

How to Write a Great College Application Personal Statement

Why Colleges Want A Personal Statement

Colleges receive thousands of applications from qualified high-school seniors seeking admission. How do schools distinguish among all of these bright students who have nearly identical grades, scores, extra-curricular activities, and teacher recommendations? The answer is the personal statement essay question.

REMEMBER, ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE MEMBERS HAVE TO READ HUNDREDS OF ESSAYS. YOURS NEEDS TO STAND OUT, ENGAGE THEM, AND MAKE THEM WANT TO KNOW YOU.

You will be asked to compose an essay about yourself, an experience you had, perhaps a person in your life -- something calculated to get you to reveal who you really are and how you think. Members of an admissions committee read every application, including the essays, and make a judgment about which applicants would make good additions to their student body. With a good essay you help the committee get to know you as a multi-dimensional human being, hopefully someone they would like to meet.

What They're Looking For

The people reading your essay are a lot like your teachers and school administrators. They want to know whether you are someone who thinks about what happens in your life and can grow, even from the bad experiences. They like to see you formulate an idea or draw a meaningful lesson by connecting different events. They look for intellectual vitality, creativity, genuineness and sincerity, and in a serious essay, a feeling of passion or deep ring about your topic.

Picking A Topic

The real question in the personal statement essay is always, "Who are you?" So choose a topic that reveals something important about you, something that mattered to you, and tell why it mattered. You can expect questions along the lines of the following examples which are taken from actual college applications. All of them give you a chance to say something very personal about you.

- *Evaluate a significant experience or achievement that has special meaning to you.*
- *Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you and describe that influence.*
- *Describe the **qualities and accomplishments** you would bring to the undergraduate student body.*

THIS PROCESS TAKES TIME, SO START WRITING WAY BEFORE THE DEADLINE. THEN WALK AWAY FROM IT, THINK SOME MORE, AND REWRITE, REWRITE, REWRITE.

What To Include

- Be sure to read the question on the application carefully and stick to answering that question.
- Comply with the word and space limitations given in the application; the school uses them to tell you how deep they want you to go in your analysis and description.
- If you have a choice, shorter is better.
- Feel free to express your emotions within appropriate limits, even to reveal contradictory emotions.
- Tell what you realized from this event, how it changed you, what it meant to you, why you find it worth telling.
- Let your values, priorities, and character come through, so that the reader hears your authentic voice from the heart and knows the real you a little better.
- Find the unusual in the ordinary.
- Get personal; tell something with deep meaning for you.

What Not To Include

- Don't list activities and their dates. It's boring and will probably appear elsewhere on your application anyway.
- Don't take on a large subject; keep it small and manageable.
- Don't use gimmicks or try to be cute.
- Don't do a humorous essay unless you are very, very sure an adult would find it funny.
- Don't try to make the essay for one college fit the question from another college unless they are truly the same.
- Don't use clichés. Try to rework them for more depth and interest.

EVEN THOUGH CLICHES MAY BE TRUE, THEY DON'T DIG DEEPEOUGH AND THEY WON'T DISTINGUISH YOU FROM HUNDREDS OF OTHER APPLICANTS.

Putting It All Together

Though it may seem obvious, your essay should have a beginning, middle and an end.

- The beginning orients the reader to your topic and gives an idea of where you're heading with it.
- The middle of the essay gives the details of the story, develops your ideas, or proves your point, taking the reader to the destination you prepared for earlier.
- The ending should remind the reader where you started from and then offer something better than a predictable conclusion.
- Make sure all three sections are consistent; don't get sidetracked and end up with a conclusion that doesn't match the introduction.

Writing With Style

- Be specific and concrete -- not general and abstract.
- To get your reader involved, use details to conjure up a vivid picture of what you experienced.
- Express your ideas in the positive instead of telling what something was not.

WHEN IT COMES TO STYLE, REMEMBER THE KEY PRINCIPLE: KEEP IT SIMPLE. THE PERSON READING YOUR ESSAY HAS A FEW HUNDRED MORE TO GO, SO BE STRAIGHTFORWARD AND CLEAR.

- Don't try to impress the reader with big words; you will only sound stiff and stuffy.
- Avoid slang - make sure the reader understands what you mean.
- Don't use quotations that have become clichés, such as "To thine own self be true."
- Don't use the same word over and over; try consulting a thesaurus to find an equivalent expression to add variety.
- Don't repeat an idea, even if you think saying it in a few different ways refines your meaning. Instead, combine all the best elements of the repetitions into one convincing, clear statement.
- Don't start sentences with the same word repeatedly.
- Avoid qualifiers: "rather," "quite," "somewhat," "probably," "possibly." They weaken your point and make you sound wishy-washy.

- Don't use the passive voice (is, was, were) if you can avoid it: "I didn't understand" is stronger than "It was difficult to understand."
- Don't say something was "special" or "interesting." Instead, tell what was special or interesting.
- Don't say, "I felt," or "I noticed"; tell what you saw or noticed.
- Don't whine, complain, appear bitter, or be sarcastic, angry, caustic, boastful, aggressive, or overly humble.
- Use transition words between sentences and paragraphs, such as "however," "as a result," "finally," "after that," "similarly," "for example." They glue the pieces of your essay together and serve as signposts telling your reader what lies ahead.
- Vary your sentence lengths.
- Stay away from a long line of subject-verb sentences: "We went to the mall. We returned to the hotel. Then we boarded the bus."

**DON'T PREACH, CRITICIZE OTHER VIEWS OR SOUND DOGMATIC.
ADOPT AN ATTITUDE OF WONDER, QUESTIONING, AND PROBING.**

Things to Watch Out For

- Use proper grammar and punctuation.
- Double check your spelling even if you used a spelling checker on your computer. A word may be spelled correctly but not be the right word.
- Avoid a run of sentences that begin with a clause: "Although we had time to shop, we went to the hotel instead. When we got to the hotel, the restaurant was closed."

**KEEP A PHOTOCOPY OF YOUR ENTIRE APPLICATION TO REFER TO
LATER AND TO HAVE IN CASE THE ORIGINAL GETS LOST.**

Resources

- The brochures, catalogues, pamphlets, and Internet sites of the colleges themselves provide the best sources of information about what each college stands for as an institution and looks for in its students.
 - The Internet has commercial sites that offer free advice plus the opportunity to purchase personalized help with your essay.
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