

**COLLEGE
WISE**



From Words to Wow:
**A Step-by-Step Guide
to Writing the Best
College Essays**

WRITTEN BY COLLEGEWISE COUNSELORS
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Table of Contents

03	<u>Why Do Colleges Require Essays?</u>
04	<u>The Role of the Personal Statement</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• What the Personal Statement Could Be About
05	<u>The Role of the Supplemental Essays</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Wacky Supplemental Essay Examples
06	<u>The Role of the Personal Insight Questions</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Frequently Asked PIQ Questions (And Answers)
07	<u>The Essay Writing Process</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• The Steps to Writing the Personal Statement or PIQs• The Steps to Writing Supplemental Essays
09	<u>Personal Statement: Dos and Don'ts</u>
11	<u>Supplemental Essay: Dos and Don'ts</u>
14	<u>5 Most Overused College Essay Topics</u>
16	<u>Our Authors and Special Thanks</u>
17	<u>More Resources and Support</u>
18	<u>Collegewise Success</u>

First impressions matter in life and college essays. Let's get into it.

If you're a parent, guardian, or student looking for more information about college admissions and how essays fit into the process, you're in the right place. This guide will provide an overview of every college essay a student may encounter and how to tackle them.

Why do Colleges Require Essays?



What better way to get to know students than through their own words? Most colleges practice holistic admissions, meaning that there are multiple factors being considered in the admissions decision. Schools that practice holistic admissions are not plotting GPAs and test scores on a spreadsheet to determine if a student meets the bar to be admitted or not. (For some schools with formulaic admissions, it really is as simple as earning a certain GPA or GPA-and-test-score combination to determine if you're admissible. And to be fair, many schools that practice holistic admissions may not require essays.) Instead, admission readers look at many factors outside of just the transcript and test scores to get to know you (the student) better. This is done through activities, recommendation letters, and essays.

The essays, specifically, give students an opportunity to add context to their application, share more of their personality, and also highlight why they'd be a great fit for the college (and vice versa). Now, let's get into the types of college essays that students will be asked to write and how to approach them.

The Role of the Personal Statement

Over 1,000 colleges and universities across the world utilize the [Common App](#) application platform, meaning there's a very good chance students will encounter the 650-word Personal Statement. The Personal Statement is an essay that every college a student applies to on Common App will review. For that reason, students want to make sure that their Personal Statement is not specific to any one college. This essay should be universal enough that it doesn't matter which school is reading it.

Many students can feel a lot of pressure to come up with the “right” essay topic.

The truth is that there is no secret formula for the essay; there is no one specific thing a college is looking for. They just want to get to know you better- it really is as simple as that!



What the Personal Statement Could Be About

01. A large-scale, defining moment in life
02. A small, memorable situation
03. A hobby, job, or summer experience
04. Or anything else in between that matters to the student

The Role of Supplemental Essays

Many colleges also require additional essays, often called supplemental essays, which are specifically tailored to that particular school. For some schools, supplemental essays are required; some are optional, and some are “suggested” (so, for all intents and purposes, required).

Supplemental essays can (and often should!) be personalized to the school at hand. Colleges decide which question(s) they want to ask, and they can change from year to year. Supplemental essays often fall into larger “buckets” centering on themes of identity, community, exploration of academic interests, and more.

A college tells students what is important to them in their supplemental essay questions. Think of the essay prompts as a reflection of the school’s values and the community they want to cultivate.



Students, if you read through a school’s supplements and find it difficult to connect to the topics, don’t want to write them, or are questioning the importance of the questions, then that school may not be a good fit for you.

Wacky Supplemental Essay Examples

What advice would a wisdom tooth have? - The University of Chicago

What three emojis/GIFs do you use most often? Why? - Elon University

What item are you excited to bring with you to college? - Pomona College

The Role of Personal Insight Questions

Think of these as a blended interview, résumé, and best story showcase. The Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) are part of the University of California (UC) system's application, and students looking to apply to any of the UC schools should expect to come face-to-face with the PIQs.

Students will be asked to pick 4 questions to answer with a limit of 350 words per answer. So it is important for students to be compelling, get to their point quickly, and stay on topic.

The four UC questions a student picks should each be designed to give the application readers specific insight into who they are and what matters to them. Successful applicants are adept at using the PIQs to add new information or expand on something they had briefly mentioned elsewhere in the application.

Frequently Asked PIQ Questions (And Answers)

Who should review my responses before I press submit?

This may seem counterintuitive, but we recommend that students not show their PIQ responses to their parents or to anyone who loves them. It's almost impossible for them to be objective. Instead, share them with a professional (a teacher, a high school counselor, or a trusted college counselor) who doesn't love you, but who has taken the time to know you or your story.

How can I determine if my style/voice is appropriate for a UC PIQ response?

Students should avoid being too stiff and write in a way that is natural to them. Look at the PIQs as if they are a conversation with a familiar teacher. Responses should be professional but also have some personality to them.

The Essay Writing Process

Ideally, we'd recommend students begin work on their Common App Personal Statement and/or the UC PIQs during the summer before senior year. Not only will this give the student more time to brainstorm and write, but it will also give them a head start and lessen the load during the fall of their senior year.

The Steps to Writing the Personal Statement or PIQs

1

Spend time reflecting

Students, consider what excites you, your passions, questions you think about, and something significant about your identity.

Pro tip: Keep the content recent and relevant.

2

Create an outline

We know, outlines remind you of assignments in English class, but in this case, it will really help!

3

Write, write, write

Set aside 1-2 hours and use your outline to write out a first draft. Remember that this does not have to be perfect – feel free to just let the writing, and your thoughts, flow! You can, and should, revise, and proofread later.

4

Proofread

Check for typos, grammatical errors, or the repetition of words. Admissions officers will notice these glaring mistakes!

5

Get feedback

Run the essay by someone close and objective— a friend, counselor, trusted teacher, or relative.

The Steps to Writing Supplemental Essays

If you or your teen are applying to schools with supplemental essays, these will look a lot different than the personal statement. These are more pointed, asking about interest in that school, major, or some other focused topic. And they're much shorter than the main essay.

1

Outline

This outline will look a bit different than the personal statement's. Respond directly to the question, though it does help to still incorporate a story and/or a specific anecdote.

2

Write

Write when you feel inspired, and write all your thoughts down as they come.

3

Reduce

Most supplemental essays have word count limits (ranging from 30-250 words). Students may need to spend time summarizing their thoughts and cutting down what they wrote.

4

Reuse and recycle

The GREAT news about supplemental essays is that, besides the "Why (insert school)" essay, you can often reuse content from essays or topics for multiple schools. But remember, always tailor the essay to the school, even when you are reusing stories or language.

Personal Statement: Dos and Don'ts



Answer the question(s)

It sounds intuitive, but we always tell students to make sure they're answering the question(s) at hand. The Common App gives students seven essay prompts to respond to (six questions and one open-ended "topic of your choice"). Admission officers don't care which question is chosen, but they do care that the answer is addressing the specific question (or questions) being asked.



Keep it personal

This essay is called a "personal statement" for a reason— it needs to be personal to the student! Whether the student is writing about a role model or life experience, it's important to bring the story back to the author. The student is the person the admission reader wants to get to know most.



Use your own voice

It's always a good idea to have someone else look over an essay to catch lingering spelling or grammar errors. (Proofreading is important!) But during the writing process, students want to make sure there's only one cook in the kitchen, so to speak. Admission officers who have read thousands of essays are pretty good at being able to tell when an essay has been written by an adult or someone else. Don't stress too much about having to sound overly polished, and don't go nuts with the thesaurus. The essay should sound like it was written by a 17-year-old— because it was!

Personal Statement: Dos and Don'ts



Try to impress the reader

Many students feel pressure to come up with a Personal Statement that is going to “wow” the admission reader, something that is going to put them over the edge to be admitted. The admission officer will read about big accomplishments in other parts of the application; the essay is where students can show a deeper side of who they are. The essay is not a competition to determine which student has overcome the most challenging obstacle, or who has earned the highest award. It’s about the smaller moments and experiences. So instead, students should focus on writing an essay they are proud of and a story they want to share most.



Be repetitive

Students have a finite amount of space to share their narrative. And an admission reader has a finite amount of time to read the application—mere minutes. The Personal Statement should be looked at as a vehicle to share new, different information that isn't present in the rest of the application. Using the limited amount of space in the essay to repeat information is not what the essay is for!



Try to summarize your entire life

Students, this one is specifically for you. 650 words isn't a lot, and if you try to manufacture a story that encapsulates all of your interests, passions, motivations, and ambitions, you’ll quickly realize that you just don’t have enough space. Resist the temptation to feel like you have to summarize your entire life story in this essay. Instead, narrow the scope of this essay to focus on a smaller moment or experience that reflects something important about you.

Supplemental Essay: Dos and Don'ts



Be specific

When a college asks students why they are applying, this is an opportunity to show them that you (the student, of course) have done your homework. Avoid pointing out obvious things to the school— the admission reader works there; they know what the school offers! Instead, focus on connecting the “what” of things you like about the school to the “why” of how it aligns with your individual interests, passions, and goals.



Do thoughtful research

One of the best ways students can set themselves up for success is to approach their college research with these essays in mind. If you know that a college may ask you why you're applying, start to take note (literally, write it down!) of what you like about that school. This will save you time when writing the supplemental essays— you'll already have a bank of specific examples to talk about!



Choose different essay topics

If a college asks multiple supplemental essay questions, the same rules apply as for the Personal Statement: use each essay to share new and different information. Yes, even Stanford, with its eight short answer prompts, wants to learn something different about students in each one.

Supplemental Essay: Dos and Don'ts



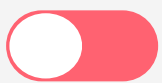
Recycle when you can

This may sound like cheating, but it's actually an effective tool to work smarter, not harder. In many cases, you can recycle essay templates and reuse them for multiple schools that ask a similar question.



Be too general

Students don't want their essays to be so generic that they could apply to every single school they apply to. This is where the specific details come into play. For example, we've seen students' drafts of essays where they talk about being drawn to Stanford's climate or the fact that Columbia is in the middle of a vibrant city. But those are not traits that are unique to either of those schools. Instead, focus on the specific things the school offers that you can't find anywhere else. We often tell students, "If you can sub the name of another school into this essay and it still makes sense, then that essay is not specific enough."



Procrastinate on writing

Senior year is a busy, demanding year. Students have to juggle academic course loads and extracurricular obligations. Applying to colleges can feel like another class on top of all of that. To try to mitigate some of that stress senior year, students should start writing their supplements early. Most colleges release their updated supplement prompts around August 1st (if not earlier). Once prompts have been confirmed, students should start working on those supplements. This is a great time for parents and guardians to step in and give a little nudge from time to time to make sure their teen is on track and has ample time to review and edit essays before application deadlines.

Looking to receive college essay and application support?

Click the link below and fill out the form to schedule a free consultation with one of our Program Advisors. This consultation is a time to get your burning questions answered, receive advice, and see if Collegewise is the right fit for your family.

[Talk to an Advisor](#)

Otherwise, skip to our next page to learn about the most overused college essay topics.



5 Most Overused College Essay Topics

01

“How community service taught me the importance of helping others...”

Colleges appreciate students who are concerned about their communities. But a claim to have learned how important it is to help people needs to be substantiated with evidence of a sincere, long-term commitment. Otherwise, the message loses some oomph. If you had a community service experience that really meant a lot to you, say so. And be honest.

02

“Hard work always pays off” and other life lessons learned while playing sports.

A lot of athletes try to inject meaningful life lessons into the experiences they write about in their college essays. But if the whole point of the essay is that hard work pays off, you've just written the same essay that thousands of other varsity letter holders will write. And you probably would never say to your friends, “I feel very fortunate to have participated in athletics because the experience taught me about hard work and commitment.” So be original. Tell your athletic story that nobody else will be able to tell.

03

“How my trip to another country broadened my horizons...”

A lot of applicants recount their trips or vacations to other countries to strange, uncharted lands. Like France. These students were inevitably confronted with the challenge of adapting to the new customs of the country they visited. Maintain that perspective. Visiting a country and noticing that it is different is not a story that you own. However, if you can pinpoint a specific event that occurred while traveling that shaped a new perspective, influenced awareness of a topic you were previously unaware of, or even just exposed you to different culinary tastes, that's a topic that might lead to a strong essay.

5 Most Overused College Essay Topics

04

“How I overcame a life challenge (that wasn’t really all that challenging...)”

Essays can help admissions officers understand more about a student who has overcome a legitimate hardship. But far too many other students misguidedly manufacture hardship in a college essay to try and gain sympathy or to make excuses for things like low grades. That’s not going to work. If you’ve had a hardship and you want to talk about it, you should. Otherwise, it’s probably better to choose a different topic. And please don’t write a eulogy for your pet. Ever.

05

Anything that doesn't sound like the person writing the essay.

Give your essays a sincerity test. Do they sound like you, or do they sound like you’re trying to impress someone? Don’t use words you looked up in the thesaurus (there really is no place for “plethora” in a college essay). Don’t quote Shakespeare or Plato, or the Dalai Lama. If your best friend reads your essay and says it sounds just like you, that’s probably a good sign.

Parents and guardians, if you are helping review your teen's essay, this isn't the time to start adding any corporate jargon or fancy words to the copy.

Final Thoughts

By now, your family should have a better sense of how to approach the college essay-writing process. It can feel overwhelming, especially at the beginning stages. Be sure to set aside enough time to brainstorm, write, review, and edit the essays before deadlines approach.

And as always, if your family could use an extra pair of expert hands, Collegewise is here to support you. [Click here to get started with us.](#)

Our Authors and Special Thanks



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More Resources and Support

Collegewise is a private college counseling company that embraces two beliefs: (1) the college admissions process should be an exciting, adventurous time for every family, and (2) accurate, helpful college information should be made available to everyone. So, even though we are private counselors who work with families, we also enjoy working with anyone who is interested and willing to listen, whether we're writing, speaking, or teaching as much as we can.

More Resources

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Collegewise Success

At Collegewise, the core of the work we do with families is recognizing that this isn't just about college. It's about helping students grow, reach new heights, explore new opportunities, and experience a simpler college application process. It's about taking the pressure off parents and guardians and giving families the opportunity to enjoy important moments in high school.

9/10

**RECOMMENDED
BY PARENTS.**

28K+

**STUDENTS
ADMITTED.**

92%

**TOP 3 CHOICE
ADMIT RATE.**

23+

**YEARS OF
EXPERIENCE.**

361+
admits

**American
University**

325+
admits

**Boston
University**

255+
admits

**U of Michigan,
Ann Arbor**

238+
admits

**UC - Los
Angeles**

365+
admits

**Northeastern
University**

254+
admits

**University of
Texas, Austin**

73+
admits

**Cornell
University**

177+
admits

**New York
University**

245+
admits

**Texas
Christian**

44+
admits

**University of
Pennsylvania**

Excellent



Based on 250 reviews

