

Creative Nonfiction (College Admission) Essay

Often, the college admission essay takes the place of an admissions interview, so it is imperative that you separate yourself from the stack. Not only should your essay be flawless grammatically, but it should also present you as the unique and intelligent person you are.

For this assignment, you will write a creative nonfiction essay based on the guidelines of The Common Application (www.commonapp.org). According to this website, the college admission essay “helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself.” One of the best ways to do this is to tell a story or a brief vignette about a prior experience you’ve had.

Your essay should be between 300-600 words, typed, double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font. Topic options as seen on The Common Application are:

College Essay Topics:

1. Describe your favorite academic subject and explain how it has influenced you.
2. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
3. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
4. Briefly discuss your reasons for pursuing the major you have selected.
5. Who is the person you dream of becoming and how do you believe _____ University can help you achieve this?
6. Research shows that an ability to learn from experiences outside the classroom correlates with success in college. What was your greatest learning experience over the past 4 years that took place outside of the traditional classroom?
7. Reflect on a significant challenge you have encountered during your high school career. Tell us about the person (mentor, family member, friend, coach, teacher, etc.) who provides support, advice, and wisdom to you in times of difficulty.
8. Consider something in your life you think goes unnoticed and write about why it's important to you.
9. “If you feel you are in a black hole, don’t give up. There’s a way out,” Stephen Hawking said. Describe a time you faced a problem that seemed impossible to solve. What did you do to find a solution?

Writing the Essay

1. Write in a style that “sounds” like you. The essay should reflect your personality.
2. **Introduction**—Start with a “hook” to capture your reader’s attention. A “hook” can be:

- An Unusual or unexpected statement
(Note: make sure you explain how this strange statement is related to your thesis.)
 - “Before I kicked the ball toward the net, I felt like a bullet had been shot from behind the bleachers and lodged in my hip.”
 - “Do you have body bags? The leak-proof kind...we need as many as you can spare!”
- An unrealistic, contradictory, or apparently nonsensical statement
 - “I opened the jar of mayonnaise as carefully as if I were defusing a nuclear warhead.”
- A thought-provoking question
 - “Why do teenagers think that all advice that comes from parents is wrong?”
- A Confession or admission
 - “Sometimes I think that I have *xanthophobia*: fear of the color yellow.”

*If you start by describing a scene or setting, make sure it is interesting and intriguing.

*Be careful about starting or ending your essay with a quote, statistic, or definition. This is common and only stands out if is done exceptionally well.

*Do not begin with an overused sentence like

“From _____ experience, I learned _____ and _____.”

*Do not use more than ¼ of the word limit.

<p>3. Tell the reader something about yourself even if the prompt just asks about an activity or opinion.</p>	<p>Good: “<i>Teaching autistic kids to swim last summer, I learned to measure success by how hard I work and not how much I achieve.</i>”</p> <p>Bad: “<i>Last summer I taught autistic kids to swim and helped them succeed.</i>”</p>
<p>4. Give specific, detailed explanations and examples.</p>	<p>Good: “<i>If my mother had not forced me to eat all those new foods, I might not be so eager to study in a country where I don’t speak the language.</i>”</p> <p>Bad: “<i>Without my mother, I would not be who I am today.</i>”</p>
<p>5. Use details to show—do not just tell</p>	<p>Good: “<i>Because of the student-faculty forums, students can now study teenage psychology instead of just memorizing the areas of the brain.</i>”</p>

	<p>Bad: “Because of my program, students have more input it the school and can make the curriculum relevant to themselves.”</p>
<p>6. Use vivid images instead of generalities.</p>	<p>Good: “After sleeping on the rocky ground for two weeks, our simple cabin seemed like a palace.”</p> <p>Bad: “When we finished backpacking, the cabin seemed very uncomfortable.”</p>
<p>7. Be concise—a good example does not need to be explained.</p>	<p>Good: “As my manager glowered at me, I realized I had only seconds to explain why the \$100 dollar bill was in my hand.” (It is obvious that this made the writer look guilty).</p> <p>Bad: As my manager looked at me with a frown on his face, I could see that he was angry. Having the valuable \$100 dollar bill in my hand made me look guilty. I know I had to come up with an explanation that would satisfy him quickly.” (This explanation of the example is a waste of words).</p>
<p>8. Avoid clichés—they are shortcuts for real thought.</p>	<p>Good: “Ellen taught me to build relationships based on shared experiences.”</p> <p>Bad: “Ellen pulled me out of my shell.”</p>

Hints:

- Make sure every word in your essay adds to what you are telling the admissions officers about yourself. Do not add extra detail just because they occurred to you.
- Don’t use the words “I” and “me” too much.

Finishing It Off

1. Proofread every word. Don’t offend the admissions officers with grammar or punctuation errors or misspelled words. Spell Check and Grammar Check can create errors.
2. Important errors to proofread for and avoid:
 - Pronoun-Antecedent Agreement
 - “If a **person** wants to get into a good college, **they** need a high GPA.”
 - Error: “a person” is singular, “they” is plural.
 - Correction: “A person who wants to go to a good college needs a high GPA.”
 - Unclear Pronouns
 - “When I got into my first-choice, **it** was very exciting.”

- Error: “it” does not refer to anything.
- Correction: “*Getting into my first-choice college was every exciting.*”
- Passive Voice
 - “***It is*** the lure of leaving home ***that*** makes me want to go to college in California.”
 - Error: the construction using a “to be” verb is awkward.
 - Correction: “*The lure of leaving home makes me want to go to college in California.*”
- 3. Have someone proofread your essay.
- 4. When finished, ask yourself:
 - How will this make the admissions officers want to admit me?
 - What image of me does this present?
 - Does this add information that is not in the rest of my application?
 - Does this sound like me?
 - It is interesting. (If you are bored with your topic/story, so will the admissions officers)

Examples:

Taken from the website of John Hopkins University: <https://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays-that-worked/#essay1>