

College Essay Assignment English 4

Many of you will be asked to write a personal essay this year either for admission to a college/university or for consideration for a scholarship. Typically, these assignments force you to focus on **yourself, your values and beliefs**, the **experiences and people who have influenced you**, and **your personal and professional goals**. Others who have other goals outside of college need to self-reflect in order to evaluate or assist in choosing and creating life plans. Your assignment is to begin the process of thinking about what you will write for your postgraduate plans. In addition to providing me with an initial sample of your writing ability, you should also be able to use some or all of what you do for this assignment for your college and/or scholarship applications as well as for any post graduate vocation/military/etc.

College Bound Students: If you have not already done so, you are to go online to the school(s) to which you expect to apply and print the required essay topics. If your school does not have essay requirements or you do not plan to attend college, choose from the topics included in this packet.

What is the purpose of the college essay?

As an admissions officer, you realize that you can't accept every student who applies. Since the goal is to select students who will be able to both benefit from and contribute to the educational experience at the school, the admissions officer looks for indications that the student is mentally prepared, interested in learning, and has ideas and energy to help him or her meet the challenges of college. The admissions officer looks for essays that seem genuine and that provide a real sense of who the student is. And since it may be difficult to choose among many qualified applicants and many similar admission essays, he or she keeps an eye out for any characteristic of an essay that makes the student stand out as a candidate—whether an ingenious opening, well chosen details, anecdotes about past experience that are especially appropriate, or persuasive language.

For reflective purposes outside of college, this essay will allow you to be reflective and introspective and decide what course you may take after high school.

Grading Rubric

Did you answer the question appropriately?	20 points
Did I get a sense of who <i>you</i> are? (Do you stand out? Is your essay personal and unique to you?)	20
Did you use a clever and effective hook?	10
Did you include appropriate transitions? Does your information flow in a logical progression?	10
Did you use a dynamic and effective “clincher” statement?	10
Did you follow the length requirements?	10
FORMAT: font, margins, front-page header, page-number headings, centered title, etc.	10
STYLE, GRAMMAR, MECHANICS: spelling, punctuation, usage, word choice, sentence structure, etc.	10

Deadlines:

Rough Draft Due: _____

A **final copy** of your essay is due at the beginning of class on _____.

Your essay should be 500 words, and you should adhere to standard MLA format: one-inch margins, proper heading, double-spaced text, twelve-point Times New Roman font, etc. In your final draft, you are to use the topic as your title and put the name of the college/post graduate plan in parentheses.

Topics to Choose From:

(if you do not have your own printed from a college of choice)

Potential Topics from the Common Application, *for an essay that “helps admissions officers become acquainted with you as a person and a student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself.”*

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community, or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

Potential Quote Topics for you to interpret: *Designed to give “insight into your character and intellect.”*

6. “In the republic of mediocrity, genius is dangerous.” ~Robert Ingersoll / How are you dangerous?
7. “Have you learned the lessons only of those who admired you, and were tender with you, and stood aside for you? Have you not learned great lessons from those who braced themselves against you, and disputed passage with you?” ~Walt Whitman
8. “I hate quotations. Tell me what you know.” ~Ralph Waldo Emerson

Potential Literary Topic

9. Consider the books, essays, poems, or journal articles you have read over the last year or two, either for school or leisure. Please discuss the way in which one of them has changed your understanding of the world, other people, or yourself.

Potential Topics for Self Reflection

10. Choose an intellectual or creative opportunity from your high school years that you have enjoyed and highlight how you have grown personally because of the experience.
11. “Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born.” ~Anais Nin / From freshman year to now, we know that you have interacted with a number of people in your high school who are different from you and have affected

who you are now. Tell us about one such relationship, with a focus on the details of your interaction, not the person.

12. Tell us an interesting or amusing story about yourself that you have not already shared in your application.
13. “Music expresses that which cannot be put into words and cannot remain silent.” ~Victor Hugo / If someone were to look at your music collection right now, they would probably know a great deal about who you are. Individuals are drawn to music, and each song conveys something about that person. Select a musical piece to be your theme song.
14. What work of art, music, science, mathematics, or literature has surprised, unsettled, or challenged you, and in what way?
15. What is your favorite word and why?
16. Describe the world you come from and how that world shaped who you are.
17. Discuss something you secretly like but pretend not to, or vice versa.
18. “We might say that we were looking for global schemas, symmetries, universal and unchanging laws—and what we have discovered is the mutable, the ephemeral, the complex.” Support or challenge Nobel Prize winner Ilya Prigogine’s assertion.

Top Ten Hints For Applying To College



- **Breathe**. Take a deep breath and relax. Many people turn the college admission process into a stressful experience. It should be a time for self-exploration and looking to the future.
- **Be early**. If you submit materials on or after stated deadlines, you are showing a lack of preparation and focus, and you give yourself no room for any sort of error.
- **Be focused**. You, the student, need to take the time to look at your interests, your likes and dislikes, your family finances, and your passions, and then look for college matches.
- **Be active**. Take time to research colleges, visit campuses, and find out details about each college.
- **Be organized**. Keep all relevant materials from the colleges you are passionate about labeled and filed.
- **Challenge yourself**. Take tough courses, especially in the core areas. College classes are hard, and this is the best way to get ready for it.
- **Manage your time wisely**. Professors will expect you to do a great deal of work outside of the classroom. The only way to do this is by having a plan in place for how you spend your time. Start managing your time now, and your first semester will not seem so hectic.
- **Find your passion**. Find the things you love, and do them. There is no right or wrong activity, so don't waste your time taking part in "what looks good on a resume." Do the things that interest you, both academically and personally, and get involved.
- **Be honest**. If you had a low grade in sophomore year Biology or had in-school suspension for excessive tardiness, don't avoid the issue and hope we overlook it. If we have to guess about what happened, we will probably think the worst. The best course is to explain what happened without excuses, and the steps you are taking to overcome the issue.
- **Keep things in perspective**. Getting accepted by your first choice college will not ensure a perfect future, and a denial will not ruin your life. Both applicants and colleges are looking for good matches, and the best situation comes about when both sides connect.

Essay Dos and Don'ts

Choose a subject that you're passionate about.	Never express cynicism about the point of writing an essay.
Write several rough drafts.	Never write about how you couldn't figure out what to write about.
Answer the question asked.	Never write something witty that says nothing about what's important to you.
Tailor your essay to each college or university you apply to.	Never rely solely on a spellchecker.
Include specific details that make the experience yours and no one else's.	Never break the rules about length, topic, or format.
Develop a structured essay—draw the reader in with an enticing opening, develop your ideas logically, and end smoothly.	Never let parents, teachers, or friends get so involved that the essay stops being about you.
Write plainly, and with correct spelling and grammar.	
Write something you'd like to read. Remember, your essay is being read by other human beings, not machines.	

Suggestions For Writing Admissions/Reflective Essays

- **Make it unique to you.** For several years, a lot of essay questions asked the applicant to share an experience from their high school years where they gained respect for intellectual, social, or cultural differences. Our rough estimate is that more than 20% of the replies focused on their high school and the wide range of backgrounds and ideas that encompassed their last four years. They would list the range of cultures, languages, clubs and thoughts, but there was a lack of specific details about the individual student and an actual experience. While many of these essays were technically very strong and showed great passion and love for their school, they lacked the concept of uniqueness. If ten or more people can write the exact same essay, then it is time to rethink that essay. When we say unique, though, we are not focused on a clever or one-of-a-kind idea, but instead your own individual story in all its wonderful detail.
- **Show and Tell.** Do you remember when you were in elementary school, and it was time for show and tell? The boy with the blonde crew cut from the second row slowly stood up, holding carefully to a small, brown paper bag. When he got to the front of the class, he gently opened the bag and eased out a long, flat almost paper like object, and everyone made an oooh sound. A snakeskin that he had discovered in his backyard next to his dad's tool shed. The class listened to him speak, but their minds were on the snakeskin, with its crinkly feel and wild designs. Wasn't the show part just a little more exciting than the tell part? Nothing against the telling, but there is just something about the "show" that allows us to use all our senses. That is how it is with admissions essays. You need to be able to draw the reader out beyond the straight text, and use words and images that trigger all the senses. The difference between showing and telling is in the details. Strong essays focus on specific details over basic statements. When admissions counselors read essays, Details are the lifeblood of the story, otherwise there is no "show" in show and tell.
- **Avoid Thesaurus.com.** It is advantageous to eschew the employment of extravagant language options. In other words, use common English. Remember, it is not just the words that you use, but more importantly, how you use them. Admissions offices want you to tell your own story in your own voice. While big words and grand phrases might seem impressive, they generally do not read well in an essay. In addition, there are always essay writers who believe that more is always better. Wrong.

Stay within the specific word requirements of each essay, and use enough words to tell us your story. One of the best essays I read this year was less than thirty words, but it made me laugh for five minutes straight.

□ **Have fun, write well, and tell your story.**



*More Essay Advice (**for your own reading pleasure)*

The following essay was written by Parke Muth, Senior Assistant Dean and Director of International Admission at the University of Virginia. It was also published in *U.S. News and World Report*.

Fast Food. That's what I think of when I try to draw an analogy with the process of reading application essays.

The bad. Ninety percent of the applications I read contain what I call McEssays - usually five-paragraph essays that consist primarily of abstractions and unsupported generalization. They are technically correct in that they are organized and have the correct sentence structure and spelling, but they are boring. Sort of like a Big Mac. I have nothing against Big Macs, but the one I eat in Charlottesville is not going to be fundamentally different from the one I eat in Paris, Peoria or Palm Springs. I am not going to rave about the quality of a particular Big Mac. The same can be said about the generic essay. If an essay starts out: "I have been a member of the band and it has taught me leadership, perseverance and hard work," I can almost recite the rest of the essay without reading it. Each of the three middle paragraphs gives a bit of support to an abstraction, and the final paragraph restates what has already been said. A McEssay is not wrong, but it is not going to be a positive factor in the admission decision. It will not allow a student to stand out. A student who uses vague abstractions poured into a preset form will end up being interpreted as a vague series of abstractions. A student who uses cliché becomes, in effect, a cliché. If we are what we eat, we are also what we write.

Not only does a preset form lead to a generic essay, so does a generic approach to what is perceived as the right topic. Far too many students begin the search of what to write about by asking: What does my college want to hear? The thinking goes something like this: If I can figure out what they are looking for, and if I can make myself look like that, then I'll improve my chances.

Several years ago we asked students to describe an invention or creation from the past that was important to them. Our No.1 response - at least a thousand people - was the Declaration of Independence. This might make some people think that our college bound students are wonderfully patriotic, but given that my institution was found by Thomas Jefferson, I have a better answer. My guess is that a significant portion of the people who chose the Declaration did so because they thought we would want to hear about how much they admired Thomas Jefferson. While this may be a noble sentiment or, in some cases, a cynical maneuver, it ultimately meant that we had a thousand essays that sounded pretty much alike and therefore did not affect the admission decision. We are not looking for students who all think the same way, believe the same thing, or write the same essay.

Too often, however students who want to avoid sounding generic with respect to form or content choose exactly the wrong remedy; they think that bigger topics - or bigger words - are better. But it is almost impossible, in 500 words, to write well about vast topics such as the death of a loved one (see excerpt: "the bad"). I am not advocating longer essays (just remember how many applications admissions officers need to read); I am advocating essays with a sharp focus that allows for detail. Detail is what differentiates one essay from another, one applicant from another.

Instead of detail, however, students try to impress us with big words. In trying to make a topic sound intellectual, students resort to the thesaurus and, as a result, end up sounding pretentious or at least insecure about using the voice they would use to describe an event to a friend. The student assumes that these "impressive" words intensify the experience for a reader rather than diminish it. Before students send off their essay, they should always read it aloud to someone who knows them well; let that person decide if an individual voice comes through.

The good. A good essay is not good because of the topic but because of the voice. A good writer can make any topic interesting, and a weak writer can make even the most dramatic topic a bore. Students need only to recall the difference between two simple concepts - showing and telling. A good essay always shows; a weak essay always tells.

By showing, a writer appeals to all of the senses, not just the visual. To show means to provide a feast for the eyes, ears and, depending on the essay, the mouth, nose or skin. But rather than telling a reader what show is, it is much easier to show what showing is.

The student whose essay appears below, an example of "the good," has undertaken the task of describing - that is, of showing, in detail - the deterioration of her father as he gets treated for cancer. I do not know of a single member of our staff who was not deeply affected by this essay, the whole of which is as well done as the excerpt. What is impressive about the essay is the willingness of the writer to carefully notice everything that is happening. She opens with a sound, that coughing, and then creates a visual scene that we can see clearly. I said before that writing about death and sickness is perhaps one of the most difficult topics to tackle in a college essay, but here we have an example of why this topic can demonstrate not only writing ability but the courage to face a terrible situation head-on with intellect and power. Compare

this with the other essay about death. There, even though the writer was saturated with emotions, he was merely telling us, in abstract terms, what he felt.

A writer who shows respects the intelligence of the reader; a writer who tells focuses on the ideas, or the perceived ideas, behind the details. He or she is more concerned about demonstrating the ability to be abstract than the ability to be precise. In a short, personal essay, precision is power.

The best essays are crafted not from a formula for success but by a voice that is practiced. Those who are willing to take a risk, to focus on that part of the world that matters to them and to show the passion and the practice it takes to write about it well, will help their chances of admission through their essay.

--The bad: From an early age, we accept death as the inevitable, but do not comprehend its actual denotation. Death is the impending future that all people must eventually grasp. In my early teens, my grandfather tragically perished. As a youth who did not identify with such a cataclysm I was saturated with various emotions. Initially, I was grieved by the loss of a loved one and could not understand why this calamity had to befall upon my family. I always considered death to have a devastating effect, but was shocked by the emotional strain it places upon an individual.

--The good: The coughing came first, the hacking in the middle of the night. Then there were the multiple doctor visits, each one the same: the little white rooms with magazines where I tried not to stare at the bald, gaunt woman across from me. One of the white coats finally said something, steadily, forecasting an 80 percent change of rain. The list of second opinions grew too long to count, looking for someone to say the right thing. Finally, there was relief in hearing the name of a kinder killer: lymphoma.

Even MORE Essay Advice!

- Whatever other advice you receive, be yourself.
- Respond to the topic suggested and stay within the length recommended. Imagine yourself as the admissions officer.
- Use the essay to elaborate on something that is not otherwise evident in reading your application (i.e. a talent, interest, political view, or achievement).



- Address your weaknesses by making them implicit strengths.
- If two schools should have similar topics, proof carefully to verify that your comments are generic or you have changed the specifics. (“My blood runs true blue” wouldn’t work for State or Clemson. “I feel most energized in the cool of the mountains” won’t work well for UNC-Wilmington.)
- Generally speaking, the admissions office is looking for evidence of a) ability, b) motivation, c) creativity, d) self-discipline, and e) growth potential.
- Don’t procrastinate. Write this essay as though a small part of your life depended on it. Write a rough draft, edit it, and edit it again. When you are ready to write the final copy, allow yourself plenty of time so you don’t make careless mistakes. Be neat. Write in blue or black ink. This is not the time for your “signature” color.
- Don’t be too grave, but don’t be too cute either. This is not the time to attempt a comedy routine unless you have some experience and success with humor.
- Write your own essay. You don’t want to end up with a packaged product. Admissions officers can tell!



Rules for Writing Real Good

1. Don't use no double negatives.
2. Make each pronoun agree with their antecedents.
3. Do not split two complete sentences with a comma, it's called a comma splice.
4. About them sentence fragments.
5. When dangling, watch your participles.



6. Verbs has got to agree with their subjects.
7. Don't write run-on sentences they are hard to read.
8. Don't use commas, which aren't necessary.
9. Try to not ever split infinitives.
10. Its important to use your apostrophe's correctly.
11. Proofread your writing to see if you any words out.
12. Correct speling is essential.
13. Eschew ostentatious erudition.
14. Avoid cliches like the plague.

Writing Checklist ... Check and Double Check!!

After writing and editing your rough draft, review again for the following:

Scratch out any of the following words: *a lot, very, really, nice, things, stuff, there is/are/was, it is/was, even, always, never.*

Scratch out any words that seem like slang.

Scratch out any clichés: *last but not least, sad but true, etc.*

Scratch out any generalizations, stereotypes, or vague statements: *I had a normal childhood., Everyone knows the feeling., etc.*

Scratch out any words you know are too pretentious or overblown.

Scratch out any words you don't know.



Eliminate all contractions.

Avoid personal pronouns, especially “I,” unless this is a personal essay.

Search for the subject and the verb in each sentence. Correct any sentence fragments you find.

Evaluate the length of your sentences. Don’t overuse either long or short sentences. Make sure you do not have any run-on sentences. While you are doing this, check for punctuation. Remember a comma comes before the conjunction only if a subject follows the conjunction. Use a semi-colon if you don’t have a conjunction. *I like to run, and I like to swim. I like to run and swim. I like to run; I like to swim.*

Make sure any number under 100 is spelled out as a word.

Do not start a paragraph with *First, Second, Third...Lastly, Finally*, or any other “count words.”