

How To Write A College Essay

Step #1: Brainstorm.

Generate ideas and then narrow them by compiling the following lists of topics:

A general list of the best things that have ever happened to you.

A general list of the worst things that have ever happened to you.

A general list of important or influential people, those who have had a positive influence on you and others who have had a negative influence.

A general list of the most significant or influential events, choosing from both positive and negative experiences.

A narrow list of the top 5 people or events from all four of your other lists.

Step #2: Free-write, outline, or map.

Use the pre-writing strategies of a free-write, an outline, or a story map to flesh out the ideas on your narrow list of the top 5 people or events in your life so far. Focus on the strategy that works best for you and your writing style, or choose the strategy that works best to generate a story about the significance of the person or event. Feel free to use more one strategy.

- **Free-Write** about the 5 Ws (Who, What, When, Where, Why) about the person or event on the list of your top 5.
- **Outline** a series of anecdotes (about 3-5) that reveal the significance of the person or event.
- **Map** the beginning, middle, and end of a single story about the event or person.

Step #3: Narrate.

Once you have the the 5 Ws in your free-write, an outline of anecdotes, or a story map, you will be ready to write your college essay or personal statement in the form of a narrative. As you develop your free-write, map, or outline into a narrative essay, you should remember: This narrative essay should not chronicle a life story, but rather narrate a series of anecdotes or a single story about an event or an important person. The story or series of anecdotes about that individual or event must also reveal important qualities about you. However, you need to show—but not necessarily tell or state outright—the important qualities about who you are, what you value, and what you want from life, and why through the story or anecdote about the person or event. Essentially, you are narrating a series of anecdotes or telling a story about a person or an event, and so you must write creatively. Therefore, use as much figurative language and as many different rhetorical modes (especially narration, description, compare and contrast analysis, and classification, and even illustration, classification, and cause and effect analysis, but not too much explicit process analysis or persuasion) as possible.

Quick Tips: DOs and DON'Ts

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from the other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it, writing, rewriting, proofreading, and revising every step of the way.

DOs

Do Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal: Your essay must prove a single point or thesis about a universal truth or lesson learned from the experience. The reader must be able to find this main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Try having someone read just your introduction to see what he thinks your essay is about. Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—instead, it's about showing them who you are.

Prove It! Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"
- **Better:** "During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

Do be Specific: Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

- **Okay:** "I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."
- **Better:** "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

DON'Ts

Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear: Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

Don't Write a Resume: Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

- "During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."

Don't Use 50 Words When 5 Will Do: Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world."
- **Better:** "I'm a slob."

Don't Forget to Proofread: Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

- "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

A WORD TO THE WISE: RESEARCH!

Before you begin your college essay and personal statement, you should research the essay topics on the common application and the essay or personal statement requirements of colleges on your list of "safety" and "reach" schools. You may discover that you will need both college essays and a personal statement. Don't worry! In most cases, all you will need is to prepare two personal statements, an essay about an important event and an essay about the most influential person in your life, either of which can serve as excellent college essays for most applications. Having both essays to draw from will also make it easier for you to apply for scholarships and a less of a stretch for you to get accepted into "reach" schools.