

Tips: College Admission & Scholarship Essays

<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays>

Nearly all colleges rate application essays as either important or very important in their admissions process. A poorly executed essay can cause a stellar student to get rejected. On the flip side, exceptional application essays can help students with marginal scores get into the schools of their dreams. The tips below will help you with your essay.

Avoid the List

Many college applicants make the mistake of trying to include all of their accomplishments and activities in their application essays. Such essays read like what they are: tedious lists. Other parts of the application provide plenty of space for you to list extracurricular activities, so save your lists for the places where they belong.

The most engaging and compelling essays tell a story and have a clear focus. Through carefully chosen detail, your writing should reveal your passions and expose your personality. A thoughtful and detailed narration of a difficult time in your life tells far more about you than a list of competitions won and honors achieved. Your grades and scores show that you're smart. Use your essay to show that you're thoughtful and mature, that your personality has depth.

Add a little Humor (but just a touch)

While it's important to be thoughtful and mature, you don't want your college application essay to be too heavy. Try to lighten up the essay with a clever metaphor, a well-placed witticism, or a little self-deprecating humor. But don't overdo it. The essay that is filled with bad puns or off-color jokes will often end up in the rejection pile. Also, humor isn't a substitute for substance. Your primary task is to answer the essay prompt thoughtfully; the smile you bring to your reader's lips is just a bonus (and a tear can sometimes be effective too). Many students have been rejected for failing to take the prompt seriously and writing essays that end up being more foolish than clever.

Tone, Tone, Tone

Not just humor, but the overall tone of your application essay is remarkably important. It's also difficult to get right. When you are asked to write about your accomplishments, those 750 words on how great you are can make you sound like a braggart. Be careful to balance your pride in your achievements with humility and generosity towards others. You also want to avoid sounding like a whiner -- use your essay to show off your skills, not to explain the injustices that lead to your low math score or failure to graduate #1 in your class.

Reveal Your Character

Along with the essay, most colleges rate "character and personal qualities" as extremely important in their admissions decisions. Your character shows up in three places on the application: the interview (if you have one), your involvement in extracurricular activities, and your essay. Of the three, the essay is the most immediate and illuminating to the admissions folks as they read through thousands of applications. Remember, colleges aren't looking solely for straight "A"s and high SAT scores. They are looking for good citizens for their campus communities.

Mechanics Matter

Grammatical problems, punctuation errors, and spelling mistakes can hurt your chance of being accepted. When excessive, these errors are distracting and make your application essay difficult to understand. Even a few errors, however, can be a strike against you. They show a lack of care and quality control in your written work, and your success in college partly depends upon strong writing skills.

If English isn't your greatest strength, seek help. Ask a favorite teacher to go over the essay with you, or find a friend with strong editorial skills.

Option #1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

Note the key word here: evaluate. You aren't just describing something; the best essays will explore the complexity of the issue. When you examine the "impact on you," you need to show the depth of your critical thinking abilities. Introspection, self-awareness and self-analysis are all important here. And be careful with essays about the winning touchdown or tie-breaking goal. These sometimes have an off-putting "look how great I am" tone and very little self-evaluation.

- **"Evaluate" -- Make Sure Your Response is Analytical**

Read the prompt for option #1 carefully -- you need to "evaluate" an experience, achievement, risk or dilemma. Evaluation requires you to think critically and analytically about your topic. The admissions folks are not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an experience (although you'll need to do this a little). The heart of your essay needs to be a thoughtful discussion of *how* the experience affected you. Examine how the experience made you grow and change as a person.

- **A "Significant" Experience Can Be Small**

Many students shy away from personal essay option 1 because of the word "significant." Many students feel that they are just 18 years old and nothing "significant" has ever happened to them. This isn't true. If you're 18 years old, even if your life has been smooth and comfortable, you've had significant experiences. Think about the first time you challenged authority, the first time you disappointed your parents or the first time you pushed yourself to do something outside of your comfort zone. A significant risk can be choosing to study drawing; it doesn't have to be about rappelling into an icy chasm to rescue a baby polar bear.

- **Don't Brag About an "Achievement"**

The admissions team gets a lot of essays from students about the winning goal, the record-breaking run, the brilliant job in the school play, the stunning violin solo or the amazing job they did as team captain. These topics are fine for essay option 1, but you want to be very careful to avoid sounding like a braggart or egoist. The tone of such essays is critical. An essay that says "the team never could have won without me" is going to rub your reader the wrong way. A college doesn't want a community of self-consumed egoists. The best essays have a generosity of spirit and an appreciation of community and team effort.

- **An "Ethical Dilemma" Doesn't Need to be Newsworthy**

Think broadly about what can be defined as an "ethical dilemma." This topic doesn't need to be about whether or not to support war, abortion or capital punishment. In fact, the huge topics that dominate national debate will often miss the point of the essay question -- the "impact on you." The most difficult ethical dilemmas facing high school students are often about high school. Should you turn in a friend who cheated? Is loyalty to your friends more important than honesty? Should you risk your own comfort or reputation to do what you think is right? Tackling these personal dilemmas in your essay will give the admissions folks a good sense of who you are, and you will be addressing issues that are central to being a good campus citizen.

- **Reveal Your Character**

Always keep in mind why colleges require admissions essays. Sure, they want to see that you can write, but the essay isn't always the best tool for that (it's obviously easy to get professional help with grammar and mechanics). The main purpose of the essay is so that the school can learn more about you. It's the only place on the application where you can really demonstrate your character, your personality, your sense of humor and your values. The admissions folks want to find evidence that you will be a contributing member of the campus community. They want to see evidence of a team spirit, humility, self-awareness and introspection. Essay option #1 works well for these goals if you thoughtfully explore the "impact on you."

Option #2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

Be careful to keep the "importance to you" at the heart of your essay. It's easy to get off track with this essay topic and start ranting about global warming, Darfur, or abortion. The admissions folks want to discover your character, passions and abilities in the essay; they want more than a political lecture.

- **Be Sure to "Discuss"**

Be sure to read the question carefully. The common application is not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an issue. So, if the bulk of your essay is describing the terrible conditions in Darfur, you are not answering the question. To "discuss" something you need to think critically and write analytically.

- **Focusing Close to Home is Often Better**

The admissions office gets lots of essays on big, newsworthy issues like the war in Iraq, the fight against terror and U.S. dependence on fossil fuels. In truth, however, these giant and complex issues often don't impact our immediate lives as much as more local and personal issues. Since colleges want to get to know you through your essay, be sure to focus on an issue that will actually teach them something about you.

- **Don't Lecture Your Audience**

The admissions officers don't want to be lectured on the evils of global warming or the cons of world trade. Save that writing for a paper in your college Political Science class. The heart of an essay on option #2 needs to be about *you*, so make sure your writing is as much personal as it is political.

- **Give Emphasis to "The Importance to You"**

The end of the prompt for option #2 asks you to discuss the issue's "importance to you." Don't short change this essential part of the question. Whatever issue you discuss, you want to make sure that it truly is important to you and that your essay reveals *why* it is important to you. A good essay on this option reveals the person behind the writing.

- **Show Why You'd Be a Good Choice for the College**

Trust me -- the common application doesn't include option #2 because colleges want to learn about world issues. Colleges want to learn about you, and they want to see evidence that you will add value to the campus community. The essay is really the only place in the application where you can highlight your convictions and personality. As you discuss an issue, make sure you reveal yourself to be the type of thoughtful, introspective, passionate and generous person who will make an ideal campus citizen.

Option #3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

I'm not a fan of this prompt because of the wording: "describe that influence." A good essay on this topic does more than "describe." Dig deep and "analyze." And handle a "hero" essay with care. Your readers have probably seen a lot of essays talking about what a great role model Mom or Dad or Sis is. Also realize that the "influence" of this person doesn't need to be positive.

- **Push the Language in This Option**

I've never been a fan of the wording of essay option #3, for if you followed the guidelines too literally, you would end up with a bland essay. The words "indicate" and "describe" suggest that your essay does not need to demonstrate any critical thought. However, a good response to #3 does far more than "describe" a person's influence on you. You should examine *why* the person was influential to you, and you should *analyze* the ways in which you have changed because of your relationship with the person.

- **Think Twice About Essays on Mom or Dad**

There is nothing wrong with writing about one of your parents for this essay, but make sure your relationship with your parent is unusual and compelling in some way. The admissions folks get a lot of essays that focus on a parent, and your writing won't stand out if you simply make generic points about parenting. If you find yourself making points like "my Dad was a great role model" or "my mother always pushed me to do my best," rethink your approach to the question. Consider the millions of students who could write the exact same essay.

- **Don't Be Star Struck**

In most cases, you should avoid writing an essay about the lead singer in your favorite band or the movie star who you idolize. Such essays can be okay if handled well, but often the writer ends up sounding like a pop culture junkie rather than a thoughtful independent thinker.

- **The "Significant Influence" Need Not Be Positive**

The majority of essays written for option #3 are about role models: "my Mom/Dad/brother/friend/teacher/neighbor/coach taught me to be a better person through his or her great example..." Such essays are often excellent, but they are also a bit predictable. This essay, however, is about a "significant" influence, not necessarily a "positive" influence.

- **You Are Also Writing About Yourself**

When the prompt asks you to "describe that influence," it is asking you to be reflective and introspective. While an essay for option #3 is partly about the influential person, it is equally about you. To understand someone's influence on you, you need to understand yourself -- your strengths, your short-comings, the areas where you still need to grow. As with all the essay options, you need to make sure a response to #3 reveals your own interests, passions, personality and character. The details of this essay need to reveal that you are the type of person who will contribute to the campus community in a positive way.

Option #4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

Here as in #3, be careful of that word "describe." You should really be "analyzing" this character or creative work. What makes it so powerful and influential?

Option #5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

Realize that this question defines "diversity" in broad terms. It's not specifically about race or ethnicity (although it can be). Ideally, the admissions folks want every student they admit to contribute to the richness and breadth of the campus community. How do you contribute?

Option #6. Topic of your choice.

Sometimes you have a story to share that doesn't quite fit into any of the options above. However, the first five topics are broad with a lot of flexibility, so make sure your topic really can't be identified with one of them. Also, don't equate "topic of your choice" with a license to write a comedy routine or poem (you can submit such things via the "Additional Info" option). Essays written for this prompt still need to have substance and tell your reader something about you.