

10 COLLEGE ESSAY TIPS

Must-Read Tips for Writing a Unique, Compelling
College Application Essay

from the experts at Passport Admissions



We at Passport Admissions have helped over 250 students apply to 500+ different colleges. We have read thousands of college essays, both great and terrible. The following list of tips has been compiled from the mistakes and struggles of our past students, and we hope they are useful to you in getting through your own college essays.

Tip 1 → Don't sell yourself.

This might seem counter-intuitive. Isn't the essay the best place to convince an admissions committee that they should accept you?

As it turns out, no. The rest of the application is what sells you. Your grades, test scores, letters of recommendation, and list of accomplishments are much better at selling yourself than your essay is.

Plus, if you're going to sell yourself, you're up against some stiff competition:

- How many valedictorians apply to college? (hint: all of them)
- How many class presidents? (all of them)
- How many captains of sports teams? (you get the idea)

If you're trying to sell yourself, there's not much that you can say that will actually convince a college to accept you. Instead, just be yourself (see tip #4 below).

Tip 2 → Avoid cliches.

The biggest mistake students make when writing their college essays is thinking, "what do colleges want to hear?" By asking this question, students inevitably write about the same topics as everyone else. Parke Muth, a former admissions officer at the University of Virginia, once called the majority of college essays McEssays, comparing them to a Big Mac, because no matter where you go across the country, these essays look and taste the same.

McEssays are written on topics such as, “How I Learned the Value of Hard Work,” (through my position of leadership) or “My Family Trip to Europe,” (and how I discovered that it’s a small world, after all) or “The Best Game of My Life” (the time I score the winning goal). Oh, and lest we forget our favorite McEssay, “How I Saved the World Through Community Service” (sometimes known as the Building Houses in Mexico essay).

These essays are so overdone that it’s impossible to write about these topics without incurring the obligatory eye roll from the admissions office. It’s best to avoid them entirely.

Tip 3 ➤ Read sample essays (but with a grain of salt).

It can be helpful to read what other seniors before you have written. There are dozens of titles on Amazon full of great essays, everything from 50 Successful Harvard Application Essays to Heavenly Essays: 50 Narrative College Application Essays that Worked.

When used well (and of course, not plagiarized, since admissions officers have read them too), these books can help you generate ideas, understand the genre you’re writing, and help you come up with a topic that’s unique to you.

But remember to take these essays with a grain of salt. Nobody would buy a book called Average Essays by Typical Students. These essays are PUBLISHED for a reason: they’re really good. Normal students write solid essays and get into great schools every year. You don’t have to write a New York Times Bestseller in order to get into your college of choice.

Tip 4 ➤ Be yourself.

Instead of selling yourself, just be yourself. I know that’s a frightening prospect when you’re trying to get into a college with a record-low acceptance rate, but here’s what you should remember: admissions officers are human beings, and they are looking for kids to root for. As weird as it seems in the middle of thousands of applicants, admissions officers read your essays to see if they like you. And the single most likeable quality is someone who knows who they are and doesn’t try to be anyone else.

Tip 5 ➤ This isn't English class.

Ah, the generic high school essay advice: write a five-paragraph essay, starting with a famous quotation, continuing to a thesis sentence and three body paragraphs, and finishing with a conclusion that says exactly what you just told the reader. Sound familiar?

Throw it out the window. All of it. You're writing a personal narrative, a story that should not be confined to the formulaic approach of high school English papers. Start with a story or a hook to grab the reader's attention and proceed through the story in whatever structure makes sense. If you feel lost in this new format, read sample essays to find a structure that might work for you.

Tip 6 ➤ Don't repeat what can be found in other parts of your application.

Many students forget how much the admissions officer already knows about them before reading their essay. The reader already knows your grades, test scores, how hard your high school is, where your parents went to college, which extracurriculars were most important to you, and (for many colleges) what your teachers and counselor have said about you. That's a pretty long list of stuff, and this list should be liberating. It means you don't have to cram every last detail of your life into your essay.

Tip 7 ➤ Focus on one story, topic, or experience.

Instead of trying to write about everything, let your essay focus on the one story you most want to share with the admissions officer reading your application. Let that story show the reader who you are in one moment of your life, and the reader will assume that's how you are in other parts of your life.

Some of the best college essays focus on the smaller parts of life: a day spent lost in a foreign city, a week spent making a suit of armor, a month spent at a part-time job. Your

essay does not need to talk about the meaning of life or anything grand; writing about something smaller and more concrete will usually make your essay far more interesting and will still allow the reader to get to know and like you.

Tip 8 ➤ Re-write, re-write, re-write.

Many students get frustrated that their first draft isn't very good. Of course it isn't! You just wrote it! Even Dickens and Hemingway didn't produce masterpieces on their first try, so you should temper your expectations about your own abilities.

Instead, focus on revising your essays. Revisions can help improve the plot, the characters, the main point, the grammar, the style... everything that you're dissatisfied with can be tackled in future revisions.

Tip 9 ➤ Get feedback from one or two people you trust.

There's an old saying: too many chefs spoil the broth. Showing your college essay to too many people leads to the same problem: it becomes an essay-by-committee rather than an essay that retains your voice. The solution is to show your essay only to one or two people. One should be an excellent grammarian; the other should know you well.

Be careful whom you choose. Ideally, you're looking for someone with experience with reading lots of college essays. Just because someone is a good writer does not mean he or she will give you good advice about your college essay. We've seen scores of college essays butchered by well-meaning parents and English teachers who don't know what colleges are looking for.

Tip 10 ➤ Proofread.

"The well-renowned faculty, the incredibly talented (and somewhat nerdy) students, the

Pasadena location - those are some of the many reasons Cal Tech is my first choice for college.” This sentence concluded a college essay submitted by a future engineer. The essay detailed the many programs the engineer was hoping to participate in and how he would contribute his talents to campus. The only problem: he sent this essay to Northwestern instead of Cal Tech.

It seems obvious that you should double-check your essays, but in this era of applying to 12 to 15 colleges, it can be pretty easy to make a mistake. Sending one college’s essay to another college is probably the most high-profile of these errors, but the solution is the same: give yourself plenty of time to proofread everything before you submit.



We're a bunch of nerds, admissions nerds that is. We're smart, passionate people who love what we do: helping students like you stand out in the admissions process. We actually get excited about writing personal statements and about helping our students apply to college, medical school, and graduate school.

Since we're nerds, here are some numbers you may find interesting about Passport:

- 500 happy students (and counting)
- 400 different colleges admitted our students (including every selective one you can name)
- 100 different medical schools admitted our students (they're all selective)
- 80% of our students come to us through referral from happy students

Passport Admissions can help you navigate the perils of the application process, put the story of your life onto paper, and find schools that are a good fit for you.

Schedule A Free Meeting

Join us for a free meeting, and we would love to get to know you and your story! Meet with one of our expert admissions advisors in-person, by phone, or over Skype.

PassportAdmissions.com/Schedule-A-Meeting