

College Application Essay

Why it's important and how you can help

Many students feel overwhelmed by the task of writing a personal essay for college applications. But this essay is their opportunity to **reveal their best qualities and to show an admissions committee what makes them stand out** from other applicants.

How important is the essay?

The 2010 College Board's College Admission and Enrollment Statistics found that while grades, secondary school record and admission tests are the top factors in the college admission decision, a majority of colleges and universities **consider the essay to be important or very important** in determining which academically qualified students they would choose.

In other words, when all else is equal between competing applicants, a compelling essay can make the difference. A powerful, well-written essay can also tip the balance for a marginal applicant.

What are colleges looking for in an essay?

College admission officers look to the essay for evidence that a student can write well and support her ideas with logical arguments. They also want to know something about the personality of the student.

Sarah Myers McGinty, author of *The College Application Essay*, shares the following tip for both counselors and students: "If you get a chance, ask college representatives about the role of the essay at their colleges. At some colleges the essay is used to determine fit, and at others it may be used to assure the college that the student can do the work. At any rate, find out from the rep how essays are weighted and used in the admissions process."

What are the different types of essays?

There are typically three types of essay questions: the "**you**" question, the "**why us**" question, and the "**creative**" question. The following descriptions and tips are based on information found in McGinty's book.

The "you" question

This question boils down to "**Tell us about yourself.**" The school wants to know the student better and to see how she will introduce herself.

Example: "UVM values a diverse student body. What contributions might you make to our campus community outside of academic achievement?" (University of Vermont, 2005)

Plus: This type of direct question offers students a chance to reveal something about themselves other than grades and test scores.

Danger: The open-ended nature of these questions can lead to an essay that's all over the place.

Counselor tips

- Encourage students to focus on just a few things and avoid the urge to "spill everything" at once.
- Advise students not to simply write out their resume in paragraph form. It's better to develop one small event, person, place, or feeling with a lot of narrative and specifics.
- Explain to students that this is a "tell us a story" question. Students should tell a story that only they can tell.

The "why us" question

Some schools ask for an essay about a student's choice of a school or career. They're looking for information about the applicant's goals, and about how serious his or her commitment is to this particular school.

Example: "How did you become interested in American University?" (American University, 2007)

Plus: This type of question provides a focus for the essay; that is, why the student chose this particular school or path—and the answer to that will (hopefully) be clear to her.

Danger: Any factual errors in the essay will reveal that the student really hasn't thought deeply about her choice. For example, writing that she wants to attend Carleton College to major in agriculture would be a blunder. (Carleton doesn't have an agriculture major.)

An upside to this type of question is that, while working on the essay, the student might realize that she is not a match for the college—and it's better to know that sooner than later.

Counselor tips

- Advise students to make absolutely sure they know their subject well.
- Warn students not to go overboard with flattery. They should sound sincere but not ingratiating.

The "creative" question

The goals of the "creative" question are to evaluate a candidate's **ability to think and write creatively** and to assess the breadth of her knowledge and education.

Example: "Sharing intellectual interests is an important aspect of university life. Describe an experience or idea that you find intellectually exciting, and explain why." (Stanford University, 2007)

Plus: This kind of question gives students an opportunity to convey their personalities and views.

Danger: Some students may take the "creative" aspect of the question as license to be obscure, pretentious, or undisciplined in their writing.

Counselor tips

- Emphasize to students the importance of writing an informed essay. For example, they should not write about a fantasy meeting with a famous artist and get the titles of his paintings wrong.
- Advise students to use common sense ("creative" doesn't mean eccentric or self-indulgent).
- Warn students not to write about high-minded topics or exotic locales simply to impress the reader.

How much help is too much help?

According to the College Board's 2003 report *Admissions Decision-Making Models*, admissions officers have expressed concern about how much assistance students receive in preparing an essay. Many institutions now ask applicants to sign a statement avowing that the essay submitted is their own work.

What can you do to help your students within the guidelines of your job?

- Help your students overcome their nervousness and encourage them to start writing.
- Suggest that they seek essay advice from teachers who know them well.
- Make sure that your teacher colleagues understand the role of the essay in college applications.
- Look over the student's essay for signs that a parent "helped" too much.
- Give general feedback on a finished or nearly finished essay. You may point out areas that need revision, but you cannot rewrite or edit-the essay must be the student's work.

Your encouragement, ideas, and overall support will go a long way in helping your students write their essays.

This article is based, in part, on information found in *The College Application Essay*, by Sarah Myers McGinty.