

Writing the Common Application and other US Essays

Role of the Essay

There is no way to know exactly how much the essay counts, when it is required. There are schools that require no essays, and the Common Application allows schools to say that they don't require one, but if the school requires an essay, then they will read it (as well as any supplementary questions that they require). Submitting a strong essay gives you an edge.

Common Application main essay:

To get a sense of your personality – what are your values, what do you care about? Are you someone that they want to have in their campus community?

To set you apart from other candidates – many will have similar grades, scores, different but equally good activities. When there are 1000 candidates for 200 spaces, how will you get pulled from the “maybe” pool into the “admit” pool?

School specific:

To help them to visualize you as a member of the school community

To ascertain whether you are a good fit for the school, and vice versa.

Getting Started

Get organized.

- Open a document and paste into it all of the essays you need to write, from Common Application and any other applications, including supplementary essays.
 - In Common App, look in the school specific questions section as well as the writing section, as short answer questions are often hidden there.
 - Do not agonize over the main essay just to dash off the supplementary essay at the last minute – it may be equally or even more important as the main one, as you are responding to the question that that college really wants an answer to.
- Look for commonalities among them, it is often possible, with appropriate editing, to make one answer work for more than one prompt. Must be done carefully so that each reader thinks it was specially written for that prompt.

Brainstorming

- The hardest part is often just getting started. Just start writing; you will not make any progress until you put pen/pencil to paper. Write down many ideas whether you think they will work or not. Jot outlines for each of what you might say, and see which ones develop in the most interesting way.
- Sometimes a topic that pops instantly to mind and seems easy to write is too shallow – once you've written down the obvious things to say about it there is nothing more there. Sometimes a topic that does not seem so promising, once you start to write, leads you to more profound ideas.
- Remember that the essay has to reveal something about **you**. The topic, no matter what it is, is just a vehicle for you to display your character. An essay about your grandfather is fine, if it is not just about him, but frequently tells us how you have grown and changed by your association with him and/or how your actions have been influenced by his example. You can't submit an essay on child labour in Pakistan and then say that what they've learned about is that you are interested in this problem.

Common App main essay

- Try NOT starting with the topics
 - Your first responses to them are likely to be similar to those of many other people.
 - You are more likely to write what you think they want to hear, which is not what they want.
- Rather, think about what you want the college to know about you.
 - Good to show an ability to be thoughtful and introspective about yourself and to learn and grow from your experiences.
- Then think about a story in which you display that characteristic.
 - Small stories are often much more revealing and honest sounding than “big” ones, which can more easily become cliché.
- Think “Is this a story that only I could tell?” This is not about the topic – there is no such thing as a unique topic, but your experience, your view, your action, your reaction, your insight.
 - Do not let someone else write your essay; a friend or relative who you think writes well, - God forbid – a paid consultant. Colleges are looking for your voice, and you should sound like a (well educated) 18 year old, not like your mother, not like the 50 other clients. No one else can have your voice or your perspectives. If you were not to get an offer to a school you care about, you would always wonder if your own voice would have gotten you in. Be true to yourself.
- Your goal is to be remembered in committee – when they bring up your application, you want them to say “Oh, he wrote about xxx!” not “what was his essay about again?”
 - For this, it is much better to write a vivid account of one or few incidents. Stay away from
 - the travelogue: “and then I, and then I”
 - the achievements or activities list
 - superficial, naïve sounding “Miss America” topics
 - generalizations
 - bragging (this is not WHAT you write, but HOW you write about it)
 - Do not bore your reader!
- Stories of personal hardship can highlight resilience and growth, but have to be told carefully.
 - No sob stories – be positive, not negative.
 - Don’t embarrass your reader – if you wouldn’t want (someone like) your mother to read it, then don’t send it.
- The five main Common Application essay topics are really quite broad. After you have your essay idea, go back and look at the topics and decide which one is the best match.
 - If you tell an interesting story well, it doesn’t have to exactly match the prompt.

The “Why here?” essay.

Ex: “Johns Hopkins University was founded in 1876 on a spirit of exploration and discovery. As a result, students can pursue a multi-dimensional undergraduate experience both in and outside of the classroom. Given the opportunities at Hopkins, please discuss your current interests (academic, extracurricular, personal passions, summer experiences, etc.) and how you will build upon them here.”

- This type of prompt is pretty straightforward. They want to know that you do know what their school is all about (what they offer and what makes them special) and to convince them that the school is a good fit for you and vice versa.
 - Be careful to relate everything back to yourself and not just laud the school.
- Be specific about what they offer and how it relates to your interest.
 - Do not be vague, and/or flatter - "XYZ University is the only university that offers such a wide variety of courses with such amazing professors and I am interested in taking a wide range of different things!!" Just says that you haven't bothered to try to find out what makes the school special and that you haven't even tried to think about what you might be interested in (in addition to being an obvious lie (the first part)).
- Find specifics about the school. What classes interest you? Any professors you would particularly like to study with? Any opportunities for undergraduate research/ internship, or any other special academic opportunities or programs in the academic year/summer?
- Highlight and remember address key words, in this case one is "multi-dimensional." The school will want to see your interest in exploring/developing new areas of interest in addition to your existing one(s). Another is "in and out of the classroom," so do the same for your activities - how will you be able to pursue your current interests further at the school? What new things might you like to try?
- In these essays it is more important to be careful to answer the question that has been asked, as the school has specific information that they are looking for.

Writing Tips

- Start early. Writing is like fine wine or an aged cheese – it needs time to mature. You need to be able to put it aside and allow your subconscious to work on it when you are doing other things. 10 hours over 2 weeks will give you something decent, 10 hours in one go, on one day, will give you something awful. When you have had some distance from your work and you go back to it, you will have a fresh perspective that will allow you to see mistakes and improvements.
 - Start, at the latest, in the summer of A1
- Show, don't tell. Cliché, but true.
 - I don't want you to be outside looking at yourself and analyzing yourself, I want to be inside you, looking out through your eyes, and feeling what you feel. If you are dispassionate, the reader will be dispassionate.
 - Don't say "I am a loyal friend," tell a story in which your actions say it for you. If you feel that you have to point it out to your reader, then rewrite your story until the message is loud and clear from your actions alone. Don't end with a moral "And so I learned that. . ." The reader should already know.
- Use active voice – be the hero of your story. Write in nouns and verbs.
- Grab your reader from the first sentence. Remember the tiny amount of time admissions officers have for each application. Consider dropping your reader in, and then orient him. Pique his interest. End strong.
- Proofread, rewrite, proofread, rewrite, repeat, repeat. One edit is nothing.
- Read it out loud to a friend or family member.
 - Can they tell you in one sentence what the key message is?
 - What vivid image do they come away with?

- Does it sound like you, or do they want to laugh?
- Can they penetrate your prose to figure out what you are saying?
- Be careful of those who may plagiarize
- Listen to the advice of others but only use what you are comfortable with. Do not let your voice be overwhelmed or adulterated.
- Don't plagiarize – it is incredibly easy to find out where you stole it from.
- If your essay is too long, don't work with your existing essay to try to cut it down. Rather, without looking at your existing essay, rewrite it from your head in the most direct way with the fewest possible words.
 - The Pakistani educational system seems to produce wordy writers – counting words to reach word limits (write 500 words on. . .) results in a lot of sentences in which 6 words are used to do the job of 2.
 - Do observe length limitations.

Pitfalls

1. Reliance on spell and grammar check. Remember that spell check will not catch all mistakes and that grammar check gives the wrong advice half of the time. Don't be one of the writers who fail to proofread adequately because they have shed this responsibility and given it to the program.
2. Thesaurus abuse. Remember that words have nuance as well as meaning, and that you have to look up each option given to you by a thesaurus in any case to be sure of exact meaning, nuance, usage etc.
 - a. "Scent" and "stench" can both be used for "odor," but are not interchangeable. (wrong nuance)
 - b. "I was able to reminisce the first time I wrote my own computer program." (wrong usage)

This is probably a result of. . .

3. Overwriting. Something simply and powerfully written in words that you are comfortable with and have control over will be much more effective and believable than the same thing written to "impress" with fancy vocabulary and convoluted sentence structure. (It does make an impression, but a negative one!)
 - a. "I enjoy studying economical policy." (Longer is not always better.)
 - b. "Doing community service has made me more tolerable." (A new variant isn't always the right one.)

4. Hyperbole. In order to make their writing more dramatic (?), students will throw in absolute statements or make broad sweeping generalizations. The first thing a reader thinks when he reads "Pakistan has the highest level of child labour in the world" is "Oh yeah? How do you know? Who says so?" The reader then feels that he does not know which of the author's statements can be trusted and which cannot. ("According to the XYZ Report, Pakistan has the highest level of child labour in the world" is fine, of course, as is "Pakistan has a high rate of child labour.")

A student may write "Pakistani businesses give no importance to human resource development" as if they know about and are authorized to speak for all Pakistani companies. A girl may write "The women of Pakistan are oppressed and their parents do not want to educate girls," when the statement is obviously not true for the writer herself

or for most girls of her acquaintance. Statements like these undermine the reader's ability to believe any of what has been written.

5. Not proofreading for meaning. Often a result of 2, 3 and 4, but not necessarily:

a. Ex: "Mathematics and Economics make a very good combination and I feel that they are the best subjects in which I can hope to succeed in my career." - ????

This is a very mild example.

Final Words

1)

"If you care about being thought credible and intelligent, do not use complex language where simpler language will do. My Princeton colleague, Danny Oppenheimer, refuted myth prevalent among undergraduates about the vocabulary that professors find most impressive. In an article titled "Consequences of Erudite Vernacular Utilized Irrespective of Necessity: Problems with Using Long Words Needlessly," he showed that **couching familiar ideas in pretentious language is taken as a sign of poor intelligence and low credibility.**

Daniel Kahneman, 2002 Winner of the
Nobel Prize for Economics
Thinking, Fast and Slow

2)

"I recently heard an admission colleague from another university summarize all of this really well, and I'll do my best to paraphrase what he said. You can approach the writing of your essay (and, indeed, the college process writ large) as a series of checkboxes, a list of items to get right and hoops to jump through, in order to get to the end goal (namely, acceptance). *Or* you can approach the writing of your essay, and the college application process, as an opportunity to think really critically (and deeply) about who you are, what makes you tick, what matters to you, and what you want out of this next phase of your life. Essays written by students with the latter approach are, inevitably, far more compelling and interesting than essays written by students just trying to do the correct thing and check all the boxes."

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