

COLLEGE ESSAY ACADEMY CHEAT SHEET: Top Tips from Chapters 1-10

CHAPTER 1

Why Does the College Essay Matter?

❶ **Admissions officers are in a rush.** They have to read 40 applications a day and 8.5 an hour, which means they can only spend 7 minutes reading an application and 2-3 minutes max reading the essay. This unfortunate time crunch does not mean that your essay will be overlooked. It means that you need use every trick in the book to capture their attention and, yes, entertain.



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❷ **Your essay is an opportunity to make yourself memorable.** In advertising, the idea of making yourself memorable is called “branding.” Celebrities often call it “star power.” What it really boils down to is finding something about yourself, your experiences, and what you have to offer to the world that is effortlessly recognizable and easily recollected. What will make you stand out in a sea of similarly qualified applicants? An admissions officer should be able to easily recall details that are emblematic of your personality and that are representative of who you are at your core.

CHAPTER 2

Guide to the Common App Essay Prompts

❶ **Work backwards.** Ultimately the Common App essay topics are broad enough to accommodate almost any story you want to tell. Feel free to take some cursory inspiration from these questions, but mostly you should focus on identifying the story you want to tell first. You can fit your story to the prompts later. Often you will find adapting a subject to fit the prompts takes little to no effort for a well-honed essay.

❷ **Personal essays can be informal - to a point.** This is your opportunity to speak to admissions in your own voice, so use it. For once, you can drop the formality of academic writing. Personal essays should be conversational in tone. They should read in the same way you would sound if you were telling a story to a friend.



CHAPTER 3

Finding the Magic Topic

1 It's okay to be a narcissist! The essay is about YOU. Even if you want to write about a special hobby or relationship, YOU should be the main character. So, don't spend too much time researching Abraham Lincoln or interviewing Grandma Millicent. Use your time to delve into your own story and talents.



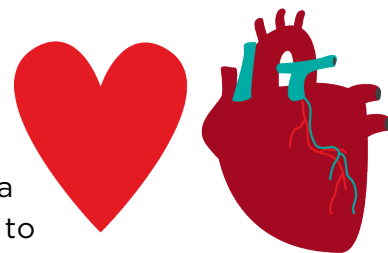
2 Take your time before ruling out tried and true topics or rushing into a topic just because it's quirky. Many applicants share a similar set of life experiences, so it's not surprising that some tried and true topics push their way to the surface over and over again. Just because a subject is common doesn't mean it's a topic to be avoided. It's how you TREAT the subject matter that makes all the difference. On the other end of the spectrum, some people brainstorm for college essay topics and, through a very organic process, decide they want to compare themselves to a toaster oven in their college essays, but this strategy doesn't work for everyone. Explore what comes naturally and if you are totes norm, let that totes norm flag fly!



CHAPTER 4

Writing Your Heart Out

1 Keep going! Even if you think you have nothing to say when you start freewriting, write about anything. If you don't know what to write about, start jotting down a description of your day so far. Just don't stop the forward motion. Trust your instincts. If your ideas come out as a drawing or diagram, go with it. Once you push yourself to start writing, a flood ideas usually follows.

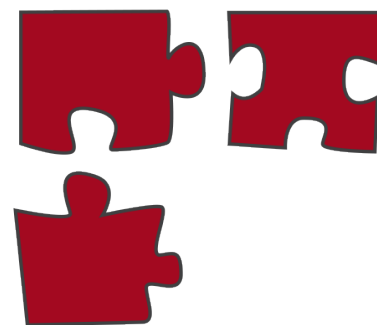


2 Identify big patterns in your freewrites to hone your topic. What themes come up over and over again? Is there a specific challenge you describe multiple times? Do you find yourself writing about various aspects of the same small event? Is there a metaphor that repeats itself in various incarnations? Look for the interplay between the answers to questions posed by your freewrite interviewer. How do your responses play off each other? Highlight anything that feels important.

CHAPTER 5

Sculpting Your Story

1 Reveal, don't explain. Every personal essay is going to require some setup. The trick is to reveal this information through engrossing details, dialogue, and other compelling language. Don't settle for a bare bones telling in its driest form. Give us some hearty/vibrant descriptions to latch onto. A few carefully selected details often allow you to say a lot. And in an assignment that is relegated to such a small space, it is important to be economical with your words.



2 Harness the power of small details. Details allow for the personalization of a story. They are what transforms an essay that could have been written by a handful of your peers into an essay that could only have been channeled from your brain through your fingers and onto the page. Details breathe life into your story, AND they act as the supporting evidence for bold claims. In fact, excellent details, thoughtfully integrated, can serve as both a claim and the proof in one.

CHAPTER 6

The Final Polish

1 Cut the fat! The reason we asked you to write so much in earlier chapters was so that you could have your pick of an array of ideas, but now you have to narrow it down to the best ones. Every word that appears on the page should be specific, memorable, and deliberate. While 650 words may feel like a lot when the page is blank, you may have realized that it is actually a very small space in which to tell even a modest-sized story. You will likely need every word allotted to you to get your point across, so use them creatively, economically, and with intention.



2 Ask these final questions before hitting submit. Will this essay make admissions wish they could meet me in person? Does it inspire them to want to know more about me? Is this essay actually about me? (Or is it about my skateboarding aunt?) Will anyone else be able to write this essay in the way I wrote it? Would it be crazy to think of someone else claiming my essay as his/her own? What does this essay say about me? What is the ultimate message I am hoping to convey? Do I feel good about this essay? Would I feel proud reading it aloud in front of an audience? Does it represent who I really am?



CHAPTER 7

Guide to the Supplemental Essays

1 Brace yourself for the “Why” essay. You may have noticed the “Why Questionnaire” we provided to accompany chapter 7.

That’s because the “why do you want to go here” question is by far the most common kind of supplemental essay question. This shape-shifting prompt can come in many forms as it attempts to solicit information like: What will you do when you get here? How will you take advantage of all the resources our school has to offer? How will the school support your academic or professional goals? And how do your past experiences or future goals support these claims? No matter what, there are two essential components to a successful why essay: in-depth knowledge of a school and a convincing demonstration of personal interest.



2 Don’t short sell the importance of short answers. 250 characters is not a lot of characters, which means the challenge of answering these questions lies half in generating honest, unique and clever ideas, and the other in being concise. Humorous answers can also have heavy impact here. Our advice to you: Overbrainstorm and overwrite. Think of as many ideas as you possibly can for each short answer and get them all on the page. When narrowing down your choices, think about representing a range of your personality traits and interests.

CHAPTER 8

Managing Stress and Writer’s Block

1 Take breaks and rest when you’re feeling fried. Give yourself some space to clear your head so you can come back to your work fresher and with a little more Jedi writing power.



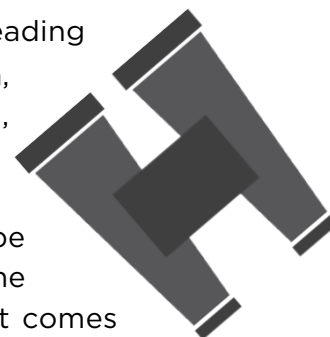
2 Disconnect the devices. Whether you’re going for an invigorating run or just staring blankly into space, give your brain a rest and set aside some time to power down and GET BORED. Your brain will rebel against the state of general ennui and generate random thoughts and memories on its own if you create the space.



CHAPTER 9

Learning from Real Essays

1 Keep the reading of example essays to a minimum. Reading through 1,000 examples of successful essays is a bad idea, destined to cloud your brain and induce the panic button. Still, we know you will be tempted to indulge, and taking a peek at a handful of admissions essays written by real students can showcase some effective strategies and tools that can be implemented in your own college essays. Just keep the exploration to a minimum. The sugar crash and foggy brain that comes after an overdose of other applicant's work isn't worth it.

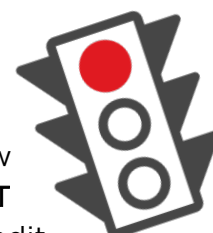


2 Use other people's essays as a launch point, not a limitation. Trust that you have enough of your own Wonka magic and imagination to cook up a winning essay with its own distinct flavor, sweetness and enchantment. You have ideas that no one else in the history of college essay writing has used before. Note what works in the essay examples you read, but put faith in your own imagination and method of execution.

CHAPTER 10

Top 10 Do's and Don'ts

1 DON'T rule out ideas before you fully explore them. **DON'T** try too hard to come up with ideas that are quirky versus authentic. **DON'T** forget that the essay is about you and no one else. **DON'T** repeat your resume. **DON'T** tell admissions what you want them to know (show them). **DON'T** sell yourself short. **DON'T** be negative. **DON'T** add extra words just to up the word count. **DON'T** skip the final edit. **DON'T** plagiarize. **DON'T** forget that everyone has a story worth telling.



2 DO start early! **DO** organize your work. **DO** be authentic. **DO** brand yourself. **DO** take calculated risks. **DO** choose your advisors wisely. **DO** listen to your gut. **DO** entertain. **DO** submit to the relatively random nature of the process. **DO** call College Essay Advisors for help!

