

Three Steps to a Great College Essay

The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself and to reveal your personality, charm, talents, vision, and spirit to the admission committee. It's a chance to show you can think about things and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. Here's how to make the best of this chance—without making yourself crazy.

Remember—you already know how to write an essay

To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process you'd use to write an essay for class: prewrite, draft, edit. This process will help you identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

Step 1: Prewriting

To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all college application 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").

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 summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? Were there other times you did something challenging in order to be with people who matter to you?

Step 2: Drafting

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

- **Introduction:** Give your reader a brief idea of your essay's content. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."
- **Body:** The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.
- **Conclusion:** This can be brief as well, just a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

But before you start writing, 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.

Step 3: Editing

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements, 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.