

Writing College Admissions & Scholarship Essays

Many colleges require that potential students write an essay as part of the admissions process. Also, many scholarship applications require essays from students to compete for funds to pay for college.

What type of essays will students have to write and how does one start?

Here are the prompts from this year's Common Application (an online application that can be used for numerous colleges nationwide).

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Notice that many of the prompts are urging students to have a story that makes them stand out from other applicants or reveal strong character traits and morals.

The length requirement is 250-650 words for each prompt.

Eight Tips for Writing the College Application Essay: (adapted from *U.S. News and World Report*)

1. Be concise. Even though the Common Application main essay has only a suggested minimum of 250 words, and no upper limit, every admissions officer has a big stack to read every day; he or she expects to spend only a couple of minutes on the essay. Remember that it's just as difficult to write a good short essay as a long one (sometimes more difficult).

2. Be honest. Don't embellish your achievements, titles, and offices. It's just fine to be the copy editor of the newspaper or the treasurer of the Green Club, instead of the president. Not everyone has to be the star at everything. You will feel better if you don't strain to inflate yourself. Also, if you have worked a summer job or after school hours, readers sometimes credit this even more than club memberships.

3. Be an individual. In writing the essay, ask yourself, "How can I distinguish myself from those thousands of others applying to College X whom I don't know—and even the ones I

do know?" It's not in your activities or interests. If you're going straight from high school to college, you're just a teenager, doing teenage things. It is your mind and how it works that are distinctive. Focus first on what you want to communicate (I am outgoing; I am studious; I am clever; etc.) and then think what brief story you can tell to show this to the reader.

Know that if you receive a prompt that asks "What characteristics do the best leaders have?" that the reader will read hundreds of essays that say "The best leaders are those who lead by example." Figure out how to say something different or at least say it in a different way. This is how telling YOUR story makes you an individual. Maybe your overall message is still that the best leaders are those who lead by example, but only YOU had Mr. Somebody as a teacher/coach/mentor who actually did lead by example.

4. Be coherent. Obviously, you don't want to babble, but I mean write about just one subject at a time. Don't try to cover everything in an essay. Doing so can make you sound busy, but at the same time, scattered and superficial. The whole application is a series of snapshots of what you do. It is inevitably incomplete. The colleges expect this.

5. Be accurate. I don't mean just use spell check (that goes without saying). Attend to the other mechanics of good writing, including conventional punctuation in the use of commas, semi-colons, etc. If you are writing about Dickens, don't say he wrote *Wuthering Heights*. If you write about Nietzsche, spell his name right.

6. Be vivid. A good essay is often compared to a story: In many cases it's an anecdote of an important moment. Provide some details to help the reader see the setting. Use the names (or invent them) for the other people in the story, including your brother, teacher, or coach. This makes it all more human and humane. It also shows the reader that you are thinking about his or her appreciation of your writing, which is something you'll surely want to do.

7. Be likable. Colleges see themselves as communities, where people have to get along with others, in dorms, classes, etc. Are you someone they would like to have dinner with, hang out with, to include in a discussion section?

8. Be smart. Colleges are intellectual places, a fact they almost always keep a secret when they talk about their dorms, climbing walls, and how many sports you can play. It is helpful to show your intellectual vitality. What engages your mind? What are you intellectually curious about? This is not the same thing as declaring an intended major; what matters is why that subject interests you.

The bottom line in writing college application and scholarship essays is the same as it is for writing résumés, attending interviews, and filling out job applications: it is all about marketing yourself. You want to stand out from the rest of the applicants but not in a way that is obnoxious or arrogant. Look for ways during your high school career to pursue your own interests or develop leadership skills, so that later you will have something to write about. And, of course, these are essays, so you want to write well. Language matters, so work hard in your English classes and learn as much as you can about using writing as a tool to communicate your ideas.