

# Writing a College Application Essay

Writing a college application essay can be a daunting task students might be tempted to put off until the last minute. The experts suggest beginning three to four weeks ahead of the due date. The experts also suggest some simple guidelines for writing this piece effectively. The best way to approach the essay is to follow the writing process that is used to write any essay. These steps include prewriting, organizing, drafting, revising, and editing. The good news is “you don’t have to do research . . . You are the real expert and can easily speak with both authority and conviction” (McGinty).

## More Tips for a Successful Essay

- **Become very familiar with the school** to which you are applying so that you can make specific references to the mission statements, specific disciplines, or campus life of that school. If relevant to the type of essay you are writing, be sure to point out how you can make a significant contribution to that particular school.
  - **For example**, when applying to the University of North Texas’ (UNT) College of Education, mention that because you have always wanted to be a teacher, you were drawn to UNT’s noteworthy certification program.
- **Make your essay memorable!** You might tell a brief story about yourself to begin the essay.
  - **For example:** “I remember the first time I knew I wanted to be a teacher. I was five and had been put to bed for an afternoon nap. Like most five-year-olds, napping was the farthest thing from my mind. So to pass the time, I searched my mother’s top dresser drawer for interesting odds and ends, and I found buttons, snaps, and loose garters. Then I got under the covers and used my legs to make hills and valleys. With my pilfered goodies, I set up my school, complete with desks and students. Then I spent my nap time teaching my imaginary students under the covers. I remember the pleasure and excitement of being in charge. Naptime had never been so much fun.” When the committee reading essays sorts through hundreds of them, they should remember the five-year-old teacher and will give her writing a second careful look.
- **Use vivid language.** Don’t use tired old words like *great, little, big, sad*. Use a thesaurus or right click on a word in MS Word and find a vivid synonym.
  - **For example**, improve the sentence, *The balloon went up in the air*, by inserting some colorful adjectives and adverbs, such as *The Snoopy-shaped hot air balloon went silently and gracefully up in the air*.
- **Be dynamic.** “Liven up a moment in the lives of [the] five professors trapped with those 500 applications. Maybe 600. Maybe more” (Gotera).
  - **For example**, just as you begin an interview with direct eye contact and a firm handshake, use words that evoke confidence and pride. You might write that you know you have a positive and effective way to communicate with and to relate to people that will enable you to be a good teacher.

- **Be specific and focused and prove your points.** When revising, try to delete any wordiness and be alert for moments when you stray from the topic. If a question you are responding to asks why, be sure to answer that with reasons and proof.
  - **For example,** “[Northwestern] [has] a question that asks what an applicant would do with five minutes of airtime—what would they talk about and why? Kids don’t answer the why part; they go on about the subject; there’s no analysis, no reflection” (Frank). So if you were to use your five minutes to talk about the need for teachers in our world today, you would need to be sure to say why you specifically could help fill that need.
- **Accentuate the positive.** If you want to write about a negative topic, such as the death of someone, a tragic accident, or a tough personal experience you have had, be sure to emphasize how you’ve overcome the challenge or how this hardship has made you a more determined and/or mature individual.
- **Pursue perfection.** Be a meticulous proofreader and/or find someone who is good at proofing to help you. Remember that how your essay looks will make as much of a first impression as how you dress for an interview.
- **Enjoy!** Have fun with this project, and the result will be even better.

Finally, here are some tips from Sarah Myers McGinty, author of *The College Application Essay*, of **THINGS TO AVOID** when writing the essay:

1. “Avoid dashes and exclamation points. They are the junk food of the punctuation world, just as the semicolon is the truffle. The former are too casual for the tone of most essays; the latter is best used sparingly.”
2. “Avoid parentheses. Most often the sentence merely needs reorganization.”
3. “Avoid asking questions. An essay should answer questions. Asking them is contrived, since you intend to answer them yourself.”
4. “Avoid setting off expressions that are wrong to begin with in sanitizing quotation marks. ‘Monet was really ‘into’ water lilies’ is not appropriate. Don’t try to get away with it by putting *into* in quotations marks. Omit the offending word and state the information in a different way: ‘Monet found water lilies fascinating.’”
5. “Avoid contractions, abbreviations, and slang. Keep your style both reasonably formal and scrupulously correct.”

#### Works Cited

- Frank, Robert, Michael Palumbo, Scott Harris, and Christine LaRubio. *The Princeton Review: College Essays That Made a Difference*, Random House, 2006.
- Gotera, Vince. "How to Write a Great Statement of Purpose." *English Language and Literature*, University of Northern Iowa, Jan. 2006.
- McGinty, Sarah Myers. *The College Application Essay*. College Entrance Examination Board, 2001.
- Pugh, Mike. "Write a Great College Admissions Essay." *FastWeb Resources*, 09 Mar. 2009, <http://www.fastweb.com/college-search/articles/write-a-great-college-admissions-essay>.
- Reed, Mary Jane. *Teaching Powerful Personal Narratives Strategies for College Applications and High School Classrooms*, Maupin House, 2004.