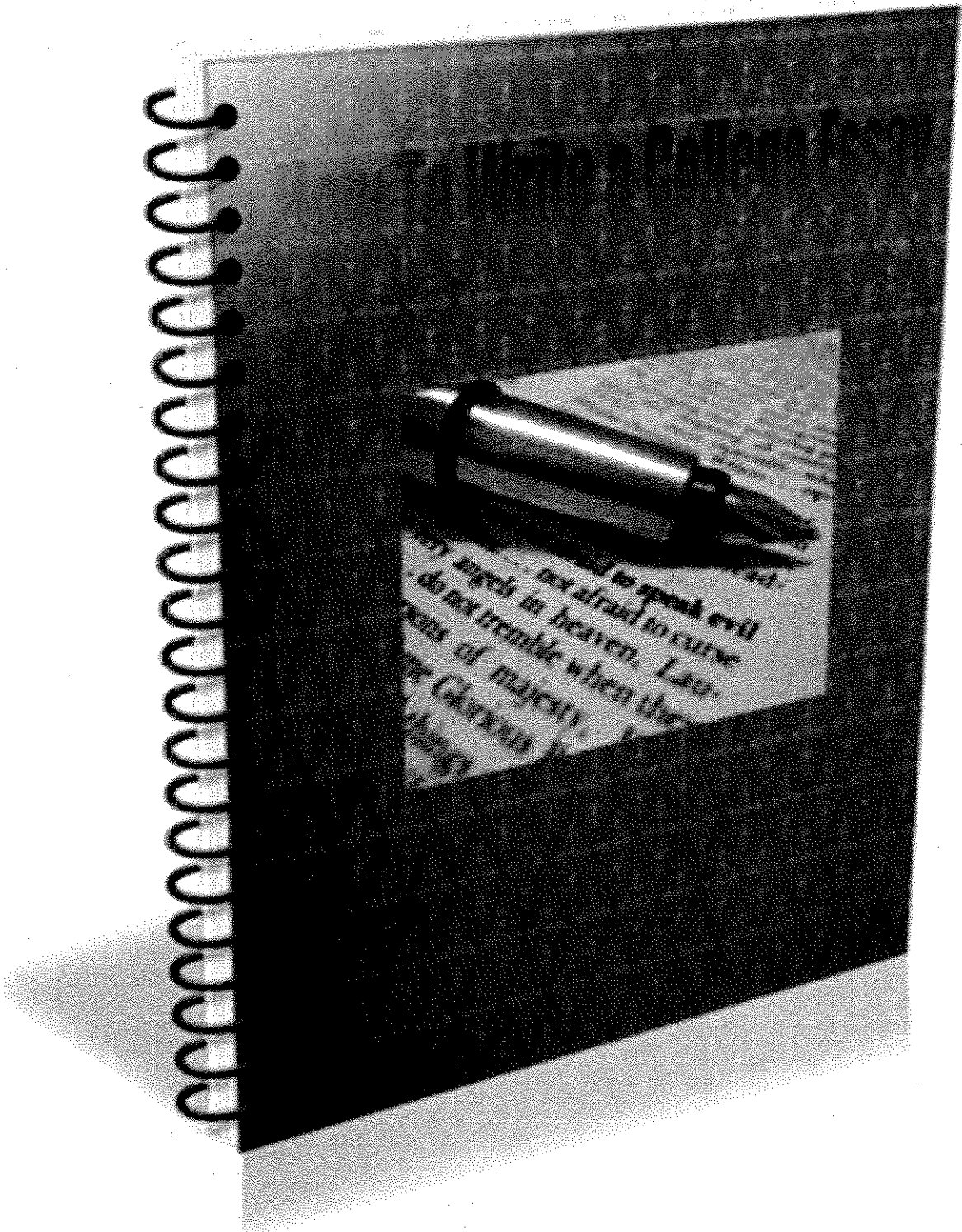


A guide for writing college
application and scholarship essays.



ADMISSION COUNSELING SERVICE

Writing the College Admission Essay

By Madeleine R. Eagon
Vice President, Admission and Financial Aid

Why an essay?

Perhaps the most intimidating part of the college application process, once you have decided where you will apply for admission, is responding to essay questions. As the parent of a successful college applicant, I can attest to the angst that develops over “What do they want?” When colleges ask you to provide essay responses, they are really asking for two things. First, they want to know if you can write; meaning, can you produce prose that is accurately spelled and grammatically correct with paragraphs and topic sentences?

Second, what kinds of ideas do you have? In other words, can you write, and do you have anything meaningful to say? That doesn't make it any less intimidating, does it? The best approach is to think of your essay as a means to introduce yourself personally to the admission committee. As an individual, you are far more than a collection of high school courses and grades, SAT and ACT scores, school activities and community involvements. Although your academic record will be the single most important piece of your application for admission (courses taken as well as grades earned), the essay enables you to differentiate yourself from all the other prospective students. Think of it as a means to open a small window into the way you think and feel for people who don't know you. Contrary to what you may believe, admission officers genuinely care about applicants for admission. We look for ways to understand what motivates you and what you really care about. Your essay will help us make the connection between you as an intellectual being and your personal qualities. The key is to write about yourself in a way that is personal, sincere, and will draw in the reader.

Think of your audience

One of the greatest challenges as you plan your essay is that you are writing for people you don't know. You have no idea about their interests, opinions or values. Admission committees run the gamut from senior admission staff who have read thousands of essays, to young staff members closer to your age and experience who haven't yet read it at all, to faculty members who are always focused on academic excellence. The one thing you may assume is that they value good writing, broadly defined. Good writing means well-written prose on a subject that matters to you. There is no sure formula for a successful essay, even one that is well thought-out and written. Thus, you waste your time trying to “psych out” what an admission committee would like to

read. Rather, you should focus your energies on writing about something that is of real interest to *you*. If you are passionate about your topic, your energy will be apparent in your writing and draw in the reader. There is nothing more depressing than reading an essay from a student who has decided what we would like to read and then writes that essay. Typically, they have guessed wrong; we find their topic dull, and their writing does not achieve the desired end. One thing to keep in mind is that admission committees as a group read many essays. That means they get tired, and it is harder to capture and keep their attention. That isn't very reassuring, is it? Once again, the burden is on you to write something of genuine interest that will engage the reader and keep him or her going. Outstanding essays really stand out in the crowd, and your readers will appreciate your effort. Your goal is to write an essay that will make your audience want to include you in the incoming class.

Choosing your topic

Many colleges suggest two or three possible essay topics. The choices often ask you to reflect upon a significant experience. The topics on the Common Application used by more than 225 colleges nationwide are these: "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement or risk that you have taken and its impact on you." "Discuss some issue of personal, local or national concern and its importance to you." "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence." "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." Do any of these topics strike a chord with *you*? Notice that the common theme in all these questions is you. Regardless of your choice of topic, your essay should provide the reader insight into who you are, how you think and what matters in your life. Admission committees want you to discuss an issue of *significance* or *importance* in your essay. It can be a challenge to figure out what constitutes significant or important to an admission committee. The key, again, is determining what is significant to *you*. Exercise care as you select your topic. Every year there are a number of overused subjects that students choose. Imagine how many essays admission officers have read about "My Family Trip to Europe." Another favorite with student athletes is writing about "The Big Game." Unless you have a truly original approach to the experience, you may wish to consider other options. Remember that if an idea occurs to you quickly, it likely also occurs to thousands of other high school seniors, some of whom are no doubt applying to the same schools. If specific questions are offered for your response, read them carefully and think about your possible response. Can you get a sense of what is wanted? What approach might you use to respond? Reflect on your background, your experiences and your interests. What sets you apart from other applicants? What details about yourself will create a favorable impression? Increasingly, colleges are asking open-ended questions, those that allow you to frame your essay around a topic of your choosing. Although this allows you the freedom to be creative, many students find that the lack of a specific question leaves them directionless. If you are provided the opportunity to tell the

admission committee anything you like about yourself, again, consider your possible responses. Perhaps you have had a life-changing experience you wish to share. Perhaps you have real enthusiasm and involvement in a specific activity that has shaped who you are. Choose wisely, as your choice of topic will say as much about you as a potential member of a university community as the words you use to describe it.

After you have considered how you will respond, write down a few thoughts or ideas that may become the basis of an outline. These will help you organize your approach later.

Final thoughts: don't be afraid to be humorous if you have that capacity. There is nothing more delightful than a well-written humorous essay. The admission committee members will thank you for a good laugh. And don't be afraid to be controversial. If you have strong feelings about a closely held value, you should consider sharing them. It is a mistake to tell your readers what you think they want to hear just so you won't offend them.

Composing your essay

Don't try to write your essay in a single sitting. Sure, it's tempting to write it once and think you have it over with, but trying to get it right on the first attempt may cause writer's block. Writing is easier if you take it in stages. Of course, this implies that you have not waited until the night before your application is due to begin your essay! Some students write sufficiently well that they can submit a first draft as a final product, but it is far fewer than those who think they can. Consider presenting your material in narrative form. Remember that readers like stories, and this may help you organize your thoughts. You may want to organize your essay around one or two themes and give some specific examples. For example, you may want to write about your commitment to volunteer service or your receptiveness to new experiences. Keep in mind that it is not just what you say in your essay that matters, but how you say it. Use vivid, descriptive language to capture your reader's interest. Examples that demonstrate your involvements and contributions are more effective than saying "I'm involved in student government."

Although you wish to present yourself in the best possible light, this is not the moment to write as though everything good that happens in your school or community is due to you. You want to convey a sense of competence and accomplishment without sounding immodest. Admission officers are well aware that most projects involve a team rather than an individual, and that sharing credit for a successful conclusion is not only smart, it is honest. Don't use a string of superlatives to describe yourself. And don't even think of beginning every sentence with "I."

You don't have to be superhuman to gain admission to college. What admission committees seek are accomplished students who have made substantive contributions to their school or community and will bring that same energy to their college experience.

Advice for College Application Essays

Effective Writing

SAMPLE COLLEGE ESSAY QUESTIONS

Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

Generally, there are three types of questions: The "you," the "why us," and the "creative." Here are tips and actual sample questions for each type. Don't assume that the questions are currently being used by a college (most colleges adjust questions annually).

The "You" Question

Many colleges ask for an essay that boils down to, "Tell us about yourself." The school just wants to know you better and see how you'll introduce yourself. For example:

- "Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application." (James Madison University)
- "How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?" (Bates College)
- "Describe any interesting experience you have had during your college admission search." (Juniata College)
- Creative people state that taking risks often promotes important discoveries in their lives or their work. Discuss a risk that has led to a significant change (positive or negative) in your personal or intellectual life." (Simmons College)
- "Describe the most challenging obstacle you have had to overcome; discuss its impact, and tell what you have learned from the experience." (Guilford College)
- "To learn to think is to learn to question. Discuss a matter you once thought you knew 'for sure' that you have since learned to question." (Bryn Mawr College)
- Please provide any additional information that can help us evaluate this application. If you are aware of personal characteristics or circumstances (e. g. work experiences, leadership qualities, motivations, community service, special talents, evidence of socio-economic disadvantage, etc.) that may help us make a more informed admission decision, please let us know. (UW System Common Essay)

Your Approach

This direct question offers a chance to reveal your personality, insight, and commitment. The danger is that it's open-ended, so you need to focus. Find just one or two things that will reveal your best qualities, and avoid the urge to spill everything.

The "Why Us" Question

Some schools ask for an essay about your choice of a school or career. They're looking for information about your goals, and about how serious your commitment is to this particular school. For example:

- "Why is UVM a good college choice for you?" (University of Vermont)
- "Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study." (Westfield State College)
- "Tell us about yourself, your reasons for applying to USF, and your reasons for seeking a college education." (University of San Francisco)

- “Describe your reasons for selecting Loyola College and your personal and professional goals and plans for after college.” (Loyola College MD)
- “We would like to know...what experiences have led you to select to select your professional field and objective.” (Boston University)
- Please relate your interest in studying at Georgetown University to your future goals.” (Georgetown University)
- The statement of purpose is a personal essay that provides insight into your specific reasons for applying to SAIC. In the statement of purpose, you should discuss your interests, creative influences, educational goals, and anything else that is important for us to know regarding your interest in art, design, and visual culture. Through your statement of purpose the Undergraduate Committee on Admissions is interested in finding out more about you as an individual and how you represent yourself in a written format. (The School of the Art Institute of Chicago)

Your Approach

The focus is provided: Why did you choose this school or path? This should be pretty clear to you, since you probably went through some kind of selection process. Make sure you know your subject well. For example, if you say you want to attend Carleton College to major in agriculture, the school will be able to tell how carefully you've chosen (Carleton doesn't have an agriculture major).

The "Creative" Question

Some colleges evaluate you through your choice of some tangential item: a national issue, a famous person, what you would put in a time capsule, a photograph. Here the school is looking at your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge and education. For example:

- "Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others." (Denison University)
- "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence." (Common Application)
- Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you." (Common Application)
- “In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge that your generation will face? What ideas do you have for dealing with this issue?” (College of the Holy Cross)
- What is the value and importance of community service in our society and tell us what it means to you.” (Ohio Wesleyan University)
- “John Keats said, ‘Even a proverb is no proverb to you until your life has illustrated it.’ Please tell us about an experience in your own life which illustrated a proverb, maxim, or quote that has special meaning for you.” (Duke University)
- “You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.” (University of Pennsylvania)
- “For some prognosticators the end of the world was in sight by the year 1000. How do you foresee your world of 2020?” (Dickinson College)

Your approach

Again, you have something to react to, a way to show yourself and write about your real views. Just don't forget the importance of writing an informed essay. For example, don't write about a fantasy lunch with a famous writer and get the titles of her novels wrong. Also, when thinking about how creative to get, use common sense. Being creative to the point of wacky is a risk you may not want to take.

RECIPE FOR A DRAFT

Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

Sometimes the hardest part of writing a college admissions essay is just getting started. Here's a quick exercise to get pen to paper (or keyboard to computer).

Step 1: Think about yourself

What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your best qualities? Are you a plugger? An intellectual? A creative type? Curious? Passionate? Determined?

Step 2: Choose a positive quality you'd like to convey to the admissions committee

Don't pick an event or something you've done. President of the Nuclear Awareness Club is not a personal quality. Focus on a quality of your mind or of your character. Complete this sentence: "I am a very _____ person."

Step 3: Tell a story

Set a timer for 20 minutes. Pretend you're taking an exam at high school and responding to, "Tell a story about an experience or time when you showed you were a very _____ person." Use the characteristic you identified in Step 2. Write or type non-stop for 20 minutes; force yourself to keep telling the story and what it reveals until the timer goes off.

You're Done

Okay. That's it. You've got a rough draft for your college application essay. Look at the college application forms and see what questions they ask. No matter what the questions are, you've already identified the important characteristic you want to convey to each college.

THREE STEPS TO A GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY

Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision, and spirit to the admissions committee in 500 words or fewer. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. Don't let the chance disappear. Stand up straight and believe in yourself!

The Essay Writing Process

Okay, boot up your computer and let's get to it. To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you'd use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

Prewriting

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- **Brainstorm:** Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics. Focus on strengths of personality, not things you've done. For example, you are responsible (not an "Eagle

Scout") or committed (not "played basketball"). If you keep drifting toward events rather than characteristics, make a second list of the things you've done, places you've been, accomplishments you're proud of; use them for the activities section of your application.

- **Discover Your Strengths:** Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.
- **Create a Self-Outline:** Now, next to each trait, list five or six pieces of evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.
- **Find Patterns and Connections:** Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?

Drafting

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."
- The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- The conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

An application essay doesn't need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the Congress of Vienna, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main points.

There are three basic essay styles you should consider:

- **Standard Essay:** Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence. Choose things not apparent from the rest of your application or light up some of the activities and experiences listed there.
- **Less-Is-More Essay:** In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.
- **Narrative Essay:** A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two narrative paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool:** Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?
- **Feedback Time:** Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- **Edit Down:** Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- **Proofread Two More Times:** Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.

COLLEGE ESSAY WRITING TIPS

Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

Write an Effective Application Essay

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from the other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin.

Dos

Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Try having someone read just your introduction to see what he thinks your essay is about.

Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—instead, it's about showing them who you are.

Prove It

Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"
- **Better:** "During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

Be Specific

Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

- **Okay:** "I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."
- **Better:** "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

Don'ts

Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

Don't Write a Resume

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

- "During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."

Don't Use 50 Words When Five Will Do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world."
- **Better:** "I'm a slob."

Don't Forget to Proofread

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

- "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

EXAMPLE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

The Total Package by Lawrence Schlossman, October 31, 2004

Write a concise statement with any additional information that is important to convey to the admissions committee. Information that may be important might include your aspirations, work experience, creative talents, factors affecting your academic record, or why you are applying to UWMadison. You may wish to attach a separate page for your statement. This is an important part of your application.

I know University of Wisconsin- Madison is right for me. At a school like University of Wisconsin I can not only succeed and flourish as a student, but even help contribute. Wisconsin can also offer me everything that a serious yet excited student could ask for: academics and a social life.

When choosing a college, the first things that came to my mind were excellence in academic programs and reputation. Wisconsin offers a wide range of classes and majors, a distinctive reputation, and it is a place where I know I can succeed. As are many students my age, I am unsure of what I want to study as a major. Part of me loves psychology and the human mind, yet I am fascinated with history, and another part of me enjoys English and creative writing. Wisconsin, being a large University, offers a wide array of classes and by the time I graduate I will have a degree in a major that I truly love. As a student of Wisconsin I can bring the willingness and excitement to succeed. I feel strongly about my academics and have a desire to learn. Education and learning is never an area to cut yourself short on and doing the most challenging things are always worth the struggle in the end. Hopefully my willingness to learn and succeed will contribute to the campus environment and hopefully I can lead by example.

Academics aside, Wisconsin also offers it students an amazing social life. I am a huge sports fan, and the Big Ten conference offers some of the best college sports in the country. I can think of nothing better then rooting for the Badgers on the field or on the court; I want to be part of the sea of red. Wisconsin also has over 600 student organizations, and I know that I can find my niche. I have always been someone who likes to get involved on campus. In high school I had a wide variety of activities and leadership positions. I did everything from my high school's Latin Club, to varsity soccer to the political club. I tried to be a leader wherever I saw fit and I got others involved and excited. I know my leadership qualities and my wide array of interests will benefit Wisconsin and those around me. I also have done work to help others in worse positions then mine. Throughout my high school career I did volunteer work at my community's Center For Food Action. I feel it is a person's duty to help those less fortunate then themselves. It is my desire to help bring leadership, excitement, and compassion to Wisconsin. I want college to not only be a learning experience, but also a thrilling one. I know Wisconsin can provide all this and more.

Wisconsin is the total package. It has academics that serious students crave, but is also a place to enjoy the greatest years of your life. I know Wisconsin can serve as a vehicle to help provide the most desirable future available, but without sacrificing the present.

Tips for writing your College application essay.....

Here's advice from the people who read them!

Does writing a college application essay seem like a daunting task to you? For most people, the answer is a resounding “yes!” However, the essay is also an opportunity for you to show your talents and creativity to their best advantage.

To help you get started, here are some insights on writing an essay from the people who read hundreds of them every year — admission officers at ACM colleges.

The essay is your chance to use your voice

The essay is the living, breathing part of your application to a college. In the essay, you can speak in your own voice and **personalize** your application. Here's your opportunity to show something about you that doesn't really come across elsewhere in your application.

So, step back and be reflective. Think about who you are as an individual. How do you view the world? What do you care about deeply? What experiences and people have been important in shaping you as a person? What are your aspirations in life?

It is in such reflection that you can find your own, unique voice. That's the voice that will help you write an interesting essay that only **you** could have written.

Now, on to some nuts and bolts of writing the essay.

Show your command of the basics of good writing

Here are some key points that admission officers look for in an essay:

- Make sure to **answer the essay question** and to follow **all** the instructions that are given.
- Start off with a strong opening paragraph that captures the reader's interest.
- Use a style that you find comfortable and that is appropriate for the subject matter.
- Use correct grammar, punctuation and spelling.
- Make a point and stick to it; develop your argument or narrative.
- Check **all** of your facts. Do you mention a date, place or event in your essay? Make sure it's correct.
- Have you given your reader complete information, so he or she won't be confused?

(continued)

Why do colleges require essays?

A college application includes a lot of information about you, such as grades, recommendations, lists of your extracurricular activities and test scores. All of that information is very important and helps admission officers form a picture of your accomplishments and abilities. However, while it tells about how other people see you, there isn't much about how you see yourself. It's that inside view — how you see yourself — that colleges hope to find in your essay.

The essay performs other functions, as well, such as:

- The essay can be a way of showing that you have researched and thought carefully about the college to which you are applying. It shows, in your own words, why you and the college would be a good “match.”
- An essay demonstrates your writing ability, which is a key component to success in college.
- In your essay, you can show that you are willing to put **yourself** into what you do. That kind of commitment is an important part of effective learning in college. And it shows the admission committee that you are someone who is willing and able to be a contributing member of a community of learners.
- Your academic record is the central and most important part of your application. For selective colleges especially, your essay provides additional insights about you — as a student and as an individual — for a college to consider as it reviews your application.



Beloit • Carleton • Coe • Colorado • Cornell • Grinnell • Knox
Lake Forest • Lawrence • Luther • Macalester • Monmouth • Ripon • St. Olaf
This *College Guide* handout is published by the Associated Colleges of the Midwest. www.acm.edu

© 2005

- In general, it's best to be succinct. If there a recommended length for the essay, pay attention to it.
- The essay should be neatly typed.
- Remember that mistakes, especially sloppy mistakes, make it look like you don't take the essay (and, by extension, the application) very seriously.

What to write about? Where to look for an essay topic

Does the application ask you to choose a topic to write about? There are as many (actually, many more) good topics as there are applicants. Here are some ideas for where you might look for an essay topic:

- Do you have hobbies and non-school pursuits that really excite you and that engage your heart and mind? Writing about your out-of-classroom interests could help bring out a part of you that's not covered — or not covered completely and to your fullest advantage — elsewhere in your application.
- Is there a social cause that you hold near and dear? Remember, an essay is not an academic paper; but a cause that you feel passionately about, and that has been in your thoughts and activities, might be the basis for a strong essay.
- Perhaps there is an event (local, national or international) that has touched you in a personal way.
- Is there an academic subject that really sparks your interest? Why does the subject engage you? Has it led to experiences or study outside of school? There may be essay material that goes beyond the courses you took or scores on AP tests.

How to handle a topic

Often, colleges will ask you, the applicant, to write about an experience you've had, an achievement in your life, or someone who has had a significant influence on your life. In handling such a topic — or, for that matter, any topic you select — go beyond the *what* and dig into the *how* and *why*. In other words, don't settle for simply providing a description of an event. Take the next step and tell about the impact the situation had on you. For example:

- This is a personal essay, not a travelogue. So, if you're writing about a trip to another country, tell about how your experiences effected you, and why they were interesting or meaningful to you. In other words, the people reading the essay are interested in what makes you tick and how you got the way you are, not in how the trains run in Paris.
- Are you writing a tribute to your grandparents and their influence on your childhood? Be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how the particular things your grandparents did or said were important to you.
- Did you overcome an athletic injury and recover to perform well? A description of the type of cast you wore and your rehab routine is not likely to make a compelling essay. However, your reflections on what it felt like to be watching your teammates, instead of competing alongside them, might be the basis of a memorable essay.

Possible pitfalls when writing an essay

- Writing a poem or making a videotape in place of an essay is probably not a good idea, unless you're applying to a specialized school that encourages such a submission.
- Humor can be risky, so be careful how you use it.
- "Honor code" rules are in effect when you write an essay, so do your own work and don't make things up.
As a practical matter, other items in the application, such as letters of recommendation, make it quite possible that you would be found out if you tried to make things up.

Some final tips

- **Leave yourself time to rewrite and revise.** For the great majority of people, this is not an easy assignment. Start early and leave plenty of time! Most likely that means to give yourself weeks (not days, and certainly not hours!) to rework your essay.
- If your essay is longer than three pages (unless the instructions call for something longer), then it had better be interesting! Think hard about what you really want to focus on, and take out whatever gets away from your central point.
- **The admission committee will take your essay seriously.** You should, too. You have a lot to gain by putting in the time and effort to write a good essay!

Suggested reading

The College Application Essay by Sarah Myers McGinty (The College Board, New York, NY).



Application Essay

Review your essays, and consider the following questions:

Content

- **Message:** What is the message of the essay? Does the writer address this idea in an interesting and personal way? Does the essay include evidence of the writer's reflection upon the significance of event(s)?
- **Tone:** Is the tone of voice consistent?
- **Metaphor, Simile, Imagery:** Does the writer avoid general statements that tell the reader what to think and instead use specific details(e.g., metaphor, simile, imagery) that cause the reader to feel what was intended by the writer?
- **Diction:** Does the writer make strong and varied word choices that suggest specific connotations? Is repetition of words/phrases used to create dramatic emphasis and help unify different parts of the essay?
- **Varied** sentence lengths and structure: Consider the rhythm created by sentences. Does the essay use different sentence lengths to create dramatic emphasis?

Organization

- **Focus:** Is the piece focused and personal? Does it try to cover too much or too little?
- **Paragraphs:** Is each paragraph unified around one idea? Does each paragraph have a clear, thematic topic sentence? Does each paragraph conclude with an analytical statement?
- **Transitions:** Are there transitions within and between paragraphs that give a clear sense of analytical progression, through repetition of key words and ideas?
- **Introduction:** Does the introduction hook the reader (the admissions officer), leaving him or her wondering what comes next?
- **Conclusion:** Does the conclusion elaborate upon the ideas set forth in the essay and address their greater significance? Does the conclusion avoid artificial summary/closure?

COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY WRITING ASSIGNMENT

Senior Literature and Composition

For the College Application essay writing assignment, respond to each of these sample questions which are required for all University of Wisconsin college system applications.

[Note, if you plan to apply to a college that requires you to answer a different question(s), you may choose to respond to that question instead of and/or in addition to these. However, please let me know before you write your paper, and also plan to include a copy of the question(s).]

For this assignment, complete responses for numbers 48, 49, 50, and 51. Note: This information was taken directly from *The University of Wisconsin System Application for Undergraduate Admission 2011-12*:

From SECTION 8—EMPLOYMENT AND ACTIVITIES

48 Please list below, **in order of importance to you**, your principal extracurricular, community and/or volunteer activities, as well as honors/awards earned. You may include involvement with school organizations, religious and service organizations, family obligations, employment, and/or participation in the arts, athletics, publications, etc. (Attach an additional page if needed.)

Activity Leadership Position	Honors and/or Awards	Approximate Hours per Week	Number of Weeks per Year	Number of Years

49 Briefly explain (in 50-100 words) how you decided which activity in Item #48 was the most important to you. (Attach an additional page if needed.)

From SECTION 9—STATEMENT(S)

Submit your responses to both questions 50 **and** 51 on separate sheet(s) of paper. Include your full name and date of birth on each sheet and attach them to your application.

50 The University of Wisconsin values an educational environment that provides all members of the campus community with opportunities to grow and develop intellectually, personally, culturally and socially. In order to give us a more complete picture of you as an individual, please tell us about the particular life experiences, perspectives, talents, commitments and/or interests you will bring to our campus. In other words, how will your presence enrich our community?

51 Tell us about your academic goals, circumstances that may have had an impact on your academic performance, and, in general, anything else you would like us to know in making an admission decision.

The following guidelines were also taken directly from the UW-Madison website:

Applicant Statements

Our two essays give students the opportunity to distinguish themselves among other applicants and help us get to know them beyond GPA and test scores. These crucial parts of your application are your chance to tell us things about yourself that aren't revealed throughout the rest of your application, such as character-defining moments, academic or personal challenges faced, hardships overcome, or cultural awareness developed. Ultimately, you'll want to provide us with all the details you would like us to know before we make a decision on your application.

Statements. The statements are a crucial part of your application. Use this opportunity to clarify your academic goals and explain any extenuating circumstances that may have affected your academic performance. Ultimately, you'll want to provide us with all the details you would like us to know before we make a decision.

The statements are a very important part of our application review and decision-making process. There are two statements. Write both. Those who do not are less likely to be admitted.

The first statement, regarding your life experiences and the impact you will have on our campus, is very focused. Write to the question. Be specific, use recent examples, and focus on what is unique about you.

The second statement is more general. This is your chance to tell us things about yourself that aren't revealed throughout the rest of your application—character-defining moments, academic or personal challenges faced, hardships overcome, or cultural awareness developed. This second statement is the only part of the application over which you have complete control. Take advantage of that freedom.

We offer a rough guideline of 250–500 words per statement. We do want to receive statements that have been carefully edited, proofread, and spellchecked, but it is equally important that your statements be written in your own voice.

APPLICANT STATEMENTS TIP SHEET

May 11, 2010

With 25,000+ qualified students applying for admission to UW–Madison each year, we cannot overstate the importance the statements play in our application review and decision-making process. This tip sheet includes information on the statements that will be included on the 2011–12 application for admission. Section 9 of the application (online and print) is the Statements Section. Students are asked to respond to the following *two* prompts:

1. The University of Wisconsin values an educational environment that provides all members of the campus community with opportunities to grow and develop intellectually, personally, culturally, and socially. In order to give us a more complete picture of you as an individual, please tell us about the particular life experiences, perspectives, talents, commitments and/or interests you will bring to our campus. In other words, how will your presence enrich our community?
2. Tell us about your academic goals, circumstances that may have had an impact on your academic performance, and, in general, anything else you would like us to know in making an admission decision.

Use the statements to distinguish yourself. Stand out among our applicants, help us to know you beyond your GPA and test scores, and give us a reason to offer you admission to Wisconsin. Here are a few additional tips to keep in mind:

- **Write on Both Topics:** There are two statements. Write on both. Those who do not are less likely to be admitted.
- **Answer the Questions:** The first statement, regarding your life experiences and the impact you will have on our campus, is very focused. Write to the question. Be specific, use recent examples, and focus on what is unique about you. The second statement is more general. This is your chance to tell us things about yourself that aren't revealed throughout the rest of your application—character-defining moments, academic or personal challenges faced, hardships overcome, or a cultural awareness developed. This second statement is the only part of the application over which you have complete control. Take advantage of that freedom.
- **Be Complete and Concise:** We offer a rough guideline of 250-500 words per statement. That being said, you should use as many words as necessary to answer the questions and tell us what we need to know about you. Use the statements to demonstrate how you think about things and that you can write concisely and clearly about your thoughts.
- **Excuse Text Formatting Issues on the Online Application:** We encourage you to write your statements in a word processing application (such as Microsoft Word), utilize spelling and grammar checks, and then cut-and-paste the text into the appropriate box on the online application. Upon doing so, some of the formatting (paragraph spacing, font styles, etc.) will drop out. You may also see some odd characters being inserted into your statements (e.g., an apostrophe converting to a question mark). Do not become alarmed. This is an issue with the application programming. You should proceed to submit the statement and your application. We see these same formatting issues in all the statements we review. It will not reflect unfavorably upon you.

