

SAT / ACT Prep Online Guides and Tips

The 13 Best College Essay Tips to Craft a Stellar Application



Posted by [Ellen McCammon](#) | Nov 19, 2016 8:00:00 AM [COLLEGE ESSAYS](#)



In many ways, the most labor-intensive part of your college application process is the essay. It's not just about forwarding transcripts or entering a list of extracurricular activities—you have to craft something personal and compelling to show the admissions committee who you are beyond your resume.

In this article, we'll go over our 13 best tips for writing college essays. We'll give tips for every step of the process including planning, writing, and editing your essay, as well as some quick and easy tips to boost any essays you already have written! With these college essay tips, you'll be that much closer to the best admissions essay ever!

5 Tips for College Essay Planning

Doing a good job planning makes the college essay process that much easier. These five college essay tips will help you get started and pave the way for a great final product.

#1: Make a Plan of Attack for Your Essays

The first thing you'll need to do is **identify all the essays you'll need to write and their deadlines**. It may help you to make a spreadsheet with the essay guidelines for each school, the word count, the prompts, the due date, and any special instructions. This will help you figure out:

- **How many essays you'll need to write**, and how long those essays need to be.
- **Whether you can reuse any essays:** In general, you can reuse essays for prompts that are about your life, broadly similar in theme, and have a similar word count. You probably can't reuse essays that are very specific to the college, like "Why This College" essays.
- **Which essay you should write first:** You'll probably want to start first on the essay with the earliest application deadline. Alternatively, if you have plenty of time or the deadlines are close together, you could start with the longest essay (which will take the most time) or the essay that will be used for the most schools (like a Common Application essay). Do what you feel most comfortable with.

With all this information gathered, you'll be able to make a plan of attack for your essays and make sure nothing gets lost in the application shuffle. (In fact, I actually advise keeping track of all necessary components of your application in a spreadsheet for the same reason).

#2: Start Early

You want to **start writing way before the deadline**. If possible, give yourself at least two months, and maybe even more time if you can. This will make sure that you have enough time to adequately plan your essay, draft it, and edit it.

And, of course, the more essays you have to write, the earlier you should start!



Don't worry, you don't need to start this early.

#3: Choose the Right Topic

Choosing the right topic has two facets: first, choosing the right prompt (if there's a choice) and second, choosing the right topic to write about for that prompt.

The Right Prompt

If there's a choice of prompts, you may want to actually start by brainstorming the specific topic or thing in your life that you want to write about, and then **reverse-engineer back to the most appropriate prompt**. Most college essay prompts are pretty vague, so a broad range of topics and issues can be applied.

You can also **use prompts to help you brainstorm** if you're having a hard time figuring out what to write about. Think about the prompt that seems most appealing to you at first. What intrigues you about it? What do you think you could communicate about yourself through that question?

The Right Topic

When you're trying to choose something about your life to write about, consider the following:

- What are you **excited to write about**? A good college essay can be about a wide variety of topics, but it should show that you're passionate about something. This could be anything from a hobby you have to your favorite book or even your most beloved stuffed animal, just so long as you can make it memorable and positive. Also, your writing will be a lot better if you are writing about something you care about and are interested in!

- Whatever you write about should be **primarily about you**. You should be the focal point. Even if you're writing about someone who has influenced you, for example, you need to relate it back to yourself. What does this tell admission officers about you?
- **What makes you stand out?** This should be something that goes beyond what's in the rest of your application. Your test scores and GPA are already there. What really shows something unique about you?
- **Choose a topic you can be honest about.** If you're not being genuine, it will end up coming through in your writing. So don't write about how much your membership in Youth Group meant to you if you only went to make your mom happy and you actually didn't care that much.
- In general, you should **avoid topics that are overly controversial**, like things that are politically charged, doing things that are illegal, or anything involving graphic descriptions of any bodily function. So if you're going to write about recovering from hip surgery, probably leave out the gory details of you being constipated and your oozy scars.

If you're really stumped, consider asking your friends and family what they think could be good topics. They may help you figure out something memorable and interesting. **But also, don't feel like you have to write about a topic just because someone else thinks it would be great.** You need to be genuinely interested in what you're writing about to write an engaging essay!

#4: Decide on Your Approach

In general, there are two main approaches you might take to write your essay. It might primarily take a **narrative format**, or it might take a **thematic format**.

In a narrative format, you'll be **relating a particular anecdote or experience** and what it means to you. In a thematic format, you'll present a particular theme—say, your love of parakeets or your secret talent for balancing books on your head—and **expound on that theme in a descriptive way** to reveal more about you and your personality.

Sometimes your approach will be determined by the prompt or topic that you choose. For example, if a prompt says to relate a particular event or anecdote, you'll probably use a narrative approach. By contrast, if you want to write about how your favorite book changed your life, that will probably be a thematic essay.

#5: Write an Outline

Doing a little bit of outlining before you put fingertips to keyboard to write your essay is always a good idea. You don't necessarily need to make a super-detailed plan before you starting writing, but a **general idea of where you are going and the points you want to make** will be very helpful when you start drafting. Otherwise, you may find yourself spending a lot of time staring at a blank Word document.

4 Top College Essay Writing Tips

Here are four tips for writing college essays and making sure your work **stands out in a good way**:

#6: Use Specific Details

The more details you use, the more your writing will come alive. Try to **use words that are vivid and specific**, instead of ones that are vague like “nice,” “good,” and so on. This will really flesh out the scene and help the reader picture what’s going on.

So take something like this:

One of my biggest accomplishments in life was teaching my little brother to ride a bicycle. I encouraged him to keep going when he fell down. Now he’s a great cyclist!

To something more like this:

One of my biggest accomplishments in life was teaching my eight-year-old brother to ride the racy red bicycle he got for his birthday. He wanted to give up when he took a tumble and skidded across the sidewalk. But while I bandaged up his knees with Batman band-aids, I convinced him to give it another try. I told him to think about how he would be able to bike all around the neighborhood exploring. Now I smile whenever I see him zooming down our street—wearing his helmet, of course!

See the difference? Wouldn’t you rather read the second one?

#7: Be Genuine

It’s important to **get beyond the superficial in your personal statement**. You should be writing about something that’s genuinely important or significant to you, so try to get beyond the surface. Instead of writing vague platitudes about how you really like the violin but it’s hard, really get at the meat: did you ever think about quitting? What’s frustrated you the most? What really keeps you going?

This means **you shouldn’t try to write about things where it’s too painful to be honest**. So if your parents got a divorce last year, it may be too raw to write about, which is perfectly fine. If, however, they got divorced when you were 5 and you can honestly reflect on how it changed your life, go for it.

Of course, you want to be honest in a **reasonable and appropriate way**. If you overshare, it will make it seem like you have bad judgment or don’t understand social norms—not good impressions to give the admissions committee. So probably don’t write about how much you despise your mother and think she is evil since she had an affair with your school librarian. It’s fine to feel how you feel, but there are some things that are a little too charged to write in your college essay.

#8: Be Unique, but Not Bizarre

You definitely want your writing to set you apart—but you want it to set you apart in a good way. This means you want high-quality writing about unique experiences and qualities you bring to the table that aren’t covered elsewhere in your application.

This does not mean you should get really avant-garde with your essay formatting. Don’t send in a piece of art instead of an essay, or make a video, or write a poem instead of an essay, unless those things are explicitly allowed.

Similarly, while your essay doesn’t have to be 100% deadly serious in tone, you should **be careful with humor**. This doesn’t mean absolutely no jokes or tongue-in-cheek moments or that your essay should read like an 18th-century book of sermons. But if your essay relies too much on humor, you’ve got a lot riding on whether or not the person reading your essay “gets” it. They may well be annoyed. So deploy humor carefully and selectively.

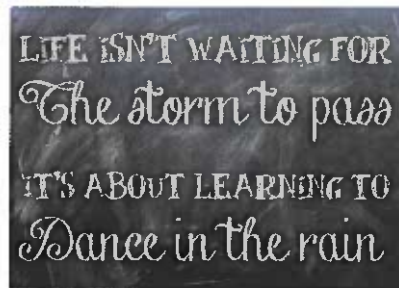
#9: Avoid Cliches and Platitudes

The more cliches you use in your writing, the more boring and less insightful your essay will be. Cliches are **phrases that are so overused that they are essentially meaningless**, and they are likely to make any reader roll their eyes. Phrases like “a dime a dozen,” “outside the box,” “cold as ice,” “dirt cheap,” “flash in the pan,” and so on are frequently deployed in conversation because they convey a common idea quickly. But you don’t want your essay to be common, so avoid cliches. **Try to think about how you can communicate the same idea in a more specific and interesting way.**

You should also avoid platitudes or sweeping generalizations about life. These are statements that are so broad and far-reaching as to be both obvious and completely un insightful.

So avoid making statements like “And that’s how I learned that hard work pays off,” or “There’s no ‘I’ in team.” You may think you sound sage or wise, but the truth is, **platitudes** are going to sound **immature and poorly-formed to the reader**. Similarly, don’t say things that sound like they could come from an inspirational quote account on Instagram. (See, ahem, “You miss 100% of the shots you never take,” “Shoot for the moon,” and so on.)

How do you avoid the platitude problem? **Try to keep what you’re saying specific to you.** So instead of saying “And that’s how I learned that hard work pays off,” try, “This experience helped me to realize that when I put concentrated effort into something that’s important to me, I can accomplish it even when there are roadblocks.” Keep the focus on what you can and will do in your own life.



Avoid saying anything like this at all costs.

2 Tips for Editing Your College Essay

You may think that once you’ve gotten a draft done that you’re good to go. Not so! **Editing is one of the most important parts of writing the best college essay possible**, and here are two essential college essay tips for editing.

Tip #10: Ask for Help

It’s always wise to get another set of eyes on your college essays. In fact, several sets of eyes is even better! **Other people can help you** make sure your essay flows, you have enough detail, that everything is relevant, and that you sound as engaging and interesting as you really are! They can also help you catch typos and other minor errors—although you’ll want to double and triple-check for that yourself before submitting.

Tip #11: Be Prepared to Cut a Lot

Brace yourself for cutting up your initial draft into tiny little ribbons and rearranging the remaining pieces Frankenstein-style. **A first draft is really just a starting place to get your ideas down before you revamp the entire thing** into a more streamlined, better organized, highly polished version. So you have to be ready to let go of pieces of your essay, no matter how much you love a particular turn of phrase or analogy. The ultimate goal is to turn the rough stone of your first draft into a polished and clear piece of writing—and that's going to take a lot of chipping and sanding!



Your finished essay is like this duck: many pieces arranged into an amazing whole.

2 Final Tips for College Essay Success

Here are two **quick but essential college essay tips** you can implement easily.

Tip #12: Have a Standout First Sentence

One thing you can do to give any essay a boost is to make sure that **your first sentence is attention-grabbing**. If you can pique the interest of the admissions counselor right away, you'll help keep their attention throughout your essay.

Tip #13: Triple-check for Typos and Errors

The most important quick thing you can do for your essay is to **make sure there are no typos or grammatical errors**. It will make your essay look sloppy and unfinished, and that's the last thing you want! College admissions officers expect a **polished product**, and there's nothing less polished than misspelled words and comma splices.



Looking all polished up and mighty fine.

13 College Essay Tips: Key Takeaways for a Great College Essay

To recap, here's our 13 tips for the best college essay ever:

College Essay Planning Tips:

- Create a plan of attack for all of your essays so you can keep track of everything.
- Start early—at least two months before the due date, if not more.
- Choose the right prompt and topic for you.
- Decide between a narrative or a thematic approach to the topic.
- Outline before you start writing!

College Essay Writing Tips:

- Use vivid, specific details.
- Be genuine—get beyond the superficial.
- Be unique, but not bizarre.
- Avoid cliches and platitudes; they are boring and unimaginative.

College Essay Editing Tips:

- Get other people to look at your essay.
- Be prepared to change, cut, and rearrange a lot!

Final Tips for College Essays:

- Make sure your first sentence is stellar.
- Triple check for typos and grammatical errors!



Imagine the essay you could write about the time you painted Mr. Lurker's claws.