

WRITING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

Are you in the University Transfer Program here at Alamance Community College and applying to colleges and universities in order to obtain a bachelor's degree? If so, you will soon be filling out college applications, which almost always include an essay section. Sometimes it is hard to think of what to write about. This workshop will help you to brainstorm ideas for your admissions essay as well as to write and revise it.

There are two reasons why colleges ask you to write an essay as part of your application:

1. To show the admissions committee who you are, in addition to what you've done.
2. To show the admissions committee you can write. (Sparknotes Editors)

Step 1: Brainstorming. First, get some ideas about what you can write about.

The application essay is the only place on the application where you can express your personality—who you are and why you would be a good fit for a college's sophomore class. Imagine that admission counselors are reading hundreds, if not thousands, of applications quickly. They want to be surprised, excited, drawn in because you are unique, interesting, innovative, committed, undaunted by failure, fascinating, or somehow different from the crowd. The college application essay can make your application stand out and be noticed. The essay is the only place to be creative, innovative, and interesting in the entire application.

List as many things you can think of that are creative, innovative, and/or interesting about you _____

List some things you own, that are in your room at home, that are probably unique to you, and that let your personality come through _____

With only an approximate 650 word limit you won't have space to reveal everything about yourself, but you will have an opportunity to highlight a slice of who you are. You want that slice to be interesting and engaging. (Sparknotes). College admission counselors want to know how well you write, but they also want to know about your "thought process, values, preferences and style" (McGinty 11). So what you write about is as important as how well you write it. It is the only opportunity you have to tell the application committee a little about yourself, your values, your enthusiasm, your creativity, and your writing ability. Assume that they have already looked at your grades, your recommendations, your resume, your application itself—they read the essay last.

What have you done that showed your creativity? _____

What have you done that showed your enthusiasm? _____

What have you done that showed your values? _____

What do you do that people find interesting or unusual? _____ -

Do you have a hobby that is a passion or that is unusual? _____

Do you have a favorite quote or saying that guides you? _____ (See Sample essay #1)

If you were a character in a novel or a play, who would you be? _____
(The novel has to be well-known)

Have you ever met any one person who has influenced your life radically? Who? _____

Have you experienced an event that changed your life forever? If so, what? _____

Sample Essay #1. Source: www.sparknotes.com/college/admissions

Allison Dencker

Stanford University, Class of 2006

As you reflect on life thus far, what has someone said, written, or expressed in some fashion that is especially meaningful to you. Why?

According to Mother Teresa, “If you judge someone, you have no time to love them.” I first saw this quote when it was posted on my sixth-grade classroom wall, and I hated it. Rather, I hated Mother Teresa’s intention, but I knew that the quote’s veracity was inarguable. I felt that it was better to judge people so as not to have to love them, because some people don’t deserve a chance. Judgments are shields, and mine was impenetrable.

Laura was my dad’s first girlfriend after my parents’ divorce. The first three years of our relationship were characterized solely by my hatred toward her, manifested in my hurting her, each moment hurting myself twice as much. From the moment I laid eyes on her, she was the object of my unabated hatred, not because of anything she had ever done, but because of everything she represented. I judged her to be a heartless, soulless, two-dimensional figure: she was a representation of my loneliness and pain. I left whenever she entered a room, I slammed car doors in her face. Over those three years, I took pride in the fact that I had not spoken a word to her or made eye contact with her. I treated Laura with such resentment and anger because my hate was my protection, my shield. I, accustomed to viewing her as the embodiment of my pain, was afraid to let go of the anger and hate, afraid to love the person who allowed me to hold onto my anger, afraid that if I gave her a chance, I might love her.

For those three years, Laura didn’t hate me; she understood me. She understood my anger and my confusion, and Laura put her faith in me, although she had every reason not to. To her, I was essentially a good person, just confused and scared; trying to do her best, but just not able to get a hold of herself. She saw me as I wished I could see myself.

None of this became clear to me overnight. Instead, over the next two years, the one-dimensional image of her in my mind began to take the shape of a person. As I let go of

my hatred, I gave her a chance. She became a woman who, like me, loves Ally McBeal and drinks a lot of coffee; who, unlike me, buys things advertised on infomercials.

Three weeks ago, I saw that same Mother Teresa quote again, but this time I smiled. Laura never gave up on me, and the chance she gave me to like her was a chance that changed my life. Because of this, I know the value of a chance, of having faith in a person, of seeing others as they wish they could see themselves. I'm glad I have a lot of time left, because I definitely have a lot of chances left to give, a lot of people left to love. (492 words)

You can think of the college application essay as having this topic: “In three to five paragraphs, tell us about something you’ve done or thought that will represent both your character and a larger sense of who you are and what you value” (McGinty 23).

What are some of the most important or interesting experiences of your life that have shaped who you are and what you value?

You are the expert on you. No one else can write the essay you write, because only you have all the information about yourself. You are a unique individual with a unique personality, and you don't need to read anything or do any research to write this essay. Also, you are writing to the selection committee of a college or university you selected, so they are probably looking for students just like you

One way to approach this is “You look into your life, select an aspect of yourself that you see as a strength, a personal characteristic like commitment or creativity or resilience, one that may not come through in the rest of your application’s facts, grades and numbers. Then you find the substantiating evidence—an event, experience or incident—that reveals this aspect. Events are the evidence. That fateful summer, that wonderful biology class, that job at the pizza place isn't the focus. Each one is valuable, however, as a lens into your thought process, your way of doing things, your choices and values” (McGinty 29). The essay is about you, not the event. It's about you as seen through the lens of the event.

What are your most important characteristics or traits? Think courage, commitment, intellectual curiosity, creativity, resilience, strength, caring for others, making a difference, etc.

According to McGinty, “Telling everything about yourself is not the idea. Select one thing about yourself and illuminate that. The light from one interesting point will reflect your personality. . .

“What you want to show is your intensity, enthusiasm, insight and understanding” (29). But DON’T repeat something that appears somewhere else in your application, like your ranking in tennis and the history of your ascent in the sport--that’s already on your resume.

As a college transfer student, it is also important to try to make the subject of your essay, if possible, about why you want to transfer to X school, and what you have achieved so far in relation to your chosen major. But a summary of what you have done in community college won’t do—you must have a narrative story, which focuses a flashlight on one thing that you have done or had happen to you that affected your plans for the future. While freshmen applying to college for the first time may write about almost anything, transfer students have a duty to show that they have profited from the years spent at community college, that they know what their goals are, and that they know that the schools they are applying for are good fits for their goals. If you do not think that this information is portrayed clearly enough in the rest of your application, think about making the topic of your admission essay touch on your major and career goals. You can do this while still showing off a character trait, a strength, your uniqueness, or your values.

What is the most interesting character or trait you’d like to get across to an admissions counselor that may not be apparent from your resume, test scores, and grades? _____

You can talk to your parents or friends and ask them what they consider to be your strengths and talents (30).

What would your parents say are your strengths and values? _____

What would your parents say makes you unique? _____

“Make a list of factors, abilities and characteristics that would recommend you for inclusion in any group” (31) In other words, what would a sorority, a fraternity, an honor society, or a community organization see in you that would make them include you in their group?

Consider a mundane topic. Sometimes it’s the simple things in life that make the best essays. It doesn’t have to be a life-changing event to be interesting and informative. The essay can be what you observe daily while taking the subway to school, or be a favorite phrase your parents or grandparents often say. It can be about how your neighborhood has affected who you are, or how working through a problem you had at work or in school helped you see yourself in a different light (see Sample Essay 2)

What are some of your everyday experiences that could reflect on who you are as a person?

Sample Essay #2. Source:

Leigh Rosen

University of Pennsylvania, Class of 2009

Describe a challenge you overcame.

The stiff black apron hung awkwardly on my hips as I casually tried to tie the strings around my waist. I had been at Gino's Restaurant for only ten minutes when Maurizio, the manager, grabbed my arm abruptly and said, "Follow me to the dungeon." Unsure of whether or not he was joking, I smiled eagerly at him, but his glare confirmed his intent. I wiped the smirk off my face and followed him through the kitchen, which was louder than Madison Square Garden during a Knicks/Pacers game. A tall woman with a thick Italian accent pushed me while barking, "Move it, kid, you're blocking traffic." I later learned she was a waitress, and waitresses did not associate with the low-level busboys. Maurizio brought me to a dangerously steep staircase that looked like it had been purposely drenched in oil to increase the chance of a fall. As he gracefully flew down each step, I clutched onto the rusty tile walls, strategically putting one foot first and then the other. Eventually, I entered the "dungeon" and was directed to a table to join two men who were vigorously folding napkins.

Pretending to know what had to be done, I took a pile of unfolded starched napkins and attempted to turn them into the Gino accordion. I slowly folded each corner, trying to leave exactly one inch on both sides, and ignored the giggles and whispers coming from across the table. When I finished my first napkin, I quickly grabbed another and tried again, hiding my pathetic initial attempt under my thigh. On my second try, I sighed with relief when I saw that what I had constructed slightly resembled an accordion shape. However, when I looked up, I saw that the other two men had each finished twenty perfect napkins. "Hurry up, little girl," they said in unison, "We have lots left." They pointed to a closet overflowing with white linens as I began to fold my third. The next couple of nights afforded me the opportunity to master such tasks as refilling toilet paper dispensers and filling breadbaskets. Just as I began to find solace in these more manageable jobs, I felt a forceful tap on my shoulder. A heavysset waiter who was sweating profusely barked, "I need one decaf cappuccino. Understand?"

"Um, okay," I stuttered, unable to get up enough courage to admit that I had never attempted to make a cappuccino. I glanced over at the intimidating espresso machine and started to pace back and forth. The waiter reappeared and with a look of irritation snapped, "If you didn't know how to do it, why didn't you say so? I don't have time for this!" Returning to the unnecessary re-cleaning of silverware, the only job I could comfortably perform, it dawned on me that my fear of showing ignorance had rendered me incompetent. I had mastered the art of avoidance and had learned nothing. I continued to clean vigorously, making sure to keep my eyes on the silverware so that no one would ask me to make another cappuccino.

Having barely made it through my first weekend at the restaurant, I was amazed at how relieved I felt to return to the familiarity of physics class. We were starting a new chapter on fiber optics. Moving through the material with greater ease than I had anticipated, we hit upon the topic of optical time domain reflectometers, and sweat began to form on my chest as I frantically flipped through my notebook. I marked my paper with an asterisk so that I would know to ask my teacher to explain this material when I met with him privately during my next free period. My teacher then said, “So, I’m sure you all understand OTDR, so let’s move on.” As all of my peers nodded in agreement, I suddenly realized that I was still not asking how to make cappuccino. I took a deep breath and the fear of not learning overcame my usual fear of looking foolish and I raised my hand. After my question had been answered, I felt like the Red Sox lifting the curse. I erased the star I had made on my notebook and confidently listened as we moved on to the next topic.

I’m not suggesting that raising my hand and asking a question in physics class was a life-changing moment. It did not suddenly rid me of my fear of showing ignorance, but it definitely marked a new willingness to ask questions. When I returned to Gino’s the next weekend, I continued to spend some time unnecessarily cleaning silverware, but after asking Maurizio how to use the espresso machine, I soon added making cappuccino to my list of life skills. (788 words)

Some schools have their own special topics, and many schools accept the Common Application. If you haven’t seen the new Common Application prompts, here’s what they look like:

- Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn? (See sample Essay 3)
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Usually you will have the option of choosing your topic.

SAMPLE ESSAY #3 The Unathletic Department (Source: <http://apply.jhu.edu/aply/essays>)

A blue seventh place athletic ribbon hangs from my mantel. Every day, as I walk into my living room, the award mockingly congratulates me as I smile. Ironically, the blue seventh place ribbon resembles the first place ribbon in color; so, if I just cover up the tip

of the seven, I may convince myself that I championed the fourth heat. But, I never dare to wipe away the memory of my seventh place swim; I need that daily reminder of my imperfection. I need that seventh place.

Two years ago, I joined the no-cut swim team. That winter, my coach unexpectedly assigned me to swim the 500 freestyle. After stressing for hours about swimming 20 laps in a competition, I mounted the blocks, took my mark, and swam. Around lap 14, I looked around at the other lanes and did not see anyone. “I must be winning!” I thought to myself. However, as I finally completed my race and lifted my arms up in victory to the eager applause of the fans, I looked up at the score board. I had finished my race in last place. In fact, I left the pool two minutes after the second-to-last competitor, who now stood with her friends, wearing all her clothes.

The blue for the first loser went to me.

However, as I walked back to my team, carrying the seventh place blue, listening to the splash of the new event’s swimmers, I could not help but smile. I could smile because despite my loss, life continued; the next event began. I realized that I could accept this failure, because I should not take everything in life so seriously. Why should I not laugh at the image of myself, raising my arms up in victory only to have finished last? I certainly did not challenge the school record, but that did not mean I could not enjoy the swim.

So, the blue seventh place ribbon sits there, on my mantel, for the world to see. I feel no shame in that. In fact, my memorable 20 laps mean more to me than an award because over time, the blue of the seventh place ribbon fades, and I become more colorful by embracing my imperfections and gaining resilience-but not athleticism. (386 words)

Step 2. Getting Started on the Writing Process

After you have your topic, freewrite about it—including as many concrete details, snippets of dialogue, and examples as you can. Write about twice the word limit—1300 words for the Common Application essay. Don’t worry about format, grammar, spelling, or paragraphs just yet. Make yourself sit in a chair and just write for 15 minutes, then take a break. Write so that someone can visualize what you are writing about. Concrete details are the key. Every essay has a claim (the characteristic about yourself that you want to get across) and the evidence (the details that show that characteristic in you). If you write 1000 words and find that any other student could change just a few words and turn that essay into an essay about him or her, then you are not being specific enough (McGinty 87). Observe and describe your environment in detail.

Then, think of paragraphing—an introductory paragraph, several body paragraphs, and a short concluding paragraph. The introductory paragraph doesn’t have to be the beginning of the story—starting “in the middle of things” or “in *medias res*” is a common and effective introduction and framing device. Then “flash back” to the events that led to your being in the position described in your introductory paragraph.

Write several middle paragraphs—not necessarily three!

Write a concluding paragraph. Think about referring back to your introduction to give a satisfying sense of conclusion. Notice that the 3 sample essays in this handout all refer back to the introduction in their concluding paragraph. Use up your word limit—don't let your essay be more than a few words short of the word limit.

Dig Deeper: While you are writing, try to state more than just the facts. This is the time to try and take your ideas further. If you think you don't have anything else to say, look at what you've jotted down and ask yourself: "So what?" Why is what you said important? What did it teach you? What does it mean? What are the broader implications?" (Sparknotes Editors).

Revise the introduction so that it points directly to your conclusion.

Step 3. Revising for Style. This topic is well covered in "Style in College Admission Essays," available at <http://collegeapps.about.com/od/essays/ss/College-Essay-Style-Tips.htm>.

Step 4. Revising for readability, grammar, punctuation, and mechanics. Let at least three other people, like a parent, an English teacher or other professor, and a Writing Center tutor, read your essay. Make sure that all words are spelled correctly, and that there are no mistakes in grammar, punctuation and mechanics. This is essential! Do not hit the "send" key until you have had at least three other people read over your essay.

Works Cited

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