

How to write an application essay



Some college and scholarship applications require essays. Some of these ask you to briefly respond to a specific question, while others require longer responses. Use these writing tips, then practice with the sample prompts or with one from your applications.

Follow directions

This simple tip is the most important one – pay attention to what is being asked of you. Answer the question asked of you, keep within page or word limits, and pay attention to any special formatting requests.

Write your best

For most applications, you will only be submitting one or two written pieces. The people who read your applications assume that what they see is the best you can do. It's your job to make sure you prove them right! Your essays should be examples of your best writing.

Proofread

This is good practice no matter what you're writing, but you'll want to make sure you proofread these essays extra carefully. Better yet, have a friend or trusted adult proofread for you, too. You'd be surprised at the number of applicants who write that they really want to go to The University of Minnesota on their application to St. Olaf College! Thorough proofreading can prevent these simple mistakes.

Be yourself

Essays are an opportunity for the admissions and scholarship committees to learn about the parts of you and your experiences that aren't captured by the "numbers" (i.e. GPA and test scores). Use your essay to show them what's important to you and to let your personality shine through. For example, some students wonder if it's okay to write a humorous essay. The best advice we've heard about this is "Funny essays can be great to read, but if no one's ever told you you're funny, this isn't the time to try."

Remember you have an audience

Most of the time you won't meet the person who is reading your application, so it can feel like you don't have an audience. It's important to remember that you do. While it's okay to write about the things that matter to you, it's always wise to consider that you don't know the politics, religion, or personal beliefs of the person who is reading your application. Choose a topic that interests you, but be careful not to offend.

Reduce, reuse, recycle

There's no question that writing essays can be time consuming. Reduce the amount of time you spend by reusing your work when possible. Many prompts are just slightly different from one another, and with some careful editing (and proofreading!), you should be able to recycle an essay for one application into a usable essay for another.

College application essay prompts

The Common Application

[The Common Application](#) is a standard application used by more than 900 colleges around the U.S. so you can apply to multiple schools with just one application. The application opens each year on August 1 and publishes a list of essay prompts; students must choose one. Some colleges may require additional essay questions. [College Essay Advisors provides extensive tips on how to choose a prompt and draft a successful essay.](#)

2022-23 Common Application essay prompts:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Other college applications

Many colleges ask additional essay questions. Often the admissions committee is looking to see you understand how the college would be a good fit for you and your future goals.

Why do you want to attend [college name]?

Other colleges may ask you to focus on specific skills that will help you succeed in college, such as leadership, community service, or commitment to diversity.

The University of Minnesota values difference, and we take pride in our diverse community. Please explain how you will share your experiences, values and interests with our community.

Many colleges also offer students who don't meet minimum entrance requirements or who have struggled in school an opportunity to explain their specific circumstances. This is extremely important to include if this applies to you! Admissions representatives want to know more about you.