



THE DOS AND DON'TS OF WRITING A COLLEGE ESSAY

College admission officers read thousands of essays from prospective students. This list of “Dos and Don’ts” will help your essay stand out.

START EARLY. The Common Application typically drops prompts in January, so you can start brainstorming by the end of junior year and during the summer before the application is due.

ANSWER THE QUESTION THAT IS ASKED. You have a limited number of words to answer one question. Don’t sway off topic.

CHOOSE A TOPIC YOU’RE PASSIONATE ABOUT. Be original. Some of the best essays are about mundane topics presented in an interesting and meaningful way.

AVOID BROAD GENERALIZATIONS OR CLICHÉ TOPICS. Narrow the experience or topic down. A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself if you could insert your friend’s name into the essay. If so, it needs more personalization and focus.

APPEAL TO A BROAD AUDIENCE. Admission counselors come from diverse backgrounds with varying points of view. Make sure your topic appeals to a variety of perspectives.

TALK IN YOUR VOICE. Express your point of view so the reader understands who you are. Being genuine will create a stronger essay versus writing what you think someone will want to hear.

AVOID INAPPROPRIATE OR CONTROVERSIAL TOPICS. Stay away from personal criticisms, divisive issues or controversial topics such as religion and politics. If the reader is offended by your point of view, it is not going to benefit you.

KEEP THE READER ENGAGED. Your English teacher was right about the importance of a strong story hook. Be creative to grab the reader’s attention in the first sentence. Make the reader want to meet you!

DON’T PLAGIARIZE. If the essay is not your voice, the reader will know. Admission counselors can tell when the voice changes and have tools that help identify plagiarized segments of sentences.

USE THE CORRECT NAME OF THE COLLEGE. If you are writing an essay that mentions the name of a school, make sure it is correct. When students reuse an essay for multiple institutions, a common mistake is forgetting to change the school name!

PROOFREAD. Use correct spelling and grammar. Spell-check doesn’t catch everything, so enlist friends, family members or teachers to proofread.