

Welcome to the Purdue OWL



This page is brought to you by the OWL at Purdue (<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>). When printing this page, you must include the entire legal notice at bottom.

Contributors: Douglas Christiansen, Vanderbilt University; Stacy Kostell, University of Illinois; Courtney McAnuff, Rutgers University; James Nondorf, University of Chicago; Kasey Urquidez, The University of Arizona; Jarrid James Whitney, California Institute of Techn.

Summary:

This resource contains advice on writing the college admissions essay from undergraduate admissions officers from colleges and universities all over the United States.

Advice from Undergraduate Admissions Officers

From Dr. Douglas Christiansen, Vice Provost for Enrollment and Dean of Admissions at Vanderbilt University:

The essay is the one opportunity each student has to give a college or university insight into his or her innermost thoughts, aspirations, dreams, and personal realities. It is to the student's advantage to use this opportunity to let admissions officers see beyond the test scores and grades. Students can explain why there may have been a lapse in grades or other important life events that have changed their high-school careers. More important than the experience is what the student reveals about how the experience has changed his/her life, how (s)he has grown and made different choices as a result of the experience, and how (s)he has improved his or her corner of the world as a result. Through the essay, regardless of the topic, it is possible to enlighten the reader regarding choices that have led to personal growth, involvement, and success or failure as a result. Through the essay, the admissions officers should be able to see more clearly the intangible characteristics of the applicant: honesty, integrity, commitment, ethical choices, perseverance, empathy, and leadership. When the number of applications is in the thousands, and the admit rate is only 10 – 15% of those applications, explaining why one student is different than all the rest is key – the essay is the opportunity to do just that!

From Stacey Kostell, Assistant Provost and Director of Undergraduate Admissions at the University of Illinois:

When writing your application essays, it is vital that you answer the question asked and address any specific criteria noted. I've read thousands of essays and have realized that there are the five factors shared by all successful applicants.

Be prepared. Slow down and fully consider the questions and your answers. You should then

create an outline, write a first draft, and edit multiple times.

Be personal. Provide specific examples of your experiences and goals. Generalizations do not help the admissions committee get a sense of who you are and why you'll make the most of your time at the university.

Be direct. Choose your words wisely in order to clearly state your message. Many universities have a word limit on responses, which means there is no room for fluff.

Be focused. There is no need to repeat your transcript. Instead, share how your qualifications will be a benefit to you at the university.

Be professional. Submit the best possible essays, free of spelling and grammatical errors. You should proofread and edit them yourself; however, request critiques from counselors, teachers, and your parents. It's always helpful to have feedback from readers.

From Courtney McAnuff, Vice President of Enrollment at Rutgers University:

This is the one time it really is all about you; colleges want to know what makes you unique. The essay is a critical component for our holistic review. Express yourself honestly. Review the essay question, and jot down your immediate responses. Don't Google the question to see what others have written for their essays. If you can't resist, at least write your outline first, and stay true to yourself in the final version. The requested essay topics reflect each college's interests in shaping their incoming class. Writing on the requested essay topic should interest you. Be sure you answer the specific topic; don't just tweak a generic essay. If the topic doesn't engage you, think about why that college is one of your choices. Do submit the essay exactly how the school requested it. The care you take in following directions can be seen by the school as an indicator of what type of student you are now. Try to do everything at least two weeks before the deadline to cover every computer crash/power outage/school closing possibility.

From James Nondorf, Vice President and Dean of Admissions and Financial Aid at the University of Chicago:

For many colleges and universities, the essays are a crucial element of the application process. They provide you with a chance to let admissions officers get to know you beyond just your transcripts and test scores. The most important part of any college admissions essay, then, is to write something you believe truly represents your unique voice—something that, beyond demonstrating your competencies as a writer, also displays your ability to be a creative and critical thinker and to make unique contributions to an academic community. First and foremost, it's important to respond directly to the prompt given (admissions officers can tell when you're fudging and trying to write your way into a different essay topic), but beyond that, creativity is key. Don't settle for the first idea that comes to mind or the first draft you put to paper. Keep revising until you feel you have an essay that reflects your original perspective. And, really, you should try to have fun with your essays—exercise your sense of humor, write about something you're passionate about, and write in a way you find inspiring. The more you enjoy writing your essay, the more we'll enjoy reading it.

From Kasey Urquidez, Dean of Undergraduate Admissions at The University of Arizona:

Your statement gives you the opportunity to show the college or university to which you are

applying a chance to learn more about you. While your academic preparation is very important, your statement will help you shine.

Taking time to write your best statement before submitting is important. Here are a few tips as you write your statement:

- Be yourself.
- Focus on one topic and making an impression. What will be remembered?
- Use appropriate, yet colorful, vivid language to express yourself.
- Be descriptive.
- Share new information. Reiterating what you already included in your application is not very helpful.
- Provide a strong opening and closing. You will want your reader to want to know more from your opening and remember you from your closing.
- Know your audience. Admissions representatives from diverse backgrounds of all ages will read your statement.
- Read the instructions carefully and pay attention to word limits.
- Write a rough draft.
- Do not rely on spell check.
- Read your statement aloud to help you “hear” what it will sound like to others.
- Select a few people you trust to proof read your work.
- Submit once you're completely satisfied!

From Jarrid James Whitney, Executive Director of Admissions and Financial Aid at California Institute of Technology:

When applying to colleges, I often remind students that their responses to the essay prompts are, in essence, like a personal interview with the admissions committee. That is, they should open up about what’s important to them and cover topics that are meaningful, and specifically address important items that may not come up in the rest of the application or even stress other parts of the application.

The essays are really a reflection of who an applicant is, and thus the student’s voice is critical. Often times students get others to help them craft their responses, which is fine, but I also remind students not to lose the essence of who they are. The story still has to be their own.

It is also very important that the student make sure they tie the essay back to themselves. Students tend to get caught up in a great story about another person, place, or thing, and forget they need to bring it back to why that person, place or thing is important to them. Also, remember that the short answer responses are just as significant to an admissions committee as the long personal statements.

Finally, students need to take time in preparing their responses. Most essays will probably go through many drafts, which is expected, since writing is truly an art. Ultimately, colleges are looking for the right fit so hopefully those essays can help to confirm if the college, and the student, are a match.

