

Writing tips: creating a successful personal statement or essay

Before you begin writing your personal statement or essay, ask yourself the following questions:

- Are there any specific questions I need to answer in this essay?
- What is special, unique, distinct or impressive about my life story?
- Have I had to overcome any unusual circumstances or hardships in my life?
- What personal characteristics do I possess that would help me succeed in higher education? Is there a way to demonstrate or explain these characteristics?
- What skills do I possess? (e.g., leadership, communicative, analytical)
- Are there any gaps or discrepancies in my academic record that I want to explain? (e.g., a high grade point average, but a low test score, or an obvious upward pattern in your grades?)

Reflect

Think about your experiences and choose an essay topic carefully. Try to tell the reader something that no one else can.

Be authentic

Be yourself, not who you think the “ideal” applicant is.

Strive for depth

Strive for depth rather than breadth. Narrow your focus to one or two main ideas or experiences.

Provide specifics

Provide the reader with insight into what drives you. Be personable and specific.

Be creative

Get creative in the opening remarks, and try to grab your reader’s attention from the beginning.

Evaluate

Evaluate your experiences throughout your essay rather than simply describing them.

Focus on the positive

Try not to be negative as you write about past experiences. Focus on the positive, highlighting how you've overcome adversity and persevered to get where you are today.

Do your research

Research the college before writing the essay. Address the school's unique offerings, and share why attending the particular college would interest and/or benefit you.

Proofread

Proofread your essay carefully. Look at grammar, sentence structure, punctuation, and word usage. Have your English teacher or a trusted advisor proof it as well. Make sure you give the reader plenty of time before the essay is due. Do not wait until the last minute.

Design

Use readable fonts, typeface and conventional spacing and margins.

Writing cautions

- ✓ Avoid repeating information found elsewhere on the application.
- ✓ Make sure you write the correct name of the school on your essay, especially if you are submitting multiple applications.
- ✓ Avoid using common clichés or conclusions such as:
 - “Allow me to introduce myself. My name is...”
 - “This question asks me to discuss...”
 - “In sum, there are three reasons why you should admit me...”
- ✓ Don't talk about money as a motivator for wanting to attend college.
- ✓ Avoid unconventional and gimmicky formats or packages.
- ✓ Make sure you answer the specific questions asked of you.
- ✓ Avoid going over the requested length or word count.
- ✓ Catch your mistakes — don't rely on your computer's spell checker.
- ✓ Resist the temptation to overuse your thesaurus. You don't need to use a big word in every sentence.
- ✓ Plan ahead. Don't wait until the last minute to write your essay. It may take longer than you think and is worth the investment of your time.