



Personal Statement Essays

“WRITING,” SAID E. B. WHITE, “IS AN ACT OF FAITH, NOT A TRICK OF GRAMMAR.” IT’S NOT ANY KIND OF TRICK, IN FACT. AT ITS BEST, IT’S JUST YOU.

WRITE YOUR OWN ESSAYS!

COLLEGE ADMISSIONS OFFICERS CAN SPOT ESSAYS FROM THE INTERNET – DON’T BE TEMPTED TO TAKE A SHORTCUT.

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

Why do colleges require essays or personal statements?

Colleges require essays because they feel it is their best way to get to know you. In the application, you have already supplied all the data, and the essay completes the picture of you as a candidate. Colleges also use personal statement essays to examine your writing and thinking skills.

Do all colleges require essays?

Most private colleges that accept the Common Application or the Coalition Application, as well as many public universities, require essays.

What are the requirements of a Personal Statement Essay?

Most essays require 250-650 words. It is best to compose your Personal Statement Essay in an outside document application so that you can use spell check and have it ready to paste into applications. You can use the WORD COUNT option in the TOOLS menu in Microsoft Word or Google Docs to count your words. Be sure to not go over the word count – your essay may be cut off if you exceed the maximum number of words.

How do I know what to write?

Applications will give you prompts that ask you to write about experiences you have had and how they affected you, books or people who have influenced your thinking, achievements, issues that are important to you, or why you are applying and what you will bring to that college. Some are short answers and some require a full essay.

What is the difference between “an essay” and “a personal statement?”

They are essentially the same thing. Colleges often use both words.

How many essays or personal statements do I have to write?

It varies. The Common Application, the Coalition Application, and many colleges require one personal statement essay, but other colleges require as many as three or four, and some schools ask for additional responses to several short-answer questions.

**THINK ABOUT
WHAT YOU
WANT TO
COMMUNICATE
TO THE
ADMISSIONS
OFFICE BEFORE
WRITING.**

**THIS IS YOUR
KEY MESSAGE
STATEMENT.**

**DON'T FORGET
ABOUT THOSE
NON-COGNITIVE
SKILLS THAT
COLLEGES SEEK!
CONSIDER
ATTRIBUTES
SUCH AS GRIT,
RESOURCEFULNESS,
AND
PERSISTENCE.**

Write your Personal Statement Essays in six steps

1. Get started

- Break the task into smaller parts: starting date, completion date, and working dates in between when you will write. Mark these dates on your calendar.
- Decide what you want the college admissions office to know about you that isn't spelled out in your application. Take some time to consider this. You may have to spend a bit of time on identity development.
 - Do your activities, classes and accomplishments point to a special interest, passion, trait, or commitment that you want to further develop?
 - Who are you? What is important to you?
 - Does your application raise any questions that you need to answer?

2. Develop a Key Message Statement

Try this exercise: When the admissions representative is finished reading your essay, what is the one thing you want the reader to learn about you? "Wow, this student sure is _____!" Be sure you can confidently answer this question prior to beginning your rough draft. This is your **Key Message Statement**.

3. Brainstorm!

Now, how do you get your message across without just spitting it out? Put yourself in the reader's chair for a moment. Most admissions officers read hundreds of personal statement essays over a period of two to three months. This may get a bit tedious, so consider something unique or unusual.

- Do an outline first if it helps you with your writing.
- If the prompt requires a "dinner-time conversation" type response, feel free to entertain, educate, or persuade as you develop your message. Consider telling a story that only you can tell — perhaps a story that screams perseverance or one that hints at innovation and creativity.
- Use descriptive words, powerful verbs, and lots of details to paint a picture that makes the reader feel like she is right there with you.
- Remember: you want the reader to get to know you — not your favorite French teacher, your father who sacrificed to bring you to this country, or your favorite author. The reader may, however, want to know how one of these people has inspired you, but remember that the focus is on you.

Realize that your college essay is not an English assignment. The best college personal statement essay draws the reader into the essay and allows the story to unfold naturally.

- Consider beginning your essay with a statement or question that causes the reader to think, "Hmm, I wonder what this student is going to talk about?" and ending with, "Oh, I get it!"
- You might want to start your response in the middle of your story for a more intriguing, eye-catching beginning: "Clutching my guide rope and flailing for a toe-hold, I thought longingly of the hot chocolate that awaited me at base camp."

**DON'T JUST
ANSWER THE
QUESTIONS;
COMPLETE THE
APPLICATION.
HIGHLIGHT WHAT
MAKES YOU
EXTRAORDINARY!**

**THREE OR FOUR
ROUGH DRAFTS
IS THE NORM
FOR A GOOD
ESSAY!**

- You'll want to be specific. Sometimes our small daily rituals tell more about us than the big awards we win. Some students choose to humbly tell a story about a failure and what they learned from it. As long as it holds a powerful message about you, the story will accomplish your goal.

4. Examine the prompts

- Each college may have a different approach to the personal statement. Some will ask you to treat the essay like an interview - factual, concise, and to the point. Others are looking for an essay that's more like a dinner-time conversation — allowing for a bit of creative writing.
- Make sure that whatever the style of the prompt, your answer still reflects your **Key Message Statement**.

5. Write your first draft

- The first sentence or introduction to your essay is often considered the most important. It is the first impression. Strategize how to launch your writing in order to really grab the reader's attention. Be sure to use your voice, explaining any slang or technical jargon.
- Remember not to make things up or fall prey to exaggeration. Be real — this is your chance for the admissions office to get to know you.
- Don't worry about spelling and grammar in your first draft — just get your ideas down on paper.

6. Refine your essay

- Spend extra time developing a strong beginning paragraph and conclusion.
- Keep the length of your essay to stated limits. Under the limit is fine.
- Vary the length of your sentences; don't begin every sentence with the word "I."
- Use transition words, statements or sentences to make sure the ideas are connected in a logical flow.
- Write in the active not the passive voice ("I did," not "it was done to me").
- Use descriptive words and avoid slang or profanities.

Before submitting any responses, check off all items below to make sure you have completed everything.

- ☐ Re-read the essay prompts. Are you sure you answered the prompt?
- ☐ Re-read and explicitly follow each college's requirements for the topic, format, word or character limits, etc.
- ☐ Proofread one more time for spelling and grammar.
- ☐ Use a standard readable font and font size such as Times New Roman 12.
- ☐ Print out and keep a copy of each final draft.
- ☐ When applying online, it is best to complete your work without any special characters in a note pad like document then cut and paste it in the space provided or upload the document if the application allows it.

Are there other ways to share my story, talents or interests with colleges?

There is a movement toward innovative options for students to share their story with admission officers. Many schools now offer the option to supplement your personal statement essay with an uploaded image, video, or document file - these files could reflect music, artwork, graded high school papers, robotics schema, and more.

- Many of the colleges that are members of the new **Coalition for Access and Affordability and Success (CAAS)** application allow students to better distinguish themselves through uploaded files in the Locker Section of the website.
- **The Common Application** partners with **SlideRoom** to provide an easy platform to upload appropriate media to the application.
- **Digital portfolios** are no longer just for artists. Students may be required or offered the opportunity to showcase their work in an online portfolio such as **SlideShare.net**.

Early in your high school years, you can begin thinking about how you want to highlight your unique interests and accomplishments.

Supplemental Essays

Students should also be aware that many colleges may require additional essays beyond the standard personal statement or question. These supplemental essays can be college-specific, major-specific, or an opportunity to elaborate further on a topic. One caveat: if you write a response to a specific college, be very careful to not “cut and paste” to another school’s application. If there’s one thing college admissions officers never want to see, it’s an essay about how much the student can’t wait to attend...another university!