

How to Write about You: A Guide to Writing Application Essays

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Writing about yourself is hard. It often feels fake, weird, or cheesy. You might feel like you are not actually that special. You might not be sure where to begin. The good news is that writing about yourself is not so difficult if you start with the facts and then organize them into an essay that makes sense. You can shape your essays so that they make a positive impression on your readers without being sappy, showy, or boring. Here are some guidelines to get you started.

1. BEGIN BY BRAINSTORMING

You need to think about everything that has prepared you for college. Try to make a list or an idea web. List *everything* no matter how small or silly it may seem – you can pick what is most important later. Do not worry about feeling awkward or silly. Remember, the truth is the truth. If it is true of you, list it. If it isn't true, don't list it. Consider the following categories:

- School activities: AP/IB/Honor's classes, foreign language classes, classes that impacted you, special projects, extra-curricular activities (sports, plays, band/orchestra/choir)
- Volunteer/Leadership activities: Did you do a volunteer activity for a day? List it. Were you a member or leader of an organization? List it. Do you have a job? List it. Be sure to list your involvement in Americana!
- Personal qualities: Determined, passionate, leader, problem-solver. Be real with yourself, and ask someone what they see in you if you are really lost.
- Motivation: Why do you want to go to college? Do you want to make a better life for yourself? Give back to your family? Learn more? Help people? Make the world a better place?
- Challenges you have overcome: Think about both personal and school challenges. Describe both the challenge and how you were able to get through it. Did it impact your decision to want to go to college? Don't be afraid to talk about your experiences learning English and adjusting to a new country. Explain why it was difficult, but also explain how you have achieved success.
- Any marks on your record that might need explaining: A really bad semester, a low ACT score, trouble with the law, or other serious issues (not that you got a B once). Again, you can talk about the challenges you faced in learning English and adjusting when you came to the U.S.

2. CLEARLY STATE YOUR GOALS

You should state your broad and specific goals. For example, a broad goal may be that you want to get a career in the medical field, and a specific goal may be that you want to study nursing in

college. Repeat these goals several times in each essay you write. Use your experiences as evidence that these really are your goals.

You can also talk about the specific school to which you are applying. Explain why that school is awesome and why you would fit in well there. How would going to that school help you achieve your goals? For example, if you are interested in nursing and you are applying to a college with a really good nursing program, make sure to say that going to a school with such a great program will help you to achieve your goal of being a great nurse.

3. CONSIDER YOUR READER

Your readers are human beings. That means that they get tired, confused, and annoyed. Furthermore, they are reading your essay with a mission in mind. They want to know if you have what it takes. Make your readers happy; emphasize what your readers want to see so that they can find it. Does the college have an emphasis on teamwork? Talk about how you are a great team player using examples of times when you are a part of a team. Does the college want creative thinkers? Describe an experience when you thought of something new and exciting. The core of your essays will be similar from application to application, but your emphasis should change depending on your audience.

4. TELL A STORY

No matter how disconnected your high school experience may seem, it followed some sort of path. Your job is to explain that path to your reader and how one circumstance led you to another. Ultimately, you should show that this path has led you to pursue a college education and a future career. The reader should be convinced that it is only logical for college to be the next step on your journey.

An easy way to tell your story is to organize your essays in time order. What experiences did you have when you were young relating to school? What were you interested in? How did you change and why? Lead the readers through your experience. Use transitions between paragraphs and the different topics you brainstormed to guide you.

5. EVERY ACTIVITY HAS AN OUTCOME

It is extremely important that you explain why your work matters. Readers will not care if you were part of a playing-with-puppies-and-kittens club. Readers will care if your club spent time at an animal shelter playing with homeless dogs and cats and then made posters to raise awareness about animal adoption. Your readers will know that you have had an impact in the past and will likely have an impact in the future. Your readers will want to invest in you.

You should always explain how your extra-curricular activities, work, or volunteering has had an effect. Be specific. What new knowledge did you discover? How many people were affected? What demographic group was impacted? How often did you volunteer? Did you work full-time? What impact did it have on your goals or thoughts about life?

6. WEAVE IN YOUR PERSONAL QUALITIES

Do not say “I am perseverant”. That’s boring. Rather, say “I overcame [blank] challenge by doing [blank]”. You should use your experiences to show your personal qualities instead of listing them. Not only does this make your essay clearer, but it gives evidence to your claims. Mention aspects that make you unique, such as being a first-generation college student or having a diverse background.

7. STAY PROFESSIONAL

Yes, it’s a personal essay, and yes you should talk about yourself. But that does not mean you should write a tragic love poem. Never write in a way that implies that you feel sorry for yourself. Never put down others. Avoid using a negative tone. If you have overcome a big personal challenge, definitely state the challenge but do so briefly. Focus on what you did to *overcome* the challenge. Try to maintain a matter-of-fact approach with personal matters – the personal matters should speak for themselves without being emotional or dramatic. On the other extreme, do not be a robot. If you are enthusiastic about something you did in high school or you want to study in college, you should say so. Just make sure that it is concise and supported by activities you have done.

8. HAVE A CLEAR ARGUMENT

You probably have a page limit, and you might have trouble fitting everything into the essay. If this is your issue, try to talk in depth about the experiences that mattered most. You can talk a little bit about the rest if you really want, but it’s better to have an essay that flows and does not have a distracting format than to list all of your experiences without good organization.

9. CONFIDENCE, CONFIDENCE, CONFIDENCE

The thesis of your essay is that you are awesome, passionate, motivated, and prepared for college both personally and academically. The rest of the essay is evidence. Unless you are extremely arrogant, the admissions committee will not be upset with you for saying that you are a great candidate. They are looking for confident people because confident people are more likely to be successful in college. And remember, everyone has to write an essay. If you are not forward about your abilities and accomplishments, a bolder student will be taking your place.

Hopefully this will help you get started. So grab that computer and get typing. The more drafts you write, the better!