Crafting an Unforgettable College Essay
(https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice/college-essay)

Tips for a Stellar College Application Essay

1. Write about something that's important to you.
   - It could be an experience, a person, a book—anything that has had an impact on your life.

2. Don't just recount—reflect!
   - Anyone can write about how they won the big game or the summer they spent in Rome. When recalling these events, you need to give more than the play-by-play or itinerary. Describe what you learned from the experience and how it changed you.

3. Being funny is tough.
   - A student who can make an admissions officer laugh never gets lost in the shuffle. But beware. What you think is funny and what an adult working in a college thinks is funny are probably different. We caution against one-liners, limericks and anything off-color.

4. Start early and write several drafts.
   - Set it aside for a few days and read it again. Put yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer: Is the essay interesting? Do the ideas flow logically? Does it reveal something about the applicant? Is it written in the applicant's own voice?

5. No repeats.
   - What you write in your application essay or personal statement should not contradict any other part of your application—nor should it repeat it. This isn't the place to list your awards or discuss your grades or test scores.

6. Answer the question being asked.
   - Don't reuse an answer to a similar question from another application.

7. Have at least one other person edit your essay.
   - A teacher or college counselor is your best resource. And before you send it off, check, check again, and then triple check to make sure your essay is free of spelling or grammar errors.
8 Brainstorming Strategies for Generating New Writing Ideas


1. Freewriting
Freewriting involves letting your thoughts flow freely on paper or your computer screen. Set aside a time frame like 15 minutes for writing or determine to write and fill a certain number of pages and get down to it. Write whatever comes to your mind. Don’t worry about typos, spelling or any other surface-level issues of grammar and style. Just write until your time is up or your page goal is attained.

When you are done, read through what you have written. You will no doubt find a lot of filler in your text, but there will also be golden nuggets of insights, discoveries and other little gems in there that you can pick out and develop for your projects. Even if you don’t discover any new idea nuggets, you will stir up your creative mind and unearth tit bits of raw concepts buried deep in your mind you can develop.

2. Looping
Looping takes freewriting a step further with the aim of zeroing in on raw ideas and insights buried deep in your subconscious mind. Move in loops between one free writing exercise of between five and 10 minutes and another until you have a sequence of several freewriting pieces. Make sure you adhere to the rules of freewriting in this exercise so that each result is more specific than the other.

Read through what you have produced in all the freewriting looping cycles and analyze all interesting sentences, ideas or phrases. You will likely discover a recurrent topic idea or theme you are unconsciously thinking about has taken precedence. You can develop this topic idea or theme and use it in your next writing project.

3. Listing
If you want to write about a specific topic or communicate a certain idea, jot down a list of single words and phrases that relate to the general topic you are thinking about off the top of your mind. For example, if you are thinking about producing a work of fiction, make separate lists of elements, characters or scenes you want to convey. If you are writing nonfiction, list facts, arguments, question or any other related ideas you want to cover.

Don’t outline or edit at this point. Let the activity be uninhibited. When you are finished listing, group the items on your lists in a logical manner and provide a label for each group. Write a sentence about each group and you will have several topic or theme sentences you can
develop. Build on the topic sentences and define associations of the groups to get broader topics or themes with possible points to write on.

4. Clustering
Clustering, also known as idea mapping, is a strategy used to explore relationships and associations between ideas. If you have run out of ideas on a subject or topic, write down the subject in the center of a page. Highlight the subject either by underlining or circling it. Think of an idea that relates to the subject and jot it down on your page. Link the idea to the central subject.

Think of another idea that relates to the new idea you just created. Link this new idea with the previous idea. Repeat the process until you have a web of ideas on the page that are all derived from the main subject. Now you can visually see ideas that relate to your main subject. Identify clusters of ideas that interest you and use the key terms you attached to them as the departure points for your writing project.

5. Nut-shelling
Nut-shelling entails discovering and laying out in a few sentences the gist of topic ideas in your head. It helps you distinguish major and minor ideas in your thoughts and identify how the ideas relate to each other. This way you are able to test how different ideas can affect what you want to write about.

Pretend you are being interviewed by someone and they want to know what you want to write about. Start your explanation with a phrase like “I want to write about...” or “I want to show....” Put down your answer concisely in writing. Make your answer no more than two or three sentences maximum to capture the essence of your topic and you will have just developed your topic statement or premise for what you are thinking about writing.

6. Cubing
Cubing is a critical thinking process that involves examining a writing project from six distinct angles to generate ideas for your stalled projects. Describe your project: What is it? What is it like or unlike? What makes up its constituents? How can it be used? Finally, what are its pros or cons or how can you oppose or support it? At the end of the exercise you should have an angle or outline on how to approach your writing topic or project.

7. Journalistic 5W’s and 1H
When researching a story and the angle to take when covering the story, journalists ask the 5W’s and 1H questions: Who? What? When? Where? Why? and How? Use the same technique
to generate topic ideas, possible angles to take on the topic and the most pertinent information to include when addressing the topic.

Write each of the question words on a sheet of paper and leave spaces to provide answers for the questions. Answer all the questions relating to your topic in brief and then review the answers. Do you have more to say about one or more of the questions, such as more on the "where" and "why" than the "what" or are your answers evenly balanced?

You will discover that you know more or little about particular question words relating to your topic. Leverage that awareness to generate new writing ideas. Research your topic further to improve on areas you are least knowledgeable in, build on areas you are most knowledgeable in or the best way to organize what you already know to balance your topic more.

8. Researching
Visit the library or go to a writing center near you and browse dictionaries, thesauruses, guide books and any other reference texts that you find. You will be surprised at how much background information, little-known facts and golden topic ideas relevant to your writing projects reference books can give.

Write down past or current events relating to your writing subject, historical or contemporary issues surrounding your topic and any other relevant information you gather in your library research for use in your projects. Also, browse online versions of the dictionaries and reference books to add to the ideas you have already collected.

If one of these strategies doesn’t work, move on and try another until something clicks. Oftentimes, it is a combination of these brainstorming strategies that yields the best results.
The essay is often the college application component where students experience the most stress, and the element where they’re more likely to make mistakes. College admissions essays are not rocket science, but there are a number of steps that students can take to put together the most accurate and compelling essays that will help their chances of gaining admission to their top-choice colleges.

According to the National Association for College Admission Counseling, application essays are the most important “soft” factors, or non-quantitative elements, that colleges consider when making admission decisions, right behind “hard” factors, or quantitative components, like grades, curriculum, and test scores. Essays are often more important than recommendations, extracurricular activities, and other qualitative application elements. While it’s important to put considerable effort into all college application components, essays are often the finishing touch and should be treated with great care and consideration.

Here are some college application essay dos and don’ts for students to keep in mind as they complete their applications this fall.

**DON’T use the essay to repeat your resume.**

This can’t be stressed enough. The essay is your opportunity to reveal something about yourself that can’t be found anywhere else in your application – use it! Many students use the essay to expound upon activities or interests that are already heavily demonstrated in their application.
through courses, the activity list, and more. Instead of reinforcing a top activity or interest, instead, write about something that reveals another dimension of your life or personality. If your top activity is swimming, don’t write about the big championship meet. Find something else that reveals something new and that shows you put a lot of thought into your essay. If your study of AP biology conflicts with your religious views, write about that and how you reconciled the two. Dig deep to find a topic that’s meaningful.

**DO show a slice of your life.**

When developing a topic that reveals something new, find a way to frame the story or idea that shows a slice of your life or the event. Be descriptive and give details that appeal to the senses – taste, touch, smell, etc. When writing about a meaningful experience or event, you don’t have to give a long timeline of events. Instead, give the reader the piece of the puzzle that conveys your message.

**DON’T copy and paste.**

With upwards of 25 or more essays to write for a balanced college list of 10-12 schools, it’s tempting for students to repurpose essays across applications if the prompts are similar. While students can use the same main essay on the Common App for multiple schools, we always recommend that students tailor their supplemental essays to the individual colleges. Telling Harvard why you want to attend Columbia is a quick way to end up in the “no” pile. Take the time to write original responses to all the prompts. It’s a lot of work, but it will pay off in the end.

**DO show your knowledge of the college.**

When tailoring responses to individual college prompts, it’s important to use specific details
you’ve learned through visiting and research. Not only does this show colleges that you’ve have done your homework, but it also demonstrates your interest in the college – and colleges want to admit students who are likely to enroll. Show your knowledge of the college by mentioning specific courses, professors, places of interest, and more. Show how you fit into the campus culture and how you will impact the community through specific examples.

**DON’T say what you think the admissions office wants to hear.**

So many students think that they “know” what colleges want from an applicant, and this can have a big influence over their essays. Students will abuse the thesaurus and write about strange topics in an effort to impress and stand out. Instead of writing what you think the admissions office wants to read, write about what you want them to know. Again, the essay is a great space to reveal something new about you, so stand out by being yourself and showing another side of you as a person or student.

**DO use your voice.**

Using lofty language and complex sentence structure can make you sound sophisticated, but is that really how you speak? Don’t let your voice get lost in the pursuit to impress readers. Instead, write like you speak – keeping in mind that proper grammar and spelling is still important.

**DON’T rely on spellcheck.**

Spellcheck won’t catch every spelling or grammatical error! Take the time to read over all your essays carefully and keep an eye out for things like “out” when you meant to say “our” and other common typos. Have a parent or counselor read over the essay, too, to catch any errors.
you might have missed. Spelling and grammar errors can take away from an otherwise stellar essay – so be mindful.

**DO double check that you’ve addressed the prompt.**

This is one of the most common mistakes that students make. In the pursuit to write the perfect essay, many forget to connect it to the original prompt. While the Common Application prompts for the main essay are general enough to allow students to write about whatever they choose, it still needs to be clear how that essay addresses the prompt. The same applies to school-specific essays. Check and double check that a clear connection is made between the topic or lesson of your essay, and the question the prompt is asking.

**DON’T wait until the last minute.**

If you’re applying to 10 colleges and wait until two weeks before applications are due, you’re going to have a lot of writing to complete in a very short amount of time. Waiting until the last minute leads to stress and rushed essays that don’t accurately convey students’ messages. Give yourself plenty of time to brainstorm, draft, revise, and get feedback on your essays.

**DO seek feedback from your counselor.**

Your college counselors are there to help, but they can’t if you don’t ask or wait until the last minute to seek guidance and feedback. Make a plan to meet with your college counselor and go over your college list and essays, and ask for feedback on your writing. Your college counselor can provide valuable insight into how to improve your college application essays, so be sure to seek feedback on your drafts as soon as possible. School-based counselors have a lot of students to advise and are very busy, so seek guidance early and often.
Essays are an important component in the college application process. While the essay alone won’t gain you admission to your top-choice college, a poorly written one can send you to the “no” pile pretty quickly. Take your time with your college application essays and seek guidance when you need it!

If you need additional help with your college application essays, IvyWise offers a number of services designed to help high school seniors with their college applications. Contact us today for more information on our programs for seniors.