

The College Essay Writing Mega-Manual From Shah J. Chaudhry, *Your Guide to College Admissions*.

Introduction to the College Essay

The process of admissions in colleges has become very competitive. In addition to your test scores, academic transcripts and other quantitative data, the colleges require a piece of writing, variously termed an entrance essay, application essay, statement of purpose, statement of background and goals, and so forth. Essay questions vary widely but basically serve the same purpose: assessing your fitness as a candidate.

When an admission committee sits down to read applications, they (obviously) pay a lot of heed to an excellent application with high-test scores and a solid transcript. But once the committee has narrowed down its choices, it makes its final decisions by reading personal statements aloud. Frequently, these personal statements are a deciding factor among qualified candidates.

An admission committee expects that the applicant has worked hard on the essay and has spent months writing and rewriting it. Therefore, it wants a perfect essay. An essay like all others does nothing to improve a candidate's chances, and essays with even a small grammatical error or a typo can be subject to dismissal.

The only way students can improve their chances of being selected from a huge pool of applicants is by writing a stellar personal essay as a part of their college application. This essay might only be 500 words, but it can mean a difference between acceptance and rejection. The way you write your application essay distinguishes you from the other applicants. It provides information about you that your quantitative data cannot.

Your application essay is your only opportunity to speak about yourself. This essay does not necessarily have to be about your life experiences but it should serve the purpose of telling a story while telling the reader something about the author, it should be written in a way that shows that you are exceptional while capturing your readers' attention. The application essay provides information about you to people who do not know you personally, and this written expression will be a very important way for committee members to get to know why you can be an acceptable candidate. Thus, it is crucial to take great care in preparing this part of your application.

The application essay is a result of hard work, often requiring countless drafts and several weeks of writing and rewriting. These essays represent your first encounter with a professional college and therefore they must show evidence of intellect and character. They should define who the author is, why they are seeking to get admission in that certain college and why have they chosen the career.

What is the Purpose of the College Essay?

Colleges want to see a sample of your writing, and they want to get to know the applicant. Another purpose is to enable the applicants to share something that may not be reflected in their academic records. The application essay is also very important because it allows the applicants to express their individuality and give the colleges an opportunity to know them. This essay allows the admission committee to find out whether you will succeed in their academic setting or not, by demonstrating your writing ability, which is a key component to success in college. Every college looks for mastery in basic mechanics of grammar. Your application essay also reflects your logical thinking ability, your maturity and your overall readiness for college.

There are hundreds of students who apply for admissions and there are several of them who have same or closely matched academic records (GPA, SAT scores, board exam scores, etc). An admission committee expects that the applicant has worked hard on the essay and has spent months writing and

rewriting it. Therefore, it wants a perfect essay. An essay like all others does nothing to improve a candidate's chances, and essays with even a small grammatical error or a typo can be subject to dismissal.

Who Reviews Your Essay?

Typically, the admission committees consist of admission counselors and officers, and occasionally, faculty members or students. These admission officers read hundreds of essays each year and generally spend just one or two minutes on each. Therefore, it is critical for your essay to distinguish you from other applicants. It is also critical that your essay provides a picture of who you are and why would you be a good candidate for the college, all while demonstrating good writing ability.

What Do the Reviewers Look for In Your Essay?

To present yourself in the best possible light, start out by following all the standards and requirements. It should be typed, double spaced, should use a twelve-point font with a standard font such as Times New Roman, and the margins should be standard size. It is preferable if your essay length is within the given limit (no more than ten percent off). Try to make your essay as clear and concise as possible. Avoid sloppiness and stylistic errors. Answer the question directly and address all its parts. Your essay should be well organized, logical, and easy to follow. The tone should be appropriately serious, sincere, and modestly confident.

A good essay will distinguish you from the other applicants. It should show the depth of your accomplishment and the quality of your character. Reviewers look for essays that are consistent and reflect your life experiences, commitment to education, and personal characteristics. It might reflect a memorable and influential experience. You may also decide to write about your knowledge of a certain ethnic group or about some hardships you overcame.

Little Known Truths about the Admission Process

We all like to believe that the admissions committee has your best interests at heart, and that the selection process is fair. The truth is, it's not. The admissions committees have three primary objectives: to generate as many applications as possible, to reject as many as they can, (in order to increase their selectivity) and to build a "diverse class." This means that people who are less qualified than you may end up getting accepted, while you have to face rejection. Most applicants are incredibly uninformed when it comes to the admission process.

Brain Storming

Now that the first part of the College Admission Essay Mega-manual has taught you what the college essay is all about and what exactly the admission officers are looking for, let's move into to actually writing the essay so that the final product is a truly exceptional composition.

The process of writing the application essay can be broken into five very basic parts:

- Brainstorming
- Selecting the essay topic
- Writing the essay
- Revising the essay
- Coming up with the final draft

1. BRAINSTORMING: Brainstorming is the process of coming up with ideas spontaneously from free flowing writing or talking. To brainstorm, you can simply sit down with a pen and jot down every idea that comes into your head. Another approach is to simply start writing and see where you end up. Record as

much information as you can recall, such as schools attended, courses taken, jobs held, research projects undertaken. Work on taking yourself deeper into the introspection process by tackling more specific topics. Here are some questions you might want to consider:

- How do my friends characterize me?
- What are my personality traits?
- Have I experienced an epiphany?
- What are my major accomplishments?
- Why do I consider them accomplishments?
- What extra curricular activities have I participated in?
- Have I strived hard for something? Why did I succeed? Why did I fail?
- What was a difficult time in my life?
- How did my perspective of life change due to a difficult time?
- Where do I want to go? Why?
- What would I most like to be doing right now?
- Where would I like to be?
- Who would I most like to be with?
- What are my dreams for the future?
- How do I intend to achieve these dreams?
- What will I be doing ten years from now?
- How does the university fit my future plans?

You can also brainstorm using the following questions:

- What might help the evaluating committee in understanding me better?
- What distinguishes me from other applicants?
- What are my career aims?
- What skills do I possess that would improve your chances for success in this field?
- What has stimulated my interest in this field of study?
- Why should an admissions committee be interested in me?
- Why am I interested in this field?

Some other topics are suggested below to stimulate your thinking:

- The most memorable experiences
- The most influential ideas, people and events in your life
- Your likes and dislikes
- Your academic, career, and personal goals
- Your key strengths
- Your favorite written work, quotations, intellectual activities
- The attributes you most respect in others
- Times when you have shown leadership, creativity, and ingenuity
- Times when you have helped others

If the topics above do not help in stimulating your creativity and eliminating the writers' block, try following some of these steps:

- Ask help from parents, friends or colleagues
- Consider your childhood
- Consider your role models
- Read sample admission essays
- Goal determination

Once you have generated the list of potential topics, look over it and revise. Do this as many times as you can over the period of one week and develop your thoughts.

Once you have completed the brainstorming process you should have an idea of what impression you are seeking to make on the admissions committee. Now, you must select a topic that will allow you to

synthesize your important personal characteristics and experiences in a coherent whole while simultaneously addressing your desire to attend that particular college.

Selecting the Essay Topic

The key to a strong essay is a good topic. When selecting a topic, keep in mind a topic that allows you to demonstrate your skills and individuality – a topic that answers the question while telling the reviewers what they want to know. Read the prompt carefully, bearing in mind that essay questions are designed to let the reviewers judge why you (as opposed to other applicants) should be admitted to their college.

There are several different kinds of essay questions. Some of the most common types of essay questions and the purposes behind them are given below:

Key Influence Questions:

Definition: Key influence questions can be about a person, movie, event, world issue, work of literature - anything.

Ideal response: While responding to this question, keep in mind that the influence you decide to write about is just as important as what you intend to write about it. Make sure that the influence you choose casts light on your strengths and values. Write about how that certain thing has influenced your thoughts, ideas, and goals and how it has made you a better person.

Goal Questions:

Definition: This kind of question can ask you to write about your goals, or it can ask you to write a personal statement that will include your goals and your qualifications. The question usually focuses on academic, career, and personal goals.

Ideal response: State your goals clearly. Let the reader know that you have a clearly defined set of goals that you are directed by and that hold utmost importance to you. You may also distinguish between your short and long term goals in the process. Next, write about how this specific college fits with your goals.

Open-ended Questions:

Definition: Open-ended questions are non-specific: "Please provide any additional information about you that you would like us to know." If the open-ended question is optional, don't feel obligated to answer it unless you really have something important to share with the review committee.

Ideal response: If an open-ended question is the only essay question your application includes, you are left with a wide variety of options. You can write anything you wish, but the preferable response should concern a key influence or goal because these are the two most common types of specific essay questions.

Growth questions:

Definition: These questions ask you to write about specific things that have been milestones in your growth and how they have helped you become the person you are. Some of these questions include: "What is the greatest obstacle you have overcome?" and "What has been your greatest accomplishment?"

Ideal response: While responding to a personal growth question, be careful not to dwell on the event itself. Rather, focus on how it has made a difference in your life and shaped you as a person.

Creative Questions:

Definition: Creative questions allow you to express your thoughts and feelings about something - they give you freedom of expression. Some creative questions can include: "Choose an issue of international concern and discuss its importance to you," or "Why have you chosen this career?"

Ideal response: Again, don't focus too much on the issue itself. Rather, write about how it has made a difference to you or why it holds importance for you. Also, make sure that you demonstrate how you can succeed in a competitive college setting without actually mentioning it.

If the answer to any of the following questions is "no" then you really need to rethink your topic and select a new one.

- Can you offer supporting material in relevance with your essay topic?
- Will your topic include material different from that already mentioned in the application?
- Will the admissions officer still remember your topic after having read hundreds of essays?
- Can you fully answer the question asked of you?
- Can you keep the reader interested right from the very first word?
- Can you give personal examples?

Never try to write about something that has already been mentioned in your application such as your GPA or your test scores. It is also a bad idea to write something that you do not feel comfortable with, or that does not let your thoughts flow smoothly. Also, watch out for topics for which you cannot give concrete personal examples.

Keep in mind that you have to keep the reader interested while, at the same time, revealing something about yourself and responding thoroughly to the prompt. It is practical to write something about yourself rather than choosing heavy topics such as political or religious issues that might alienate the reader. Focus on things that hold meaning for you, not merely what "they want to hear."

If you are planning to make your essay humorous, be extremely careful. This approach is almost always done poorly and not appreciated by the admissions committee. There is nothing worse than not laughing at something that was meant to be funny or amusing.

A good essay tells a story about the applicant - it's not a life history. Rather, it is a glimpse into the life of the applicant. Treat your essay as a snapshot. Each of us has different selves at different times: sometimes we are clowning about, while other times we are demonstrating wisdom. Pick one of your better selves, one that is interesting, rich with meaning, and alive with imagery.

Writing the Essay

Clear writing is the result of clear thinking. The first task is to decide your topic. The essay is short so you must be highly selective. Remember the audience and decide on two or three main points that you wish to tell the reader. Decide which aspect of yourself you want to present to the readers and stick to that impression. Each of your paragraphs should deal with one main idea. The organization of your essay reflects the organization of your mind.

Try to make your central idea unique because readers get tired of the same essay topics. Stay away from the "I-struggled-for-a-year,-but-finally-scored-the-winning-touchdown-in-CIF" essay.

The first draft is a preliminary version of your essay and it will always be rough, imperfect, and in need of revision. But this essay will contain the ideas that you will carry on to your final draft. To make the task of writing the essay easier, keep in mind the intended audience and what the audience will be looking for.

Each essay has four very basic parts:

Title: This is a vital part of your essay and the reader's first impression. Students often forget this small, but very important part of the essay.

Thesis: The thesis is the main idea of your essay. It is the guiding theme that sets your essay tone. In a way, the thesis is a one-sentence answer to your question. You make a claim in your thesis statement and spend the rest of the essay supporting this claim.

How do you come up with a thesis?

Coming up with your thesis requires a great deal of thought. Focus carefully on your topic and try to find an angle that makes it both interesting and different from what others will be writing. The thesis statement should make the reader want to continue reading.

Body: This is your chance to support the essay's thesis statement.

What should the body contain?

An essay which contradicts its thesis statement has failed in its primary objective. Start by describing your thesis statement clearly, and then provide evidence supporting the thesis. Describe how your perception and behavior have changed by what you are writing about, and how it has influenced you.

Conclusion: The conclusion of your essay reminds the reader of the thesis you have just proven. Never summarize your essay in your conclusion; try to end with an observation that will leave your readers thinking.

How to decide what to write in the conclusion?

Connect your thesis statement with the body of your essay, and then describe how this turn of events relates to you being an ideal applicant. How does it relate to your decision to apply for college admission?

Types of essays:

There are three main types of essays. Look for clues in the application to decide what kind of a structure is expected:

Narrative: This structure is linear and therefore comparatively easy to organize. A narrative essay progresses chronologically and can be broken into small, manageable parts. While writing a narrative, make sure that you balance interpretive points with specific facts.

Analytic: An analytic essay evaluates and answers the question "Why?" In this kind of an essay you may have to use a structure that first gives an overall answer, and then discusses the specific reasons.

Technical: Technical essays show your readers how much you can contribute to a certain field and you might have to write about your involvement in a specific issue. In this essay, be careful to use clear, factual references, as well as a statement giving the reason why this topic is of your interest.

How you write is just as important as what you write. You should constantly keep asking yourself what would make you interested in the essay if you were the reader and put yourself in the shoes of the admission officer and find answers to questions like "Why should I choose this applicant?" Do not just rely on your own opinion, show your essay to others and seek their opinion.