

How do you write a college application essay? Tips from College Board

1. Just get going.

Staring down a blank page can be the hardest part of writing an essay. So try this exercise to overcome writer's block: Take 30 minutes to jot down a few quick lists of proudest accomplishments, worst embarrassments, life-changing moments, strongest memories, favorite people, or any other categories that appeal to you. Don't overthink your lists. (And don't worry if, like most people, your best ideas come after that initial 30 minutes are up.) Repeat the exercise once a day for as many days as you need. Soon you'll discover yourself with one—or more—possible essay topics.

2. Give yourself an early start.

Few people write well under pressure, so give yourself at least a few weeks before the submission deadline. You don't have to work on your essay every single day, but you do have to give yourself enough time to revise, to edit, and then to show your first draft to a friend for feedback. The sooner that first draft is underway, the better off you'll be.

3. Avoid a theme that everyone else is using.

Your essay will be easier to write—and more exciting to read—if it's based on genuine emotion and authentic experience. Don't try to guess what you think an admissions office wants to read. So if all your friends are writing application essays about the topic of the day, that may be a good reason to stay away from it. Unless, of course, you have a unique angle that you are burning to share.

4. Sound like your best self.

Admissions counselors say that the best essays help them learn something about the student that they would never know from reading the rest of the application. For example: This essay may be the ideal opportunity to draw attention to an achievement, a hobby, or a life experience that's barely mentioned on your application.

5. Write confidently, but not arrogantly.

Keep a confident tone even if—especially if—you're not feeling that way. Be on the lookout for words and phrases like "maybe," "sort of," "I think" that might undercut that tone. At the same time, though, make sure to follow application guidelines about format and length. If the essay has a suggested 650-word maximum, your application will stand out—not in a good way—if you turn in 250 words.

6. Proofread, proofread, then proofread again.

As you progress toward your final draft, run the essay through the spell check on your computer and double-check your word count. Then do not read it for a few days. When you read your essay again with a cold eye, you'll be more likely to spot typos and awkward phrasing. After that, ask a teacher, parent, or college student to give it a quick read.

7. Put yourself in the place of an admissions counselor.

If you were someone who had to read dozens of college essays every day, would you enjoy reading this one? Does it have a promising beginning? Is it easy to follow? Written without distracting typos? Does it have a logical conclusion? Does it make you want to know more about the writer? If you think so, chances are that an admission counselor will too.

Common App Essay Prompts

The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

This prompt is from William & Mary

Beyond your impressive academic credentials and extracurricular accomplishments, what else makes you unique and colorful? We know nobody fits neatly into 650 words or less, but you can provide us with some suggestions of the type of person you are. Anything goes! Inspire us, impress us, or just make us laugh. Think of this optional opportunity as show and tell by proxy and with an attitude.

These supplementary prompts are from several Virginia colleges.

1. Share how you contribute to a community that is important to you. How long have you been involved? What have you learned and how would you like to share that with others at college?
2. Resilience is defined as the ability to adapt and learn from a difficulty. Reflect on a time that you have exhibited resilience. What growth did you see in yourself after this experience?
3. Share a time when you were most proud of yourself either as a role model or when you displayed your leadership. What specific skills did you contribute to the experience? How did others rely on you for guidance? What did you learn about yourself during this time?
4. Describe a goal that you have set and the steps you will take to achieve it. What made you set this goal for yourself? What is your timeline to achieve this goal? Who do you seek encouragement or guidance from as you work on this goal?
5. If you could create a college course that all students would take, what would it be about and why?