



Empowerly's Guide to



APPLICATION ESSAYS

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Introduction

Know who reads your application essay—and help them know you.

At the end of the day, you can only be yourself. What you do have control over—and what you can work on in your college applications—is how well you use your essays to summarize who you are to admissions officers.

Before you even start thinking about your college admission essays, we also have a few tangible exercises you can do at any stage of your high school career to flex and build your writing muscles.

Having formidable writing skills will help you in any field. It sets you apart, gives you a voice and helps you command respect. And, perhaps more importantly for high school students, it is necessary to cultivate a college essay that universities will love.

Writing Exercises

Try out these exercises to improve your writing. You can start as early as your freshman year, or as late as the start of your fall application season.



1. Keep a Journal.

In order to become one of the greatest writers in your high school, you need to write more. Simply describe your day, the events that occurred, and how you felt about them. This increases self-awareness. You have to be in tune with yourself to stand out in the college admissions process. Writing every day gives you an outlet to record the

events that you may want to include in a college essay and rereading your entries may give you a new perspective on the growth you have experienced in high school.

2. Research.

Take time to read other people's college application essays. A simple Google of "XYZ college name + essays" will return plenty of examples for review. The more you read, the more you will discover a multitude of topics that can inspire stories to tell in your essays. Take notes as you read through these, much as you would in completing research for a school project. Note what you like and don't like, as well as ideas that develop as you read. Review these notes before writing your first essay.

"As an application reader, I can tell you that the most impactful essays are those that are novel. They are not the common sports/debate/olympiad failure trope. They are creative, thoughtful, and personal. I want to leave the essay feeling I know the writer."

- Empowerly Counselor Jen

3. Peer Edit



Offer to exchange essays with friends. Be diligent and provide honest feedback, keeping in mind that your comments can play a decisive role. Not only can you help each other address grammatical edits and issues of flow, but analyzing and revising each others' essays drives inspiration. Since they're your friends, you can workshop ideas and help each other carve out new lines of thought.

"Don't be shy about asking a teacher or counselor to read your essays. They can provide a more critical eye and provide feedback closer to that of an admissions committee.

I remember approaching my AP English Lit teacher, who I did not have much of a relationship with, to read my essay. I was nervous as he was the type of teacher who blanketed everyone's papers with red. However, I knew that he was likely the best person in my school to go to if I wanted to ensure that my essay was 100% ready for submission. Not only did he help me write the essays that gained me admission to UPenn, but my sharing of these personal stories with him also created an indelible impression that led to us developing a much stronger student-teacher connection. I am grateful that I took that leap of faith."

- Empowerly Counselor Jen



4. Proofread

Many students make the mistake of not proofreading their essays before submitting them (this goes for class assignments as well!). You should get into the habit of reading and re-reading everything that you send – emails, short answer responses, etc. Everything that you submit to the world is an extension of yourself, and therefore fair game for judgment.

Read your writing out loud to locate problem areas. Reading out loud forces you to listen to what you have written. It puts you in the reader's seat and helps you hear what parts of your submission do and do not work. Also, don't be afraid to use Grammarly or other editing tools to easily provide a boost to your daily writing.



5. Read!

Reading helps you build vocabulary, as you learn about the world and develop your voice. As we often imitate the writing that we digest, it's best to avoid subpar writing. Challenge yourself to find well-written pieces and spend a little time each week reading and analyzing the writing to help you find your voice. Whether novels, blog posts or academic articles, if ever stuck on how to tell a story, read something on the subject and you'll often find a direction to get you started with your own storytelling.

How to Level Up

In the whirlwind of applications, it's important to keep your audience in mind. Be genuine and help the admissions officers understand you.

"Keep in mind that the admissions offices have no idea of who you are! You need to be precise and detailed in your descriptions. I like to tell my students to envision writing to an alien from another planet. To them, everything about you is new, and they need your writing to paint a picture."

- Empowerly Counselor Jen

There is no guaranteed secret sauce to getting into college (and you should be wary of anyone who promises you that there is). You cannot alter your past accomplishments. However, you can do your best to write an intriguing account of who you are and the experiences that have shaped your goals and perspective.

It's important to remember that:

- Admissions officers read hundreds of applications every admissions cycle.
- They are subject to feeling tired and forgetting things about you, soon after they read them.
- You need to battle these obstacles by creating a holistic picture of yourself that is impactful and memorable.

How to convey who you are – in all your infinitesimal complexity – within 350–650 words is a challenge. Here are a few of our favorite tips to create your best possible personal statement.



1. Remember These Two Quotes:

“Show, don’t tell.”

College admissions are one of the few times when you are welcome to brag about your accomplishments (although a healthy dose of humility will be appreciated by admissions officers). Choose a tone that accurately conveys your accomplishments, being tactful in weaving them into a story. Write about what you did and why it matters.

“Ask any of my students, and they will verify that, “Show, rather than tell,” is one of my greatest, most repeated pieces of advice. These words ought to be at the forefront of your mind when you begin to brainstorm your answers to responses.

Ask yourself, “What do I want to convey?” and “How can I show this?” Think of examples that display your courage, determination, patience, resilience, etc. Let a story capture who you are in a way that rightfully displays your strengths without coming across as braggadocious or assumptive.”

- Empowerly Counselor Jen



“Make sure your essay is about you, not your grandma.”



This is a phrase heralded at admissions presentations across our nation. It is certainly an easy mistake to make, as to write about a sick relative that has inspired your interest in medicine or an entrepreneurship family friend. However, while your essay should be focused on your feelings and actions, do not be afraid to give the admissions officer a broader picture of why you are the way that you are.

There is no way for an admissions officer to know how your familial background has influenced your academic interests, or how your role models have catalyzed your career aspirations. Provide the details, but do go overboard in discussing others.

2. Structure It.

A good story has a narrative structure driven by your thesis, aka the idea that you're looking to convey. Most of these essays are positive as you are trying to convince the reader of what you are writing about yourself.

Our brains are programmed to look for a beginning, middle, and end, so make it easy for the admissions officer to scan your essay and find your structure. Open with a gripping anecdote or “hook” that is intriguing, but not overly dramatic. Sometimes a lighthearted, positive or humorous, self-deprecating tone is refreshing in light of so many straightforward and serious narratives. Your best personal statement reveals how your brain works, after all!

If it suits you, aim to end your essay with a forward-looking statement about how you hope to tie in your past interests into your career or college experience.

3. Think Theme.

Either choose a distinct topic to write about or if your essay has multiple vignettes, then select a theme to tie them together. Don't try to write about too many things at once. Crowding your essay can make you seem scattered in your approach. Instead, every element of your essay ought to be built to support your thesis. After writing your essay, it is important to check that each paragraph, and each concept covered in your writing, support this main point. If a section or sentence does not meet this point consider removing it as extraneous.

4. Stand Out.

Out of a stack of thousands of applications, you will need to stand out. Many applicants will have the same experiences as you do. Write about an unusual activity that sets you apart. If you do not have an obscure experience to write about, explain your seemingly commonplace experience with uncommon insight. Show the admissions officer that you can think in ways others may not.

Another way to establish yourself as memorable is to be specific in your descriptions. By loading your essay with proper nouns, and descriptions that evoke sights, sounds, scents, and feelings (aka our senses) you can review a specific image in the reader's mind. This will help you in making a lasting impression on your reader, thereby making it easier for them to determine your candidacy for their program.

5. Stay Succinct.

It's important to avoid excessive adjectives or effusive language. Cut unnecessary phrases like "I think" or "I feel." The officer assumes that you are the author of this work, so anything started as a statement will already be attributed to your thoughts or beliefs. Keep your sentences short and to the point.

"Re: Excessive adjectives are a concept that I often have to coach students to use sparingly. Just note in my saying that I find it "very/so annoying" is just as powerful as my saying simply that I find it "annoying" when students overuse excessive adjectives."

- Empowerly Counselor Jen



Types of Prompts

“Discuss an issue about which you are passionate.”

“Tell us about yourself.”

“Explain why you want to attend our university.”

“Discuss your favorite academic subject.”



“Talk about a time you overcame a challenge.”

Many colleges require you to answer one or two specific questions. Other options, whether the UCs or through the Common or Coalition Applications, provide a selection of essay prompts to choose from. If you have begun writing your college application essays, these directives will look familiar.

Whether you're preparing for a college interview or to write a college essay, you'll face similar questions. However, unlike an interview, an essay allows you more time to collect your thoughts, and craft your unique story, before drafting an answer.

Choosing a Prompt

To select the best prompt for you and your application, it's worth first considering what you'd like to convey to the admissions committee. Pick a prompt or two that align with your message (keeping in mind that some option-based prompts allow you to “choose your own adventure”) and practice writing these essays now. That way, you will know which one will prove to be the most substantive, organic, and unique.

Reminder – the colleges that you end up applying to will have differing essay requirements. It's likely best to review what topics are covered across the various schools that you are applying to before answering one of these option-based choices.

It is never a good idea to repeat topics across multiple essays being sent to one school (although you can be efficient by modifying and reusing essays across multiple schools). As a result, it's best to review specific school essay prompts ahead of writing any of your essays (if possible; we understand some schools don't officially release their essay prompts until the Common Application opens).

However, practicing with sample common college essay prompts will help get your creative juices flowing, and they can help you gain a deeper understanding of yourself and your experiences, as you develop your writing skills.

The Purpose of the Prompts

Now that you have an idea of what kinds of prompts to expect, let's talk about how admissions use your essays so that you can position them to be used to your advantage!

Colleges are looking for 3 things:

A. Can you write?

Francis Bacon said, "Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man; and writing, an exact man." Universities live out this concept by requiring students to regularly express themselves through writing. According to Brown University, "Good writing is essential to learning. Across the disciplines, scholars, teachers, and students write to explore ideas, uncover nuances of thought, and advance knowledge. Writing is not only a medium through which we communicate and persuade; it is also a means for expanding our capacities to think clearly."



The written word is the prime academic medium of expression, and college admissions officers want to make sure that you have the tools to participate in the academic process. So, for the love of (Kevin) Bacon, know how to use a semicolon!

B. What value will you add to our campus community?

If you have ever spent time on a college campus, you have likely seen signs of life outside of the library. From the skydiving club (they exist) to the volunteer center, universities are communities of whole people, not just academicians. Admissions officers want to know the sort of person that they are inviting into their community. Your essay is an opportunity for you to show that you are determined, compassionate, generous, reflective, active, ambitious, dedicated, focused, and joyful.



A focused and generous student will be a better community member while on campus, and a better ambassador for the university as an alumnus, than a directionless and self-concerned student. Show them that you have the character traits that they want (and contact us at Empowerly if you need assistance determining which traits are most valued at your top school).

C. Who are you?

A good portion of your application consists of grades, demographic data, and test scores. As much as the college admissions process can seem like a numbers game, remember that the people processing your application are people. They want to admit fully realized individuals, not resumes. Use this opportunity to add “a face” to the anonymity of the more numerical bones of your application. Outside of an interview, your essay is the greatest tool that you have to present your personality and identity to a school.

Finding your voice as a writer can be difficult, but it is well worth the time if you look to stand out from the sea of formulaic essays that colleges receive by the thousands each year.



Writing Timeline

Okay, now that you are ready to roll up your sleeves and get into the writing process, let's take a moment to talk about your timeline.

Do not sell yourself short in waiting to plan this all-important piece. A deciding factor as to whether or not you are accepted to the school of your dream, it's best to jump in now!

Here's how to approach writing your college essays over the summer.

Step 1: Set Up Your Summer Schedule

At Empowerly we recommend that rising seniors attempt to write their Common App essays (and, if applying, their University of California essays) over the summer at the very latest. These two sets of essays are time-consuming, and as each set is submitted to multiple schools, they are also some of the most important writing pieces that you will create in the whole of your academic career. These prompts don't tend to change much from year to year, so by starting early you don't risk writing an essay that will then not be accepted.

"I aim for my students to complete their Common/Coalition App essay, UC essays, and 2-5 sets of school-specific essays before the end of summer, as senior year fall is intense. I want my students to be able to write without the crushing feeling of keeping up with a rigorous course load and leadership roles in extracurriculars!"

- Empowerly Counselor Jen

Step 2: Read Well-Written Common App Essays

Not only is it fun to discover the topics that past students have successfully covered, but you will also discover a variety of approaches that can be used in your essays. Check out the introduction of this guide for more information on this tactic!

Step 3: Evaluate Your Goals in Writing This Essay

Your goal is to write an essay that is visceral. It should cause the reader to experience the emotions that you once felt in experiencing the moment that you are describing in your piece. Think of what words you can use to tell a vivid story that will resonate with your reader.

Highlight what makes you unique, while telling a coherent and focused story.



Step 4: Choose 2 of the Essay Prompts for Which to Brainstorm Ideas.

Choosing two prompts will allow you to explore multiple essay topics without feeling overwhelmed. Read through all of the prompts and choose the two that are the most immediately compelling. Then take some time to develop your ideas for both prompts. You can sketch out your ideas while either sitting at your desk on your computer or outdoors on a notepad. Try different settings to see which spurs your creativity.

Step 5: Discuss Your Ideas with Others

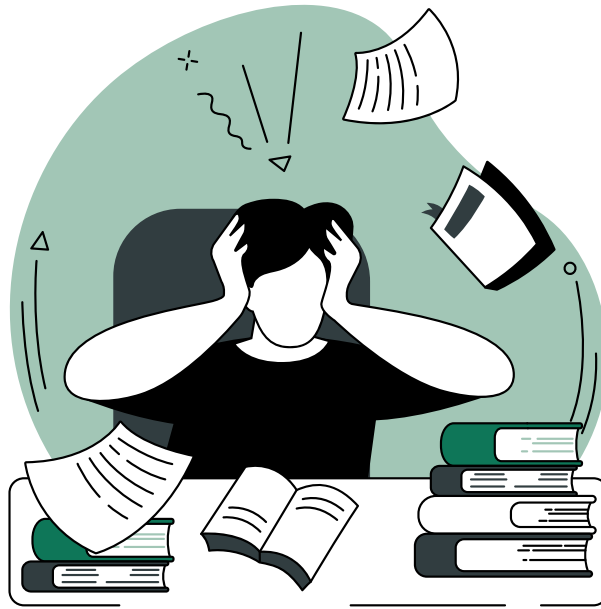
The final step to take before writing your admission essays is to discuss your ideas with others. Consider running your ideas by family and friends. The goal is to present yourself in the best light, and sometimes this comes easiest to those who have known us all of our lives. And ultimately, as this is your essay, you will choose what you write about and submit it.

Step 6: Let the Writing Begin!

Once you have made it through this all-important list of steps, you are ready to begin writing!



As you can see, this isn't a one-sitting project. Each of these steps takes much longer than most students first estimate. Starting early is important to head off writer's block, allowing you to eliminate the pressure of an impending deadline.



Topics to Avoid

Before we go any further, we have to level with you: there are some topics that you want to avoid or at least handle with extreme caution. Let's get those out of the way so that we can get started. For starters, you might be wondering just how "personal" your "personal essay" should be!

Surely we've all been told that the more unique our story, the better chances we have of standing out during the application process. Does this mean that you need to talk about the time you were embarrassed when you had a costume mishap during your fifth-grade Christmas play? Or should you mention the time that you almost died when you came into contact with peanuts? Basically, how much of your life should you be telling others? Here are some issues that you'll want to avoid.

Too Short

You do not need to hit the word count maximum provided. That should never be your goal. However, it is unideal to choose a topic from which you cannot write a detailed answer. If unsure whether a topic is too short to cover, first consider whether you may want to save it for a short answer prompt, or if it is worthy of attempting to expand into a 650-word essay.

No Takeaways

Consider what people will learn about you from your essay. Is there a clear, discernible point couched in a description that evokes the circumstances for the reader? If this is unclear, then you have either chosen the wrong topic or need to revisit your description.



Too Personal, Too Quickly

Consider your history and background. Maybe you had a rough childhood with separated parents or a lost grandparent that you were close with. If you feel comfortable enough to discuss these topics, then feel free to go in-depth describing the impact that these events had on you. Maybe you had to mature early on to step up in your family role to take care of your siblings, etc. These essays can display your strong familial ties or your ability to cope.

However, there is a boundary between opening up and providing TMI (too much information). Remember that these are admissions officers that you are talking to. They are humans with their own dispositions and moral standpoints. It can be risky to write about this sensitive subject matter. Many applicants steer clear of these topics, but if told eloquently and passionately, they can deliver a powerful impact. If you are unsure whether a topic is appropriate, consider sharing this with your Admissions Coach or School Counselor for advice.

"I have worked with a number of students in shaping essays that explain the steps that they have taken to combat depression, anxiety, eating disorders, issues of confidence, and more. I myself wrote an essay about a rather traumatic childhood that I think played a deciding factor in my acceptance into the University of Pennsylvania. Attending a less-than-stellar high school, coming from an underserved community with limited access to resources and novel experiences, I could not rely on academic laurels or extraordinary scores to gain my entry into the Ivy League. Instead, I told my truth: that I had fought my way through extreme circumstances with a level of resilience that would one day motivate me in guiding others through issues not dissimilar from the ones I faced as a child. It is this level of honesty, couched in a well-rounded narrative, that made me stand out in the admissions process."

- Empowerly Counselor Jen



No Character Growth

Try to find essay topics that showcase your development as a leader, student, or simply, person. (Bonus points if you extend yourself into the future and mention how your development has prepared you for life at a certain school). While it's important to feature any quirkiness, which can play an advantage in distinguishing your uniqueness, if you don't feel comfortable sharing much about your personal life, then consider writing about school life or other extracurriculars. These are topics that can showcase your abilities and interests.

Big Myth: Busted

The last piece of important advice to send you off is what we call one of the biggest myths in college admissions. As Empowerly superheroes, we are here to debunk it. Buckle up.

We've said it before and we'll say it again:
there is no formula for college admissions.

"I have had students gain early admission into Columbia with a 1240 SAT (test optional), or into Harvard despite a multitude of setbacks and limiting socio-economic status. The differences between these and other applicants are these students' genuine engagement in life and their ability to shape a narrative, through their classes, extracurricular activities, and essays. It takes many drafts to reach this quality of application, but with persistence, and ideally, guidance, the unique admissions profile necessary to gain admission into your best-fit school is within your reach."

- Empowerly Counselor Jen

We can dream up myths behind seemingly "perfect" applications, but the truth is that no Top 50 admitted student harbors every quality that these rumors praise. Nonetheless- we've all been guilty of thinking these thoughts and feeding the proverbial beast, so let's explore the biggest application myth, and why some students feel this way.

Myth: "I need a major life-changing event or passion to set my application apart."

Some call this the "personal statement crisis," and we find it is the most common college admissions myth. Students think that they need an incredibly specific life crisis or dream/passion to write the personal statement portion of the Common App or other application essays. Oftentimes these applicants will compensate by trying to cover everything that they're involved in one essay. This makes them appear unfocused and overcommitted. The essay then comes across as incoherent, which is a red flag to admissions officers.



A majority of the Top 50 Admitted students will tell you: they didn't have a quirky singular interest or life-altering crisis. So what did they write about? Something they love, something that changed the way that they think or see the world. It can be a minuscule moment or an impactful school involvement; it doesn't matter what it is, but rather what it means to you. At its core, the application is about presenting your most authentic self. It takes thought, time, and vision. You need only ONE dream, passion, or phenomenal life experience.



The Facts: Put your best foot forward, follow the steps above, and you ought to be in good hands!

With this guide on your desk, you'll be ready to conquer the challenges of writing your college admissions essays. Special thanks to our stellar counselor, Jennifer, for her help in shaping this guide and offering her expertise. If you'd like to work one-on-one with a college admissions expert like Jennifer, reach out to Empowerly. We'll be happy to discuss how our program works, and match you with your best-fit counselor. Happy writing!



Biography of Consulting Admissions Consultant: Jennifer (Jen)

Jennifer is a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania (BA in Psychology) and Rutgers University (Teaching Certification K-5 and Special Education) with over 14 years of high school and college admissions experience. Her career began in reviewing undergraduate applications at her alma mater while teaching SAT, ACT, and LSAT test prep at The Princeton Review and Bright Kids. She works for USC Bovard Scholars, a college access program, and supports Berkeley's Y Scholars. Her recent students have gained admissions to Harvard, Columbia, Duke, Northwestern, Princeton, UCLA, UC Berkeley, Brown, and more.



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