

Messy Essays?

Tips & Tricks to Perfect the College Essay

10 General Tips:

- 1. Do not write what you think the admissions officers want to read.**
Admissions officers read hundreds of essays about winning the big game, that service trip that changed your life, and the experience that turned you around, made you a leader, and helped you think in a new way. They don't want the same old essays – they want to learn about YOU.
- 2. Write about yourself, and keep it small.** Do not try to sum up your life story in 650 words. Pick one story – one moment – and show the admissions officers the way you think. Show them how you will add to the college through how your mind works – let them see what an investment you are!
- 3. If you are not passionate about it, do not write it.** Admissions officers can tell when you're bored. If you're bored writing about yourself, the officers are probably bored reading about you. **STAND OUT.** They want to read the essays that you want to write, because those are the ones that enable them to get to know you better.
- 4. Show, Don't Tell.** Show the Admissions officers what interests/excites/saddens you by the way you write instead of by saying "This interests/excites/saddens me". Let them see how the things that affect you actually affect you – show them, don't tell them. Also, don't draw attention to things they already know. Don't write, "I am applying because..." because they already know that.
- 5. Details, Details, Details.** Your goal should be for the admissions officers to lose themselves in your essay. When they finish reading, they should be disoriented from entering your "mind" and experiencing what you experienced. Do this by including details about everything, details that will show them some of the unique qualities of your mind and character. Show them what you think, feel, smell and remember, and pay attention to the level of personalization you include. Write down how your experience differs from anyone's experience.

6. **Be intentional in your word choice.** Avoid descriptions that are clichéd or vague. Be specific, and create images with your words. Do not rely too heavily upon the thesaurus to make you sound “smarter”.
7. **Do NOT try to write the 5-paragraph essays you write for high school classes.** You have limited space, and the admissions officers have limited time to spend on your individual application. Take the admissions officers on a journey with you, instead of sticking to a rigid structure.
8. **Remember why you’re writing this essay.** This essay is not supposed to recap all of the talents, extracurricular activities, and academic achievements on your application. They already know all of that! This is your chance to show your personality and who you are – you are a unique individual who will add perspectives, interests, and values to the campus community.
9. **Do not turn in anything without having at least 2 different people edit it.** Period. Spell-check will not catch everything, and friends/family may not be able to edit your paper without bias. Make sure other people can understand your essay and that it is grammatically correct. Ensure your essay is focused on the prompt, and triple check to be sure you’re answering the full question.
10. **Read your essay out loud.** Although it sounds weird, reading your essay out loud helps you to hear things you might miss on the page. By reading aloud, you can check to see if your writing matches the way you speak – you speak in complex sentences with a certain vocabulary, so write that way! Don’t try to replace every word with a different word from the thesaurus.

Grammar Tips:

- ☞ Use active voice; your sentences will sound less cluttered and more direct. “The student sent the application” is better than “the application was sent by the student”
- ☞ If you start a sentence in the present tense, you should end it in present tense.
- ☞ Don’t use a word unless you know what it means and can use it correctly.
- ☞ Avoid using the words rather, quite, somewhat, probably, possibly, etc. Your writing will sound more confident without them.
- ☞ Know the difference between affect/effect, your/you’re, to/too/two, then/than, its/it’s, and there/their/they’re.
 - Affect = action ; Effect = a result
 - Your = possession. ; You’re = you are
 - To = location ; Too = also/amount ; Two = 2
 - Then = a time or order ; Than = a comparison
 - Its = possession ; It’s = it is
 - There = a place ; Their = possession ; They’re = they are
- ☞ Coulda/shoulda/woulda are NOT WORDS. “Could of” is also wrong. Could’ve is short for “could have”.
 - Use those contractions sparingly (I’m, can’t, it’s, don’t, etc.)
 - Instead, break them down into two words.
- ☞ “A lot” is always two words. Cannot is always one word.
- ☞ Do not overuse apostrophes or commas.
 - Use a comma before FANBOYS if the sections before and after are complete sentences that could stand alone without that word.
- ☞ Do NOT use a comma if both sections could not stand alone as two complete sentences
- ☞ Use a comma after the introductory phrase when you begin a sentence with words like when, as, since, if, although, so, because, until and for.

Sample Essay

Review the essay below which follows the following prompt: Attach a small photograph of something important to you and explain its significance.

Keep in mind while reading - What are the strengths of the essay? Weaknesses? Flow? Structure? Word Choice?

I gasped when I found it, awestruck by the magnitude of my discovery. Ever so gently, I scooped it up and rushed back to my house, awkwardly lurching as I tried to hold my arms as still as possible while half-running, half-tripping through the woods at the back of my yard. I laid it down on a blanket in my room and gaped at my newest find: a dinosaur egg. Of course, it wasn't really a dinosaur egg, or an egg of any kind, but my five-year-old mind managed to transform a large, passably oval rock into the greatest paleontological discovery of the millennium. My seven-year-old brother had read me a fair few picture books on dinosaurs, his particular obsession, so I knew exactly what to do. I scooped my blankets into a massive, fluffy nest, placed my egg delicately in the center, and then squatted down on top of the pile, determined to sit there until I hatched my very first dinosaur.



I sat on that rock for weeks. Whenever I needed to take breaks to sleep, eat, or play with other toys that were starting to look neglected, I would pile a mountain of stuffed animals and dolls on top of the nest to keep my dinosaur egg from getting cold. Something special was going to happen. I could feel it.

Long story short, my dinosaur never hatched. But I still have this rock. Somehow, through 9 different moves from Georgia to Alabama to Virginia to North Carolina to Missouri, through all the weeding and throwing away and yard sales, through learning to ride a bike without training wheels to signing the title on my first car, I never could throw this rock away. And I think this is significant. I have grown older. I have matured. I long ago stopped donning my ripped purple tights and oversized green t-shirt to play Peter Pan and quit buckling my Cabbage Patch doll into the child seat of the grocery store cart. I have developed opinions about feminism, musical theatre, the Oxford comma, American politics, and Impressionism. I have learned to think broadly and analyze specifically. I can speak intelligently about T.S. Eliot, Nabokov, and Swift (either Jonathan or Taylor; I have opinions about both). I no longer believe that this rock is anything more than just that – a rock.

But it still sits on my bookshelf overlooking my current state of life, one of the few remnants of my days of whimsical play. Maybe I keep it for the nostalgia, to remind myself that I used to play make-believe in fanciful lands where anything was possible. But I think the real reason I cannot throw it out is bigger than that. I think that keeping that dinosaur egg shows that even with all of the changes I have experienced both internally and externally, that imagination – that spark – is still there. My mind is a force of creation, and it once held the power to make worlds and creatures come alive, to speak the language of roly-polies and ladybugs, to erase extinction, to breathe life into solid stone. Every once in a while, I'll touch my dinosaur egg as I walk by and quietly smile my secret: I've never given up hope that the impossible could happen, and I like knowing that if I hold that rock up to my ear and listen carefully, I can almost hear a heart beating.