

Tackling the College Admissions Essay: A Pocket Guide from Someone Who's Been Through It All

by James Do

This guide is meant to help you understand the ins and outs of college application essay writing. Although this guide is geared towards the “big” essays, which are usually capped at 400 to 600 words, the concepts below are applicable to nearly every kind of essay in the college admissions process. The advice here is derived from the personal experience of the Perfect 2400 staff as applicants, as well as from our experience in helping our students craft great college admissions essays. I hope that you find this guide to be informative, helpful, and maybe even fun (okay, no guarantees on that last one).

The Essay's Core Message

The purpose of the essay is to inform the admissions officers about you *as a person, not a collection of scores and numbers*. The topic you select, then, should demonstrate something beyond what the rest of your application will show.

- The essay's core message should be about a quality about you that is not apparent from the rest of your application.
- Although the essay prompt may somewhat limit the range of topics you can write about, you can almost always tailor your essay to fit nearly any generic “big essay” prompt.
 - Most students write one main essay to use for the “big” essay required in most apps.
 - The topics are usually fairly broad, and are usually meant to elicit some kind of information about you as a human being... so if you write an essay that talks about you as a human being, you can usually use your main essay for all your applications.
- Keep in mind: college admissions officers aren't there to admit sets of numbers... otherwise college admissions officers would be a bunch of computers, not people!
 - There are many, many students with the same scores and GPAs.
 - Admissions officers use other criteria to admit students—they are admitting *individuals*, not a set of SAT scores.
 - Many students with 2400 on the SAT and a GPA of 4.00 get rejected every year from elite schools because admissions officers can't see a human being behind the fog of scores and numbers—or it's clear what the applicant's personality is, but the officers don't like what they see (arrogance or lack of internal motivation is often an issue).
- Examples of qualities you might want admissions officers to know about:
 - Inquisitiveness – Are you curious? Are you always looking to learn something new?
 - Initiative – How willing are you to get off your chair and *do something*?
 - Leadership – Do you enjoy leading and inspiring others?
 - Compassion – Are you uniquely caring and sensitive to strangers' needs?

- A common mistake is to turn the essay into a “laundry list” of all the activities that you’ve ever done in your life. Keep in mind that the real purpose of the essay is to provide your *subjective commentary on how those activities have contributed to you as a human being*.

SIDENOTE: Multiple Essays—Making Them All Work Together

- Virtually all college applications involve multiple essays. This guide is primarily meant to talk about the “big” essays—usually about 500-600 words long.
- Given that you have many essays to choose from, you can divide up the qualities that you want to talk about among the essays. For example, my main essay was about inquisitiveness only, but I used my minor essays to address leadership, initiative, and other qualities.
- Together, all the essays paint one picture—it’s like a collage. Make the pieces work together to paint a picture of who you are.

Choosing a Topic

- After you’ve thought about what qualities you want to express, think of a two or three anecdotes that demonstrate those qualities.
- *For example*, if you want to show all four of the example qualities listed above, you could talk about that one summer when you gathered your friends and got the group to help out at a hospital in need of volunteers.
 - Inquisitiveness – you wanted to find out how hospitals operate
 - Initiative – you decided to do something about it
 - Leadership – you got your friends together and inspired them
 - Compassion – you were also motivated by the prospect of helping others

Your Essay Is a Story

- Your essay should have a story arc to it—that is, your essay should be a story, not just a flat exhibition of how you’re awesome in four different ways.
- An excellent way to make your essay a story is to talk about how you have striven over the years to develop the personal qualities that you want the admissions office to know about.
 - This also shows that you are modest, and that you have the motivation to improve yourself.
 - If your essay is just an advertisement of how awesome you are, that’s not going to fly very well. You’ll come off as arrogant.
 - Instead, if your essay shows that you are constantly trying to improve yourself and that you’ve come far but you’re looking forward to growing yourself further as a person... that reflects *much* better on you and your personality!
- Chronological order is usually the best way to organize your story. It’s inherently logical and, if you’ve developed yourself into a better person over the months/years, it makes sense to talk about how you’ve improved over time in these various qualities, using a few anecdotes along the way.

Making Your Language Come to Life

As a law student, I've come to realize that effective expression of an idea is often far more important than the idea itself. An idea, poorly expressed, raises the question, "so what?" because the reader doesn't understand *what* the concept is, or what they are supposed to think. By contrast, a well-expressed point will sink into the reader's mind and become engraved there (yes, this comes from my upcoming book entitled, "Inception: A Beginner's Guide on Planting the Idea in College Admissions Officers' Heads that They WANT to Accept You"). So how can you use language to make sure your ideas are expressed clearly and vigorously?

- "Show, don't tell." You've heard this one a million times, but it's worth mentioning again.
 - Not good: "After getting off the phone with the hospital director, I was really excited to start our volunteer work."
 - Good: "After getting off the phone with the hospital director, I hurried to my desk and excitedly marked the first day of our volunteer work on my calendar."
- Craft your wording to *highlight your achievements*, and don't downplay the importance of your role in the activities you describe.
 - Not impressive: "That year, I went to every single Speech and Debate meeting and voted on all the issues."
 - More impressive: "That year, I actively participated in Speech and Debate, helping the club move forward by offering helpful input at every meeting and becoming a part of every decision that the club made."
- Be sure to *infuse* your essay with powerful, meaningful adjectives and adverbs—but be sure to use only the ones you *know* how to use in context (meaning, you thoroughly understand the common usage of the word and you understand all of its connotations).
 - Many people say you should avoid a thesaurus like the plague. I respectfully disagree. A thesaurus is useful because it can your memory as to what other words you can use... just be sure to select a word from the thesaurus that you know how to use properly.

Various Traps to Avoid

1. AVOID ARROGANCE or anything that *might* be understood as arrogance!
 - a. Remember, it is a very, very tricky task to show the best qualities, without seeming arrogant. This is why it's so useful to talk about how although you've come far, you recognize that there's still a long way to go.
 - b. With the "*Where do you see yourself in 10 years?*" type of topic: DO NOT say that you imagine yourself as some billionaire graduate of that school, because it's tacky to (1) assume you'll be wildly successful, and (2) assume you will get into that particular school. This topic is always a tricky one. I suggest instead that you talk about you *pursuing something that you are passionate about, whether or not it might be related to your future career*. You should avoid talking about graduating from any particular school, because:

- i. For obvious reasons, you shouldn't "predict" that you'll have graduated from ANOTHER school, and
 - ii. If you "predict" that you'll have graduated from that particular school, it's lame and sounds arrogant.
2. Avoid grammatical or spelling errors, or any other technical errors. You can ask your English teacher if he or she is willing and able to review your essays for you. Whatever you do, make sure your essays have spotless grammar, spelling, and syntax.
3. REMEMBER TO REPLACE SCHOOL NAMES! I have a friend who was extremely bright and hardworking in high school. He had submitted the same application essay to many schools, but forgot to change the school name in the essay from "Notre Dame" to the appropriate school name. Not surprisingly, he was rejected from every school that got the essay, except Notre Dame. He did, however, apply to Stanford using different essays, and he had no trouble getting in and then rocking his way through college with excellent grades.
4. DON'T *generically* explain why you want to go to a particular school. If you are going to mention a school, make sure that you can make a specific reference to a program at that school that you would be a great fit for, or that you would love to join.
 - a. Related trap: Don't act as if the school to which you're applying is THE ONLY school where your heart would be content. Unless you have some serious reasoning to back up your infatuation with that particular school, it's going to look pretty suspicious.
5. Don't be too informal:
 - a. Avoid slang or non-standard words. (Example: "We thought the volunteer work was seriously the *bomb*.")
 - b. Avoid abbreviations, like "didn't," unless you're quoting someone who actually used the abbreviation in speaking.
6. Speaking of quotes... don't use generic quotes from Martin Luther King, or Mark Twain, or Albert Einstein. It's lame. The problem with quotes is that they are *someone else's words*. Who cares how skillful you are in using Google to find someone else's famous quote? Admissions officers want to know how well *you* can express your *own* thoughts!
7. This is the opposite of #5—don't be so formal that your writing sounds like something from the 1800s. The English language has moved past that. Gotta stay with the program, folks!
 - a. Here's a biggie: One must not use the word "one" as a subject or object. It's outdated, it's stiff-sounding, and it's just plain awful, coming from a high school senior in the 21st century. A common example is something like this: "Mr. Miyagi, our math teacher, taught us that one must not look at math problems as opponents, but rather as friends."
 - b. In general, avoid *straining* your use of the English language to sound like someone you're not. Because, as they say, a horse that tries to look like a cow... just ends up looking funny.

Final Nuggets of Wisdom

Remember who your audience is. The readers will be admissions officers who are trying to get an idea of the type of person you are. They already know what you *have* achieved, as evidenced by your scores and grades. What they want to know now is what you *will* achieve, and that's based very heavily on how you plan to continue developing yourself as a person, a scholar, and a professional. Make sure your essay is written to fit that goal.

Good luck, and happy essay writing!

>> If you have any questions or comments (nice ones only, please!) about this article or about college admissions essays in general, please email James Do at jdo@perfect2400.com.