

Woolf College Consulting



THE WRITE STUFF

Essay Writing Essentials

What is it about the college essay that strikes fear into so many hearts? The difficulty in imagining that a high school senior, with such limited life experiences, can actually have something to say? The fear that a teen's future rests on the strength of 500 to 650 well-written and poignant words?

Well, yes -- and no. Although the essay is an essential part of the college application for many schools, it's not the single factor on which a college acceptance rests. A great essay alone will not overcome a lackluster high school GPA or an attempt to skulk through high school taking the easiest classes offered.

So why spend so much time crafting an essay? Because it's the one chance for a student's personality and character to shine through. It's the one way to differentiate yourself from other students.

And what about the topic? The student doesn't have to write about how he saved the world or did some grandiose event. What's important is to make sure the student isn't just repeating the list of activities that's already in the application. Application readers can tell when a student has done several drafts; the essay just flows better.

If you check out the website for Connecticut College in New London, CT., you'll find college essays from admitted students. They demonstrate individuality, personal insight, good writing, and often, an interesting twist on a typical teenage experience, like going to a

history museum, miracles both on and off the baseball field, even revealing one's sexuality.

So what kind of essay questions will students have to answer? On the Common Application, they fall into one of the following seven categories:

- *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.
- *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?
- *Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- * Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma — anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
- *Discuss an accomplishment, event or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- *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?
- *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.

On the Coalition Application, some of the categories may seem familiar:

- * Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
- * Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.

- * Has there been a time you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
- *What is the hardest part of being a teenager now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?
- *Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

Colleges may also ask supplemental questions on their applications, such as:

- * Why have you selected this college?

This is a very important question for the colleges, because they want to know if you understand their missions, academics and environment. *The answer to this question requires research; mining the college's Internet site is a great place to do it.*

- * What would you bring to the diversity of the college campus?

Diversity doesn't only mean black, white or Hispanic, or whether a student lives in Katonah or Kentucky. It can just as easily be the Westchester student who is an online NASCAR racing fan or the business student who spent a summer doing science research.

When it's time to submit the essay, you should do two things before hitting that *Submit* button:

1. **Ask someone to read it** – a parent or teacher, for example - to check for spelling and grammar. A college admissions representative once told me about a student who submitted a well-written essay except for one thing: he referred to an activity as “peasant-hunting” when what he was talking about was “pheasant-hunting.” And there's also the story about the applicant who talked about "shudders" when she really meant the "shutters" on a house.

2. **Make sure the right essay is sent to the right school.** Colleges know that students use the same essay for multiple applications, but always make sure the essay has the right college or university name

on it. Otherwise it looks like the student is either sloppy or just doesn't care.

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