



## The Importance of the College Essay

Most college essays essentially ask, “Who are you?” (i.e. how have different experiences, people etc. shaped you into who you are today?)

This may seem like a broad question but in most cases you need to use **specific instances** to reveal one aspect of yourself.

Look at your college essays as an opportunity to reveal your best qualities and to show an admissions committee what makes you stand out from other applicants.

Each college ranks the importance of the essay differently but a majority of schools mark it as “important” or “very important.” In addition, schools are increasingly not using standardized tests to evaluate applicants, placing more emphasis on the essay portion of applications.

Essay plays a crucial role in helping admissions in cases such as choosing between similarly qualified applicants or deciding on a marginal, borderline applicant.

The admissions essay is a different form of writing from anything you’re used to, so if you want to produce the best possible essay you need to study this form of writing (if you were writing mystery novel you’d study/read other successful mystery novels first...)

We’ll walk you through how to write your best possible essay by using simple steps that include analyzing some of the best college admissions essays. This crucial step in the process will allow you to absorb what makes a college essay successful.

## Choosing a topic

Though the essay is about a topic you know intimately (you), you still need to do some “research” since you probably haven’t spent much time contemplating who you are and what makes you unique.

Doing some exercises to learn about yourself should help you respond to most essay prompts since the core of each essay is asking who you are and how that has shaped you/influenced you in some way.

The biggest mistake applicants make is thinking they have to write about some grand experience that admissions has never heard about. The truth is that the best essays are about simple, mundane, everyday incidents that approach this moment in a unique way to reveal who the applicant is and how they think.

Here are some ideas for finding inspiration (for more ideas, see Acceptional’s blog post [here](#)):

- Try setting your phone alarm for a few times during the day (for a week) and when it rings write about a small incident you recently experienced and what that says about you; these incidents can be something you do habitually that you never thought twice about, but now your job is to think twice to see what that says about you (e.g. your morning exercise routine, daily trip to a store, random conversation you had etc.)

- After doing this you can think back and recall incidents from your entire life...be careful about trying to only remember extraordinary, once-in-a-lifetime experiences; also think back to the mundane.

- Be sure to include both “good” and “bad” events and incidents.

- Going through this exercise should give you a list of focused incidents/moments that reveal something about you.

- Look through the stories/experiences and try listing some personality traits that jump out at you...remember in most essays you’re trying to show one focused, specific aspect of yourself so each trait is a potential essay focus.

- Now you have personality traits and specific stories/experiences as evidence to back up the trait

-Other exercises that will help you brainstorm:

- Record your dreams
- Excerpt from journal/diary
- Best/worst thing anyone has ever told you about yourself
- Best/worst thing that has happened to you over the past two years.
- Most unusual character trait

-Overused ideas; clichés are the #1 essay killer, and you must avoid them (for more information on avoiding clichés, see Acceptional's blog post [here](#))

-Your main idea could be that a certain event helped you grow but you don't want to state this too directly (instead of saying it helped you grow you want to imply this with vivid description of an event/story)

-Overused ideas: pets, world peace, discrimination, drugs, trip to remote village, sports game clichés like "there's no I in team" (if you pick these topics just make sure you're using a specific incident and relating something about yourself that isn't cliché)

-Don't write about something already covered in another area of your application

-Instead of the overused ideas, try to think of a seemingly ordinary event that turned into a life-shaping incident

-To summarize...

-You can't write about everything that's happened in your life so focus on giving the admissions committee a small peek into a distinctive way that you think.

-Colleges are essentially looking for unique and interesting observations that you make about an everyday experience that also reveal character.

-There are no proven stories that will make the best essay, so focus on how a certain story conveys your main point rather than trying to choose the most unique story anyone has ever heard.

-You need to look at your life, select one small element, moment, experience, or insight, and then give this meaning.

-Essays on common topics such as your family, football team, trip to France, or parents' divorce can be effective as long as they're focused and specific (e.g. a single Christmas eve church service, a meal in a foreign city, dipping ice cream on your summer job)

-Most college essays fail for one of two reasons: they are either too comprehensive (thus lacking focus) or too general (thus lacking specific supporting evidence).

***Step 1: Follow these steps and choose a topic.***

## **The Acceptional Method**

Now you're ready to use Acceptional to learn exactly how to write a successful essay before you embark on your first draft.

Read the essays in your account and be sure to pay attention to exactly why they were successful. This page has guidelines for how to do so. [Click here](#)

After studying and taking notes on several essays two things will happen:

- 1) You will absorb patterns of style and structure
- 2) You'll feel confident as you write your first draft and you will naturally and almost subconsciously think about components that make an essay successful

It's important to learn about how to write an essay through actual successful writing. Typically students are just given essay tips and are then on their own – this outline is meant to provide those tips as well as show you how to reinforce and employ those tips in your writing.

Now you're just about ready to start writing. You may want to pause briefly after each sentence or few sentences and say aloud “does this fit with the thesis?” and “is this clichéd?” and “does this get across who I am?” in order to make sure you're keeping all the main lessons in mind. However, at this stage you don't have to pause for grammatical reflection like “is this concise enough?” Focus first on getting your idea across and making **each** sentence have purpose.

**Step 2: Learn from successful example admissions essays on [Acceptional.com](http://Acceptional.com)**

## **Outlining**

Pick a trait you want to get across about yourself from the list we made earlier during the brainstorming process, and then pick an experience or experiences you want to use to convey this trait (note: even for essays that ask about why you want to go to a specific school the process is the same except you want to connect your trait/story to the school usually in the conclusion)

**Step 3: Organize your thoughts into an outline.**

## **Drafting**

Intro: typically start with a general statement in the topic area or a captivating line followed by more specific sentences that build up to a thesis

- You can use an enigmatic, mysterious statement that makes the reader wonder
- You can use an obscure quotation, thoughtful question, trivial observation, paradox, confession etc.
- For more information see Acceptional's blog post about writing the introduction

Body: start with another topic-related sentence, followed by vivid supporting evidence, and then a clincher that can summarize a main thought and serve as a relevant transition to the next paragraph

- Don't present a great idea without specific supporting evidence, but also don't fill it with tons of supporting evidence without a clear focus and thesis.

Conclusion: can be used to connect to the prompt specifically if you've told a story or if the prompt asks about why this school etc.

- Use short, forceful sentences
- Don't use words like "finally," "in sum," "in conclusion"
- Don't repeat or sum up in any way
- Don't end with a quotation

\*This above advice is a general guideline and may not apply for certain essays (for example, if you tell a story and then make connections at the end rather than revealing your thesis in the introduction).

The pre-writing process should apply to most essay prompts but let's break down the most common prompts and show you what goes into each, so you can organize your outline more efficiently:

### 1) The “you” question

- Use brainstorming techniques to arrive at a personality trait with supporting evidence (remember to prove your point with **vivid** description)
- You can choose from three ways to approach this question
  - Standard essay with each body paragraph serving as evidence of the point you make in the introduction about yourself
  - The “single incident” essay that uses one specific experience to make your point
  - Short narrative/story that ends with the focus/connection to you rather than starting with the focus

### 2) “Why this college” question...you can either:

- Use the body paragraphs to present specific points about the school that interest you along with supporting evidence
- Same as #1 but use conclusion to connect the essay to the school

### 3) The “show us something creative” question

- For these harder prompts where you want to be creative there aren't many rules so recognize this is higher risk, higher reward since there is more chance to end up unorganized
- Remember to choose a representative trait or self-defining quality and simply write creatively
- For more information, see Acceptional's blog post [here](#).

### **Step 4: Write a first draft.**

## **Editing**

After you write your first draft you can now go over the essay multiple times to improve organization, grammar etc.

It is important to keep these editing tips in back of your mind as you write your first draft as well.

Do the first read-through and make sure your focus was specific and you

provided **vivid** evidence backing up your main idea in an organized, logical way.

Make sure you're ultimately focusing on you without spending too much time focused on a story about someone else (if the story is about someone else it should still be saying something about you most of the time).

Make sure you answered the prompt question **fully**, connecting your story to each part of the prompt question.

Make sure this couldn't become somebody else's essay just by changing a few things around; it should be personal and written in your own, unique voice.

Once you fix organization issues read the essay again keeping these things in mind:

- Ensure a natural, easy-to-read quality; keep the language simple, direct, and clear; use the fewest and simplest words possible

- Strike a balance between a personal and formal tone (like a phone conversation with friend)

- Avoid clichés

- Use active voice over passive voice (i.e. write "I baked a cookie" rather than "A cookie was baked by me")

- Avoid empty words and phrases (e.g. really, special, unique, interesting, meaningful)

- Avoid vague and predictable conclusions: "I learned a lot"; "I learned to work with others"; "I interacted with those different from me"; "I benefitted from the love of my family"

- Don't explicitly say things like "I am unique"; imply this with your style

- You don't necessarily have to write in all complete sentences that include a subject and predicate if it flows better

- After editing your essay and re-writing many times, you can again use Acceptational as a benchmark to see how you measure up to our essays

-Compare your essay with other similar successful essays and analyze why yours did a better/worse job at engaging the reader and implementing all the points above

**-Remember: samples don't allow for less work or give you a shortcut, but they will give you a better final product if you follow our advice!**