

## The College Application Essay

Colleges ask their applicants to write essays (notably called *personal essays*) so that admissions officers can get an idea about who you are and how you think. Much of the rest of the application gives them information which they can fit neatly into little compartments: your grades, your scores, your activities, your honors. These things are all important. These things show what you can do, but they do not always show who you are. Your personal essay is an opportunity for you to show an admissions officer the character behind all the numbers. Don't look at the essay as a dreadful chore. Look at it as an opportunity to tell a story and reveal a little bit of your personality.



Because the essay presents such an important opportunity for you, you certainly want it to represent your best work. Although I am here to help at every stage of the writing process, from brainstorming for a good topic to organizing your thoughts to correcting the last grammar mistake, your essay must speak with *your* voice. Not my voice, not your parent's voice, not your teacher's voice. It is your voice that your admissions officer wants to hear in your essay, and admissions officers are not easily fooled. So let them hear the voice of a high school student, reflecting on past experiences and looking forward to future ones.

The questions on The Common App and on many supplements are posed in such a way as to give you tremendous freedom in your choice of topic, and there are countless ways to approach these essays. Whatever you choose to write about should be very important to you, so that you will have plenty to say. Even a seemingly minor event or experience can be developed into an excellent essay if it was meaningful to you. This is exactly the time to reveal your passion, your individuality, and your intellectual curiosity.

A word of caution if you choose to read published college application essays: these tend to be the best of the best and can be intimidating. However, if you'd like to know what you're up against, or you'd just like to see how others have approached the task, go ahead and read some of these. You will be able to find books of published college essays in your library. The *New York Times* also publishes several prize-winning college essays every spring, most of which have to do with "dangerous" topics like money, race, and class. You can find these on-line, for example [here](#) and [here](#).

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