

College Essay FAQ



Essay

What are College Admissions Officers looking for in your essay?

- Who is this person? (a good story about YOU)
- Can this person write? (a story well told)
- Will this person contribute something of value to our campus? (your activities, leadership, service, involvement)

Why is the essay important?

Schools look at GPA, course rigor, and test scores (if needed and or submitted) more than anything. When you are being compared to other students with similar GPA/SAT scores, that is when the essay can make or break your chances.

What should I focus on?

Your admissions officers meet you for the first time the day they pick up your application. They meet you through your transcript and teacher recommendations and extracurricular resume, but mostly they meet you--the parts of you that don't revolve around a list of leadership positions or math grades. So write about you: what matters to you, how you spend your time, what makes you tick. Often the best essays come from common everyday moments that reveal your character and humanity. Be honest and genuine and paint a vivid picture of you.

How do I write to reveal more about myself?

A cardinal rule of good writing is: Show, don't tell. Don't tell colleges how important something is—show them what you've done through extracurricular activities, community involvement or overcoming obstacles and challenges. Describe and show evidence of behaviors that indicate initiative, determination, drive, enthusiasm and attitude. Let readers imagine you doing and succeeding. Share times you did something you're proud of. Let that behavior illuminate who you are.

How long should my essay be?

It depends! Your Common App essay can be up to 650 words, while the essays for the University of California schools are around 350 words and supplemental essays for colleges will vary. In 250 to 650 words you can only write about one thing. It is much more powerful to tell one important story than to try to pack your whole life into 650 words (that's not what colleges are looking for). And, keep in mind, it is better to go over the count and have to make edits than it is to write a shorter essay. Admissions officers will wonder why you only used 300 words when you had the ability to tell your story in 650.

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TIPS:

- Start writing your essays in the summer before your senior year. This way, you won't be slammed with school work and essays or leave too little time to craft a winning essay.
- Use Grammarly to flag potential issues in the text and make context-specific suggestions to help with grammar, spelling and usage, wordiness, style, punctuation, and tone (it's FREE, go to [grammarly.com](https://www.grammarly.com))
- Once you've written your college essay, set it aside, then re-read it with fresh eyes. Get at least one person to proofread it.