



Tips for Writing Your Main College Application Essay

Whether you're using the Common Application or the Coalition Application, the prompts for the personal statement (as the main essay is called) are merely suggestions. Both applications indicate that you may also write on another topic of your own choice, and you should be able to use the same essay for both applications although you will sometimes need to produce versions of different lengths. Below are some keys to writing an effective essay.

First of all, understand what admissions officers are looking for: a bit of insight into who you are as a person. You want to come across as someone they'd enjoy interacting with and whose presence in their community will benefit your teachers and classmates. To that end, you don't want to sound conceited, but you do want to sound mature, thoughtful and interested in learning and growing from your experiences. Your topic need not be anything extraordinary. It's your thought process and self-awareness that's important and your explanation of why you do what you do that's revealing.

"Show, don't tell" is a mantra to keep in mind. Admissions officers are looking for insight into what kinds of things you think and care about, and/or how you interact with others, and/or how you respond to challenges. To be convincing and interesting, recount an experience (or two or three at most) in such a way that your readers fully understand your thoughts and feelings while in the midst of the experience and perhaps also looking back on it afterward. Trust that if you do this, your character traits will be evident.

A colleague recently said she has three words or phrases she tells students to avoid: "passion," "comfort zone," and "pivot" because all three have been so overused of late. By all means, feel free to write about your passion for an activity or about a time you took on a new challenge; but use details rather than these abstract words to convey your message in a fresh way.

Alas, there are a few topics admissions officers read about too often and so advise against. One is the sports essay in which students describe a time they pushed themselves harder than they'd thought possible, achieved something they'd never thought they could, and now know that if they try hard enough, there's nothing they

can't do. If you learned something else from an experience with a sport, fine, but please don't make that implausible statement your takeaway.

Also, many students write successfully about community service activities that exposed them to people they never would have met otherwise or challenged their thinking in some way. Just don't make the takeaway that seeing how much less fortunate others are has made you more appreciative of what you yourself have. It may be true, but it's not a particularly deep takeaway, it makes you sound a little too sheltered, and it's been said too many times before.

You can begin by brainstorming about experiences that have impacted you, and you can also think about what you want the reader to know about your personal characteristics that may not be evident elsewhere in the application. Then try writing a bit on all the possible topics without worrying initially about the structure (how you'll begin and end). See what you're enjoying writing about the most. There's a good chance that readers will find most engaging whatever it is that you most enjoy writing.