a classroom has never wavered in the years that have elapsed since. It is for this reason that elementary education is my first choice of major.”*

Which writing gives you more insight into the applicant? Which is more memorable? Option A doesn’t tell us much about the reader, while Option B shares a vivid personal story and connects that directly with an area of academic interest.

**Here’s a little brainstorming strategy:**

Before you begin writing the “*Why This Major*” essay, briefly jot down words, ideas, or phrases in response to the following questions:



- **What are your strongest academic interests?** (List as many as feel applicable.)
- **How did these interests develop?** (So, you want to major in psychology? What is the origin of this interest? This origin story might be a rather ordinary series of life events or a major “aha” moment. Interests develop in all sorts of ways!)
- **How would this specific university contribute to your academic interests?** If you want to major in marketing, that’s a great start, but there are hundreds of colleges that offer a marketing degree. Why study marketing at the University of Southern California? Do your research. Jot down the names of specific courses that are unique to the institution and not offered elsewhere. Learn more about the professors, their research, and any publications they’ve recently contributed to. Learn more about student-led organizations that correlate with your academic interests, such as the Consulting Club or Marketing Student Ambassadors.
- **What are your career interests and professional goals? How would this major help you work toward your goals?** News flash: it’s okay if you don’t know exactly what you want to do with the rest of your life! College is a great place to figure that out. However, if you do have career aspirations or other professional goals that link to your intended major, this is a great place to share them.

Let’s look at an example of a “*Why This Major*” essay, from a student who was accepted to Tufts University:

*Music inspires my interest in engineering. Whenever I play with an ensemble, our common purpose is to decipher the complex emotions that underlie a piece of music, recreate those emotions with our instruments, and transfer them to the audience. This process of collective interpretation fills me with joy, but it also renders me desperately curious as to why music is so profoundly stirring.*

*The answer is simple: the laws of nature. To understand music theory is to understand acoustics, resonance, material science, and fluid dynamics.*



*Engineering explains how various natural phenomena combine to create beauty. The interdisciplinary approach to education provided at the Tufts School of Engineering mirrors my personal approach to understanding the world.*

*Jumbo engineers enjoy a balanced education that emphasizes research while providing extraordinary liberal arts instruction. As such, Tufts alumni are better equipped to compete and lead in the modern global community. The flexibility of the engineering program will leave me ample time to explore my other passions, so I can pursue a BS in engineering in tandem with another major or minor in another area of interest. The School of Engineering also offers ABET-Accredited BS degrees in Mechanical Engineering and Electrical Engineering, should I choose to narrow my focus.*

*As a founding member and four-year president of the Edgemont Robotics Club, I would feel at home in the collaborative and competitive atmosphere of the Tufts Robotics Club. I hope to help bring home the fifth consecutive win at the Trinity College Fire Fighting Robot Contest!*

Why did this essay work?

- The writer gives us insight into who they are as an individual, drawing a unique connection between musical talents and intellectual interest in engineering.
- The writer helps us understand how their academic interests developed.
- The writer shows us specifically how Tufts can contribute to their academic interests.

This all sounds great, but I have no idea what I want to major in! How should I respond to this prompt?

Feeling undecided about your intended major is normal. Many colleges allow students to enter as an “undecided major,” and many students who declare a major during the application process end up changing along the way. The



important aspect of this writing supplement is not actually that you're certain about your future major, but rather that you have academic interests and can articulate them. If you are unable to convey any interest in learning, college admissions officers may wonder why you're applying to college in the first place.

The “*Why This Major*” supplemental essay is the perfect opportunity to showcase your intellectual interests while adding a narrative about your personal journey that may be missing in other aspects of your application.





WRITING ON THE TOPIC OF

## Identity, Diversity, Belonging & Community

In recent years, supplemental essays on the topics of personal identity and diversity have grown in popularity among many universities. In some cases, this prompt is optional (which we know isn't *really* optional, right? By not responding, you're relinquishing a valuable opportunity to share yourself with the admissions committee.) In other cases, this type of prompt is a required part of the application process.

Let's look at a few examples:

### Example 1: Duke University

*(optional writing prompt, maximum of 250 words)*

Duke University seeks a talented, engaged student body that embodies the wide range of human experience; we believe that the diversity of our students makes our community stronger. If you'd like to share a perspective you bring or experiences you've had to help us understand you better—perhaps related to a community you belong to or your family or cultural background—we encourage you to do so. Real people are reading your application, and we want to do our best to understand and appreciate the real people applying to Duke.

### Example 2: Rice University

*(required writing prompt, maximum of 500 words)*

Rice is lauded for creating a collaborative atmosphere that enhances the quality of life for all members of our campus community. The Residential



College System is heavily influenced by the unique life experiences and cultural traditions each student brings. What personal perspectives would you contribute to life at Rice?

**Example 3: University of Michigan**  
(required writing prompt, maximum of 300 words)

Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong and describe that community and your place within it.

What are these prompts really asking? While the language and expected word count differs a bit, these prompts are all asking the same underlying questions:

- ✓ Who are you?
- ✓ What makes you unique?
- ✓ What communities do you belong to?
- ✓ What perspective would you bring to this campus?
- ✓ How might your lived experiences be different from your future college classmates?

As a brainstorming strategy, feel free to jot down brief responses to each of these questions. As you consider specific communities that you are part of, here are a few suggestions to get you thinking:

- Your culture, race, or ethnicity
- Your gender identity
- Your sexual orientation
- Your religion
- Your family's socioeconomic status
- Your neighborhood or the area where you grew up
- Your values, beliefs, interests
- Your unique life experiences
- An ability (or disability)
- A club or organization that you're actively engaged with



Allow me to provide a quick word of caution here. This essay prompt is designed to be deeply personal, pulling back the layers of your identity that aren't evident in your transcript and your test scores. However, it's important to remember that this writing is yours, and you should not place any pressure on yourself to write about aspects of yourself that you aren't ready to share with a panel of strangers.

In my work coaching students through the college essay process, I've received numerous questions about this type of prompt. Here are a few questions that have been asked recently:

*"I identify as LGBTQ+, but my extended family doesn't even know that yet. I don't feel like there's anything else really 'unique' about my identity. Should I write about my sexuality here?"*

Only if you want to! This is your essay, and you are not required to disclose anything that doesn't feel 100 percent comfortable for you. Just because you identify as part of the LGBTQ+ community doesn't mean that this is the only interesting aspect of your identity to write about. Every college applicant is a dynamic individual with a lot of different layers to their identity and building a diverse incoming college class can look a lot of different ways. Often, students feel that they must share an aspect of their identity that has been marginalized, and that is simply not the case. That's actually not the purpose or intent of this essay. If you're feeling stuck and need ideas, try asking a loved one, "What makes me unique?" and jot down what they say as a brainstorming technique.

*"I'm white, identify as straight, and I grew up in a middle-class home. I attended a public high school in the suburbs of a major city. When I read through this prompt, I immediately think that I'm not part of any specific community and there's nothing especially unique about me."*

Really? There's nothing unique about you? Let's take this a little further.



Perhaps it's not the major categories of identity that you need to be focusing on here (such as race, gender, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic class.) Instead, what life experiences have you had that are likely different from the person sitting next to you? Through further discussion, I learned that this student had spent several years of their childhood living in Germany and had also been vegan for more than ten years. Boom! These are both unique aspects of an individual's personal story, and either topic would make a lovely essay.

Just to get you thinking about some additional writing ideas that might not feel so straightforward, here are a few other topics I've encountered over the years for the "identity, diversity, belonging, community" essay prompts:

- Being an adoptee
- Being raised in a Kosher household
- Being fluent in sign language
- Holding a strong identity as a feminist
- Being a musician
- Having a peanut allergy
- Being left-handed
- Being raised by two dads
- Having a military family
- Being raised in a home with no television
- Being a runner

Colleges strive to build a campus community that is diverse and inclusive, and this is your opportunity to show them what kind of unique experiences and perspectives you'd bring. Don't be afraid to draw outside the lines a bit and exhibit creativity and authenticity in your approach.

Let's consider this example essay:

*My feet hit the ground with a resounding thud, and I squealed in glee. At six years old, I'd finally surpassed the height requirement of 44 inches tall and had thoroughly enjoyed my first roller coaster ride. The ride was terrifying and exhilarating all in one, and that day marked my entrance into a new community: those who self-identify as risk-takers.*



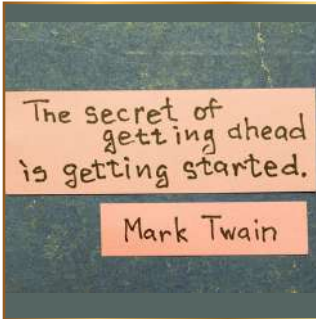
*Since that memorable day at the amusement park, I have embraced a variety of risks in my life. I've learned how to rock climb and how to perform skateboard stunts. I taught myself to speak Spanish (thanks, Duo Lingo) and sampled every new food I've ever been offered (Oysters? Escargot? Yes, please.) Recently, I ran for class president, knowing full well that I would lose. You know what, though? The experience was completely worth the risk. I gained a new friend in the process.*

*Being a risk-taker doesn't mean that I engage in risky behavior; instead, it means that I'm not afraid to embrace life fully. I don't mind getting dirty; I'm not afraid of failing, and I'm okay with hearing "no." Being open to risks is a fundamental way that I approach other people and the world around me, and I find myself gravitating toward other "risk-takers." In them, I've found my community.*

While this essay is short, here are a few aspects that worked:

- ✓ The writer begins with a story that immediately grabs the reader's attention.
- ✓ The writer responds to the prompt by identifying a unique community (risk takers) that they belong to.
- ✓ The writer provides clear examples of what it means to be a risk-taker.
- ✓ The writer paints a clear picture of their individuality and the unique perspectives that they'll bring to the campus community.

This essay is designed to be unique and personal. Your topic options are limitless—go with it!



## WRITING THE

# “Quotation” Supplement

Using famous (or not-so-famous) quotations in your college essay is a bit risky because it's easy to unintentionally cross over into cliché territory. Additionally, when you're limited by a maximum word count, you want those words to highlight you, not some former politician, author, advocate, or celebrity.

Occasionally, though, a college will turn the tables by sharing a quotation of their own and asking for your reflection or interpretation.

Let's consider a few examples.

### **Example 1: Amherst College**

*Please respond to the following quotation. It is not necessary to research, read, or refer to the text from which the quotation is taken; we are looking for an original, personal response to this short excerpt. Remember that your essay should be personal and not simply an argumentative essay. (Maximum: 300 words.)*

*“Difficulty need not foreshadow despair or defeat. Rather, achievement can be all the more satisfying because of the obstacles surmounted.” -Attributed to William Hastie, Amherst College Class of 1925, the first African-American to serve as a judge in the United States Court of Appeals.”*



### Example 2: *University of Virginia*

Rita Dove, UVA English professor and former U.S. Poet Laureate, once said in an interview that “...there are times in life when, instead of complaining, you do something about your complaints.” Describe a time when, instead of complaining, you took action for the greater good. (Maximum: 250 words.)

### Example 3: *Dartmouth College*

“Everything changes, everything moves, everything revolves, everything flies and goes away,” observed Frida Kahlo. Apply Kahlo’s perspective to your own life. (Maximum: 250-300 words.)

These examples make it evident that when a college uses a quote within an admissions prompt, it is often because that specific quote reflects something important about the institution, its mission statement, history, or values.

Here are a few suggestions for approaching this type of essay:

- 1. Read the quote carefully.** Do a little background research on the quote and the individual it is attributed to. If you misunderstand the quote or take the words out of context, it can throw off your response. Make sure you understand what is really being asked.
- 2. As you begin brainstorming a response, recognize that quote should merely serve as a lens through which you share more about yourself, your identity, and why you would be a good fit at that particular school.** A great response does not necessarily have to refer back to the quote or the author (in fact, in most cases, it shouldn’t!) This essay is about you. In some cases, topics you may have written about for another college’s supplement (example: on topics such as community and belonging or an extracurricular activity) may be reworked to create this essay. Instead of focusing so much on the quote, think about what you really want to share about yourself, and how you can bridge this connection to the prompt.



- 3. In some cases, a prompt may contain a quotation that you vehemently disagree with. While higher education is a place for thoughtful discourse, you should be cautious about creating an argumentative response unless you are explicitly asked to do so.** Use this as an opportunity to share more about yourself and your life.

Here is an example of a successful response to Dartmouth's prompt, which features Frida Kahlo's quote:

*The Indian community in Portland is small, and the Malayalee community even smaller. Portland is a majority white city, founded as a white separatist state, and the remnants of that are still present, despite its progressive image. When I wanted to put up an art installation featuring Kerala around my Southeast Portland neighborhood, something really surprised me.*

*Usually people are pretty nice around the neighborhood, but when I went to get permission to use public spaces—more as a courtesy than a requirement—I was met with backlash. Some of my neighbors claimed I needed permits, while others simply didn't understand the point of a public art installation with a subject matter so far from their own experience. I could tell a lot of them felt uncomfortable with images of brown people around the neighborhood.*

*But I had worked on the large portraits for this installation for over a year, and I wanted to see my vision realized. So, my friends helped me put the portraits up one night in the pitch dark while everyone was sleeping. They even helped me set up security cameras in case someone tried to deface one of the artworks. Once the installation was up, my neighbors acted differently. They seemed to be impressed with my skills as an artist and decided they liked the artwork.*

*Most importantly, they started asking me questions about the people and places depicted with genuine interest, something I'd never experienced before. Other nonwhite residents also approached me to express their appreciation for how the installation disrupted the image of an all-white community. I'm proud*





*that my artwork created a dialogue, which I hope will ultimately lead to more inclusive attitudes in my home city. I believe this change, and all change, is possible one small action at a time.*

This essay never references Frida Kahlo, and the prompt itself is not mentioned. Yet, this student does a wonderful job of addressing Frida Kahlo's quote through the lens of their own lived experiences. "*Everything changes, everything moves, everything revolves, everything flies and goes away,*" illustrates the concept of change as a constant. This applicant told a compelling story, focusing on how they have contributed to positive change in their community, and finishing with the sentence, "I believe this change, and all change, is possible one small action at a time." If you were given this prompt, you could write about a way that you have contributed to change or a way your life has been impacted (either positively or negatively) by change.

There are two important takeaways here:

1. **Focus on the central theme of the quote** (in this case, that's change as a constant.)
2. **Tell a story about your life** (ideally, something that isn't covered in other parts of your application.)

The "quotation essay" is an opportunity to share about yourself, while illustrating your ability to think critically.



## UNLEASHING CREATIVITY

# Writing Supplements with a Twist

Every once in a while, you may run into an exceptional quirky essay prompt, leaving you wondering, “*What should I write about?*” or perhaps more importantly, “*Why would an admissions team want me to write about this topic anyway?*”

Admissions officers are busy people, and they do a lot of reading. Imagine stacks and stacks of essays. So, you can rest assured that you’ll never be asked to write an essay that isn’t significant to the college’s admissions decision making. If a supplemental essay is included in the application, it is important to their evaluation process, no matter how silly, unusual, or creative the prompt.

Let’s consider a few examples:

### Example 1: Dartmouth College

*In The Boy Who Harnessed the Wind, William Kamkwamba, Class of 2-14, reflects on constructing a windmill from recycled materials to power the electrical appliances in his family Malwain house. ‘If you want to make it, all you have to do is try.’ What drives you to create and what do you hope to make or have you already made?*

Perhaps you haven’t yet founded a company or created a new invention (although if you have—good for you!) You don’t need a *Forbes* feature to successfully write this essay! Instead, take out a sheet of paper, and brainstorm by creating two columns. The first list should be titled “Things I’ve Made.”



The second list should be labeled “Things I Hope to Make.” If you’re feeling stuck, ask a family member or close friend to look over your list—sometimes your loved ones think of examples you’re missing. What drives you to make sourdough or to arrange wildflowers? This is just as compelling of an essay topic as writing about your experience founding a club or creating an app. The key here is authenticity and revealing a side of yourself that isn’t evident by reviewing your transcript.

### **Example 2: The University of Virginia**

*What is your favorite word and why? (Maximum of 250 words.)*

If you’ve never considered your favorite word before, don’t panic! The key to writing a memorable essay in response to this prompt is not *really* about a favorite word; it’s about your creativity and how well you can weave in a personal story, value, or characteristic that will make an admissions team feel like they know you.

Stay away from cliché words! Don’t write an essay about the reason why your favorite word is love, success, friendship, or justice. While these words are meaningful and have strong connotations, there is a great likelihood that dozens of other applicants will have the same cliché idea. Instead, provide a bit of flair by considering a less common word that could be tied back to a personal interest, curiosity, or lived experience. When it comes to brainstorming, you may actually find it helpful to work backwards (jot down a potential passion or experience that is important to you, and then consider some individual “buzz words” that connect to that specific topic.)

For example, if you select “unison” as your favorite word, you connect this back to your experience singing in a church youth choir or ballroom dancing. Or maybe your favorite word is “lens,” and you relate this to your love of photography and what it’s taught you about how you see the world. Since there are more than 171,000 words in the English language, you have a lot of options



to choose from. Keep it clean, pick a word that is uncontroversial, steer away from clichés, and let your creativity shine through.

### Example 3: The University of Chicago

*Who does Sally sell her seashells to? How much wood can a woodchuck really chuck if a woodchuck could chuck wood? Pick a favorite tongue twister (either originally in English or translated from another language) and consider a resolution to its conundrum using the method of your choice. Math, philosophy, linguistics... it's all up to you (or your woodchuck).*

This prompt is an example of the quest for creativity and quirkiness at its finest! The college application process is stressful, and this is your opportunity to liven things up a bit and **have fun**. This prompt gives the admissions team a glimpse into your creative problem-solving skills and how your own originality and quirkiness will be an asset to their campus. (Clearly any campus that asks a question as unique and open-ended as this one is actively looking for a quirky, diverse student body.) Don't stress about being perfect or picking the right topic; the key is to let your creativity flow and create a response that is unique. Perhaps Betty Boyer bought a bit of butter, but what happened next? Maybe she realized that the bit of butter wasn't quite enough for her scones recipe, and she had to borrow more from a neighbor. Then what? Perhaps Sally sold seashells down by the seashore, but now she's the CEO of a Fortune 500 company. How did that transpire?

There are many different ways to approach prompts, so relax a bit, and enjoy yourself!

New quirky prompts pop up each year at a number of highly selective institutions. This is an opportunity to be **authentic** and **creative**, which gives you the opportunity to reveal an inventive aspect of yourself, while enjoying yourself during the process.



## FINISHING

# Finishing Strong

## Check Your Content First!

It is great to ensure that grammatically, all your punctuation is correct, you do not misuse “their/there/they’re,” “your/you’re,” or any other common mistakes, and you do not have any misused prepositions. However, before we get to that point, you will still want to check your content one more time. Just as we started on a high level, we will want to do our final review on a high level. Ask yourself the following for each essay and for the application as a whole:

1. Am I conveying my message well enough?
2. Have I told the story I need to convey this message?
3. Have I been as specific as I can be to make this story as strong as possible?

Even if you have already thought through these questions, do it one more time. You will thank yourself once you’ve hit submit and you know you worked as hard as you could. Once you feel certain you have got your content down, you can move to line editing and proofreading.

## Change Your Perspective

Arnold Schwarzenegger shares an anecdote in his autobiography, “Total Recall: My Unbelievably True Life Story,” about struggling with the cadence of his lines when filming “Conan the Barbarian.” James Earl Jones, though, provided him an easy tip that ultimately helped Arnold and can also help you.



Make the words appear different from before.

In Arnold's case, this meant printing the script with a bigger font so that the last word on a specific line of text would change. In your case, we recommend trying two different things:

1. **Change the font size to something bigger than you use now.** If you are using size 11, blow it up to size 16 and read. You will be surprised at what you catch. (Just change it back before you submit!)
2. **Print it out and edit with a pen or pencil.** Although old-school, many newsrooms still take this approach before publishing an article online or in print format. Change how you look at your essays, and you change what you will catch—for the better.

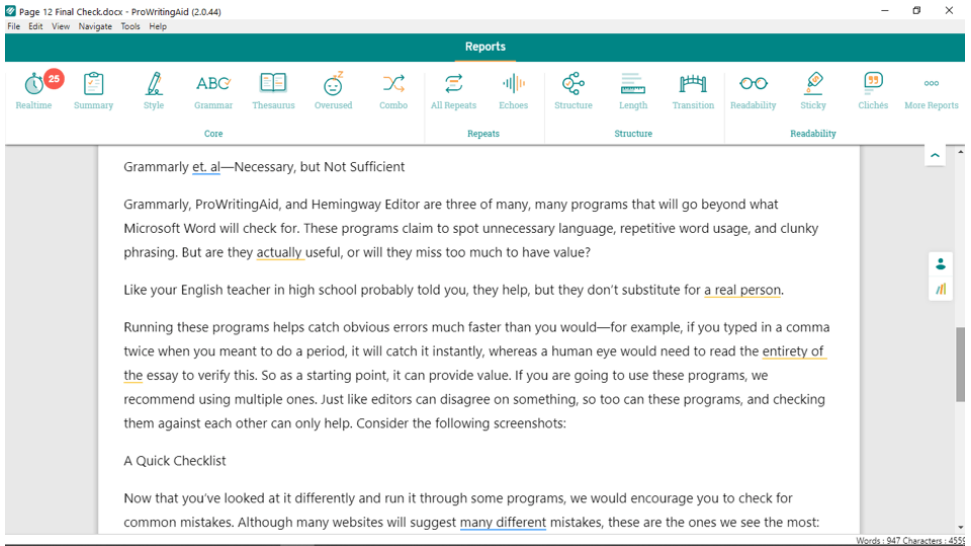
### Grammarly et. al—Necessary, but Not Sufficient

Grammarly, ProWritingAid, and Hemingway Editor are three of many, many programs that will go beyond what Microsoft Word will check for. These programs claim to spot unnecessary language, repetitive word usage, and clunky phrasing. But are they useful, or will they miss too much to have value?

Like your English teacher in high school probably told you, they help, but they don't substitute for an actual person.

Using these programs helps catch obvious errors much faster than you would—for example, if you typed in a comma twice when you meant to do a period at the end of your essay, it will catch it instantly, whereas a human eye would need to read the entire essay to spot this. So as a starting point, it can provide value. If you are going to use these programs, however we recommend using multiple ones. Just like editors can disagree on something, so too can these programs, and checking them against each other can only help.

Consider the following screenshots:



Grammarly considers the use of “catch” above clunky, but ProWritingAid does not. Meanwhile, ProWritingAid takes issue with “a real person,” but Grammarly does not. Thus, while using these programs is useful, they will not cover all of your bases. It is best to use them to see what they consider incorrect or subpar, and then use your own best judgment.

## A Quick Checklist

Now that you have looked at it differently and run it through some programs, we would encourage you to check for common mistakes. Although many websites will suggest many different mistakes, these are the ones we see the most:

- **Repetitive language.** Unless done for overt, obvious reasons, try not to use the same words, especially in the same paragraph. You can probably get away with repetitive language if the words are spaced apart by two or more paragraphs, but even then, variety is better.



- **No transitions.** If you jump from a story from your childhood and then, without warning, start talking about your first internship in college, it can jar the reader out of the story. Not every paragraph will need a transition, but if you change subjects or time periods drastically, considering adding one.
- **Misused Words.** “They’re/their/there,” “two/too/to,” “compliment/complement,” “principle/principal,” “its/it’s,” “effect/affect”... there are far too many of these to list everywhere, but a good rule is if you have even the slightest doubt about if you have used the word properly, double-check it.
- **Conditional Phrasing.** “Probably,” “planned to,” “hope to,” “maybe,” “just,” and “perhaps” are among our least favorite common phrasing. An essay should sound confident and assertive, not hedging and uncertain. And more often than not, it’s more concise to get rid of these words.
- **Capitalization.** We’re not talking about the capitalization of the beginning of the sentence—by now, you know to do that. We’re talking about failure to capitalize courses, programs you partook in, scholarships—in other words, formal subjects. We have seen too often, “I partook in mock trial” when the club calls itself “Mock Trial,” for example.

And finally, one last note—do not do this the night before the deadline! Not only will you not give yourself a lot of time to fix any errors you may have, but you will also feel stressed and burned out. We recommend doing this at least a week before your deadline to give yourself a reasonable amount of time to correct any mistakes.

But if you want to go a step beyond? You can [ask for help](#).





## THE FINAL STEP

# Get Help

No matter how much work you put into the essay, you are going to have blind spots. The more work you put into it, the harder it will be to recognize these blind spots since you will be so invested in it, even if you edit your draft multiple times. To ensure the highest quality product, it makes the most sense to get help. There are two ways to do it.

### Get Someone You Know (*Who Is Qualified*)

Yes, having family and friends reviewing your essay can help. They may catch something you may miss, and sometimes, it is good to have the opinion of an “outsider” who has no preconceived notions of what works and what does not. But just like software will not cover all your grammar bases, friends and family will not provide the best review.

Why? Because they just do not know.

*“If you think it’s expensive to hire a professional to do the job,  
wait until you hire an amateur.”*

*-Red Adair, Firefighter and Innovator*



Do they know what distinguishes good writing from great writing? Do they know if you have provided effective details? At times, yes, but they will rarely catch



everything. And sometimes, only someone with experience who can rely both on knowledge and a developed gut feeling can provide you the best insight possible.

In a perfect world, ideally, you would ask someone you know who has experience examining college application essays for help, but if not, you could also ask:

- **Recent admits to top school.** Especially those who got into the very best schools like Harvard, Yale, Stanford, etc.
- **Editors and Writers.** They will know what makes a compelling story.
- **Journalists.** For the same reason as editors and writers.
- **English Majors.** They will know how to write.
- **Marketers.** While they will not know the specifics, but they can tell you if you are presenting yourself and getting your message across.

However, if you are looking for the absolute best outside help you can seek, you should hire a professional.

## Work with Us

At EssayMaster, we provide the highest-quality help you can seek. We will do all of [these things](#). We will combine the best admissions consulting with the finest editing, add a dash of experience, and help you craft the strongest essays possible.

Don't leave anything in your application to chance. [Submit your essay today](#), and put Harvard-educated editors to work for you!



## CONCLUSION

# The Definitive College Essay Course

The college essay process is a unique opportunity to reveal important aspects of yourself that aren't evident in other aspects of your college application. As a result of the *Definitive College Essay Course*, it is my hope that you have learned something new that you feel more confident about the writing process.

Here are a few major takeaways, which I hope you'll leave with:

1. **Pick a topic that is meaningful to you**, not just what you think college admissions officers will want to hear.
2. **The best college essays are those with a strong sense of student voice.** The reader should walk away feeling as if they know you.
3. For supplemental essays, **make sure you answer the prompt.**
4. **Proofread, proofread, proofread.**
5. **Enjoy yourself!** The transition from high school to college is an exciting time of life, and you have a lot to share with the world. Be gentle with yourself and have fun with the writing process.

Thank you for joining me on this journey!

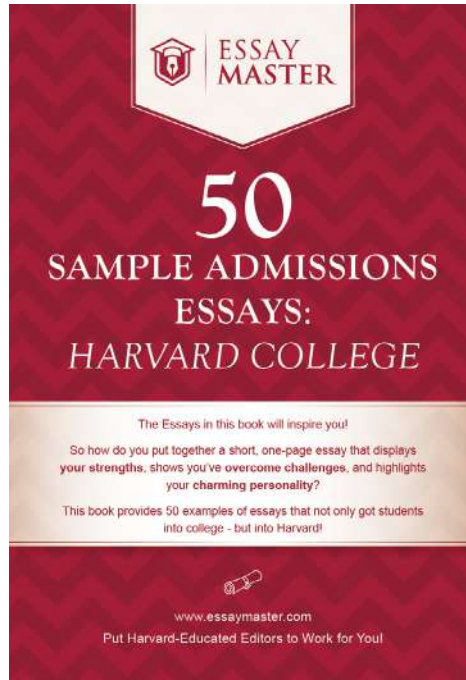


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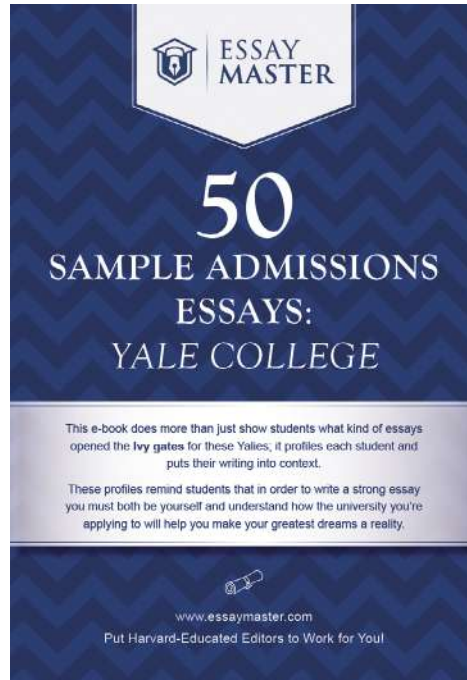
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## Video Course: The College Admissions Essays



In this video series, we will go over the importance of the college admissions essay and the different types of admission essays you may encounter while applying to schools.

The college essay process is a unique opportunity to reveal important aspects of yourself that aren't evident in other aspects of your college application. As a result of the *Definitive College Essay Course*, it is my hope that you have learned something new that you feel more confident about the writing process.

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