

College Admissions Essays



FOLLOW THIS “RECIPE” FOR A SUCCESSFUL ESSAY PLAN, DESCRIBE, REVIEW, REVISE

Nearly every college expects at least one personal essay as part of the admissions process. Writing an admissions essay can be a challenge. But this “recipe” will help with simple steps.

FIRST... WHAT DO COLLEGES WANT?

Colleges use three general types of questions. Let’s explore each one.

QUESTION TYPE 1. WHO ARE YOU?

Colleges may ask you to tell a story from your life or to write about something that demonstrates your character. They may ask you to describe your family’s history or your dreams for the future.

The key to answer this type of question is to focus on a few examples that describe you well. Don’t try to tell everything about yourself. Instead, pick one or two examples and then write your essay on just those points. Don’t exaggerate. But do show off your interests and personality.

QUESTION TYPE 2. WHY US?

Colleges may want to know why you have chosen to apply or why you are interested in a certain career or a major. The college wants to know how committed you are to their school.

To answer, start with your goals. What do you dream of doing? Why do you have this dream? Then tie your goals to the college and the major. HINT: Do your homework! Don’t write an essay about your interest in marine biology for a college that does not offer marine biology!

QUESTION TYPE 3. HOW DO YOU THINK?

Colleges often ask your opinion about a famous person or something in the news. Colleges want to find out how aware you are and to see how creatively and originally you can respond.

To answer this type of question, start with a little research. If you are writing about a global challenge, what do experts say about it? If you are describing a famous novelist, what books did he write? Once you know the facts, though, let your own opinions shine through. Don’t just quote other people. Instead, share your ideas and your opinions.

RECIPE FOR A SUCCESSFUL ADMISSIONS ESSAY, *continued*

SECOND... HOW CAN YOU START AN ESSAY?

Now that you know more about what colleges might ask, let's start a draft essay with three steps.

STEP 1: PLAN YOUR APPROACH BY THINKING ABOUT YOURSELF

What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your best qualities?

Are you a hard worker? A fast learner? Are you curious? Determined? Passionate? Athletic?

Make a list of words that a friend or family member might use to describe you. Which of those words seem to describe the "real" you? Circle those words. They'll help you get started.

STEP 2: DESCRIBE YOURSELF BY TELLING A STORY

Look at the words you circled. Do they describe you or could they describe many people? For instance, if you say you are athletic, what exactly does that mean? How can you describe yourself more specifically, and how can you highlight your positive qualities in that description?

Take a few minutes to add details to your list of words. Maybe you're not just "athletic," but rather a "dedicated athlete, who has overcome injury." Maybe you're not just "determined," but rather the "determined founder of Students for the Environment."

Think of as many examples as you can. Don't just list things you've done, but rather list the qualities that led you to do these things. A college will already know from your application if you are a varsity athlete or the president of a student group. What they won't know is what it is about you that made you that way. So think about how you can tell a story about yourself.

STEP 3: REVIEW AND REVISE

Take what you've written so far and organize it. Then, using this outline, write as fast as you can for 15 or 20 minutes. Don't worry about mistakes or paragraphs or organization. Just focus on telling your story. If your success as an athlete in high school is due to the training you did to recover from an injury, write about that – about what happened, and what you did. If you decided to start a student group to solve a challenge in your community or at your school, write about the moment that challenge first seemed like something you could solve, and write about what you did. Set your work aside for a day or two. Then reread and revise.

YOU'VE GOT A DRAFT!

After a few more days, look at your essay again. It may still need more work. But it is a good start. With a little more work, you will be able to submit this essay.

This handout is based on information found on www.collegeboard.org.