

The College Essay Workbook

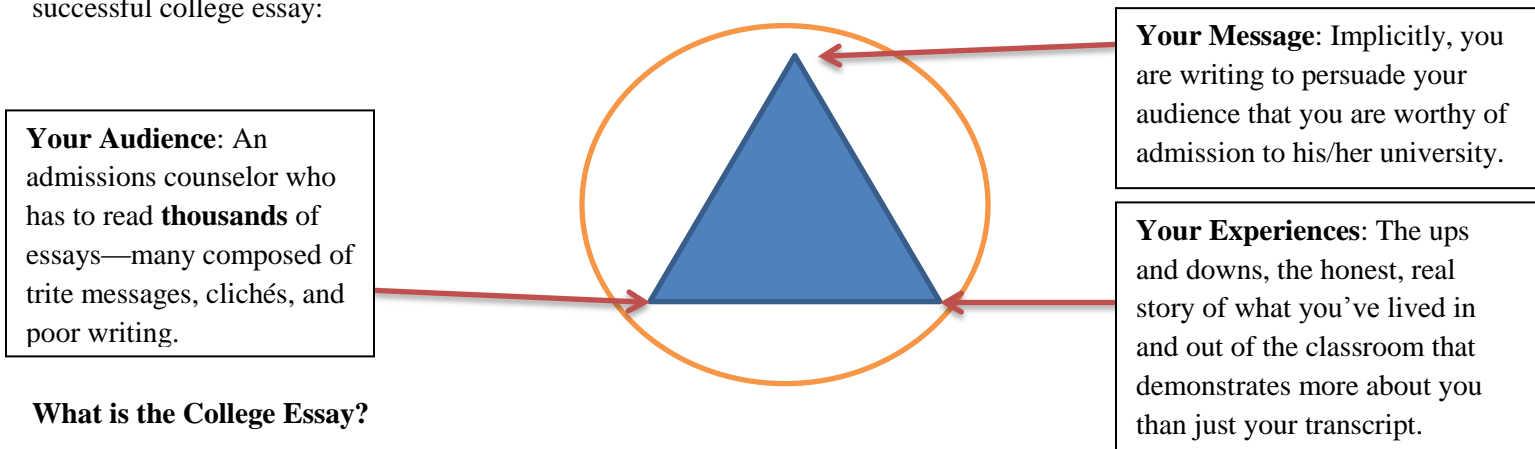
The Rhetorical Situation: What’s Going On?

Before we think about what and how you’ll write, let’s consider your situation. According to the Princeton Review,

“Admissions committees put the most weight on your high school grades and your test scores. However, selective colleges receive applications from many worthy students with similar scores and grades—too many to admit. So they use your essay (along with your letters of recommendation and extracurricular activities) to find out what sets you apart from the other talented candidates” (www.theprincetonreview.com)

To put the importance of the college essay in perspective in terms of statistics, consider this: Harvard, an obviously selective school, had around 34,000 applicants last year. It accepted only 2,000. My alma mater, the University of Dayton, accepts about three in four applicants, and it is a more selective school than, say, the Ohio State University. **Thus, wherever you’re applying, anything that makes you an individual in these large fields will help.**

So, let’s take stock of your position as a writer by considering your situation and the crucial elements that play into a successful college essay:



What is the College Essay?

Essentially, it is a personal, thoughtful essay about something that has meaning for you. Here are some other qualifications of what a college essay is...and isn’t.

A College Essay is...	A College Essay isn’t...
An opportunity to sound like yourself	<i>Necessarily</i> an opportunity to sound really smart
A chance to write about something important to you	A chance to write about what you think an admissions counselor would like to hear about or a soapbox on an issue about which you convince people to change their minds
A piece of writing in which you stick to the word limit	An essay in Mr. Eble’s class in which you have free reign to write as much (or as little) as you’d like
A thoughtful piece of writing in which you reflect upon an experience (or a set of experiences that illustrates a personal characteristic)	A recounting of an experience in which you give plot summary.
Your chance to write your story apart from your application	A recapitulation of your application
A specific answer to a specific prompt	One essay that you recycle for multiple prompts
Written in a unique voice that can include humor that an adult admissions officer would find funny	Written academically (like most essays for school) or with crude, off-color humor and one-liners

Here's a lousy example

Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

Everything happens for a reason. My character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work that has had an influence on me is Katniss Everdeen from The Hunger Games by Suzanne Collins. I absolutely LOVE the book. I read it when I was a sophomore. I could see so much of myself in her (even though she's a girl!).

If you haven't read The Hunger Games, it's a pretty awesome book. I think it's one of the best books I've read. It's about a girl named Katniss Everdeen who lives in District 12 and has to risk herself to save her sister from being in the Hunger Games, a game where children fight each other to the death so their district doesn't go hungry. Katniss is really outdoorsy—like me—because she hunts for food. She had to do this when her dad died. Her mom couldn't take care of the family, so she got herself together and got food for her mom and sister.

The world she lives in is crazy. Everybody has to fight to stay alive. Katniss can fight in more ways than one. Katniss uses a bow and arrow to hunt. In the arena, she does the same thing. This reminds me of when my dad took me out to hunt when I was a little kid. He taught me how to use a twelve gauge shotgun when I was just a little boy! And I can still use it today. Plus, my parents always say that I shoot from the hip all the time—I say what's on my mind. That's how Katniss and I are alike.

But we're not just the same. She has had a MAJOR influence on me. This was the first time I read a book where the main character was actually like me. I could totally relate to Katniss because she had to do a lot by herself. It is such a good book. When I was in junior high, my mom got cancer and had to go to the hospital for a few weeks at a time. This was a sad time in my life. But it wasn't the end. I took care of my little brother and got him and myself to school every day because my dad had to balance work and going to the hospital, too. I was doing good in school, too. I got my best GPA when my mom was in the hospital because I knew I had to do well to keep my parents from having to worry about me or my brother. That's why Katniss has had a major influence on me.

So when I read The Hunger Games when I sat in the hospital when my mom was sick, I got a lot of strength from the main character. She wasn't perfect or anything, but she sacrificed herself and came out a winner with a healthy mom...just like me.

Here's a pretty decent example:

Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.

Wallflower

I wasn't unfamiliar with the word. It was something I remembered hearing since I was able to grasp the fine art of polysyllabic language. Of course, in my experience, it had always been subtly laced with negativity. They told me that it wasn't something I was supposed to be. They told me to socialize more -- okay, maybe they had a point there -- but to open up to strangers I didn't know from Adam? Apparently, yes, that was exactly what I was to do. I had to 'put myself out there,' or something. They told me I couldn't be a wallflower. Wallflower was unnatural. Wallflower was wrong. So my impressionable younger self tried her best not to see the inherent beauty in the word. I wasn't supposed to see it; no one else did. I was terrified to recognize its rightness. And that was where Charlie came in.

Before I get any further, I feel obligated to mention that Charlie is not real. I question whether that makes a difference -- it shouldn't, really. Fictional, factual, or seven-dimensional, his influence in my life is indisputable. But, to give credit where credit is overwhelmingly due, he comes from the brilliant mind of Stephen Chbosky, from the universe of his novel, *The Perks of Being a Wallflower*. In a series of anonymous letters to an unknown friend, Charlie tells his story of life, love, and high school: of skirting the fringes of life and of learning to make the leap. And from the first sentences, I was drawn to Charlie. I understood him. I was him. He was me. I felt acutely his fears of entering high school, his just-barely-perceptible separation from the rest of the student body, because these fears were mine as well.

What I didn't have, the singular distinction between this character and myself, was his vision. Even from the very beginning, Charlie's innocence and naiveté gave him an unparalleled ability to see beauty in everything and to acknowledge it without hesitation, exactly as I'd longed to allow myself to do. I had been scared to be the only one to value being a wallflower. But with Charlie came the promise that I wasn't alone. When I saw that he could see what I wanted to see, I suddenly found that I could see it, too. He showed me that the true beauty in being a wallflower was the ability to acknowledge freely that beauty, to embrace it for everything it was while still managing to 'put myself out there' on a level I hadn't thought myself capable. Charlie taught me not conformity, but the honest, open expression of myself, free from the vise-like fear of being judged by my peers. He told me that sometimes, they were wrong. Sometimes, it was okay to be a wallflower. Wallflower was beautiful. Wallflower was right.

And for that, Charlie, I am forever in your debt.

Know Yourself

Colleges base your admission and award scholarships based upon a few categories: Grades, Test Scores, Extracurricular Activities, Recommendation Letters (**by the way...contact teachers about those ASAP**) and, of course, **the college essay**, which gives you the opportunity to showcase the “intangibles” that statistics and grades on a paper application cannot.

So let's take some time to reflect upon your life and what you might consider choosing as a topic. *Answer the following questions as honestly as possible—take some time to dig through your memory.*

1. **History:** Think back to your earliest memory, and go from there. Move chronologically, cataloging events in your life until you reach the most recent one(s). Don't limit yourself to only dramatic or life-altering experiences. Spend the most time on the past few years; childhood memories rarely create a useful picture of who you are today. Use the following space to write down your ideas:

2. **Achievements and Accomplishments:** List all awards or other commendations you have received (academic, extracurricular, etc.). Also include goals you have reached or accomplished that may not have been explicitly recognized by others. What milestones have been important to you and your personal growth? What achievements are you most proud of? Use the following space to write down your ideas:

3. **Activities and Extracurriculars:** Outside of the classroom, what have you spent your time doing? These may be one-time or ongoing activities. Keep the following areas in mind (but don't limit yourself to these): sports, civic groups, travel, volunteer work, art projects, technology, and religious groups. Why did you start the activity, and, if applicable, why do you continue with it? Remember, many of these may be listed in other places on your application. Think about things you've done that are not mentioned elsewhere, or have not been given significant attention on the rest of the application. Here is where you can expand. Use the following space to write down your ideas:

4. **Influences:** Make a list of the people, events, works of art, literature, and music that have affected you. Use the following space to write down your ideas:

5. **Skills:** What are you good at? You may want to ask friends and family members to help with this. Skills may be those acquired through learning and practice, such as playing an instrument, or may include personal attributes, such as leadership or willingness to follow the road not taken. Use the following space to write down your ideas:

6. **Passions:** What makes your blood boil or your heart beat faster? Is there a sports team you follow with fervor, a book you've read many times, a topic of local, national, or global importance that gets you riled up? You may have listed these in other sections, but repeat them here because this category examines them from a different point of view. Use the following space to write down your ideas:

7. **Family:** It might sound ordinary to you, but a story about a parent, sibling, or other relative can make a great essay. The more specific you get, the more unique this topic will become. Remember that colleges are looking for students who have the emotional maturity and stability to stay in school and excel—showing that you have a strong family base of support can do just that. Use the following space to write down your ideas:

Know Your Audience

Below, provide the following information:

- To which schools would you like to apply? List each.
- As you list each school, write why you plan to apply to it. What makes that school stand out?
- Finally, (if you have time) research the schools' applications. Do they utilize the Common App, or do they show their own essay prompt?

The Common App's essay prompts (2014-2015)

Instructions. The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. *What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores?* Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)

- Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

(Just for fun) 2013-14 University of Chicago essay questions:

Essay Option 1. Winston Churchill believed "a joke is a very serious thing." From Off-Off Campus's improvisations to the Shady Dealer humor magazine to the renowned Latke-Hamantash debate, we take humor very seriously here at The University of Chicago (and we have since 1959, when our alums helped found the renowned comedy theater The Second City). **Tell us your favorite joke and try to explain the joke without ruining it.**

Essay Option 2. In a famous quote by José Ortega y Gasset, the Spanish philosopher proclaims, "Yo soy yo y mi circunstancia" (1914). José Quintans, master of the Biological Sciences Collegiate Division at the University of Chicago, sees it another way: "Yo soy yo y mi microbioma" (2012). **You are you and your..?**

Essay Option 3.: "This is what history consists of. It's the sum total of all the things they aren't telling us." — Don DeLillo, *Libra*. **What is history, who are "they," and what aren't they telling us?**

Essay Option 4. The mantis shrimp can perceive both polarized light and multispectral images; they have the most complex eyes in the animal kingdom. Human eyes have color receptors for three colors (red, green, and blue); the mantis shrimp has receptors for sixteen types of color, enabling them to see a spectrum far beyond the capacity of the human brain. Seriously, how cool is the mantis shrimp: mantisshrimp.uchicago.edu **What might they be able to see that we cannot? What are we missing?**

Essay Option 5. How are apples and oranges supposed to be compared? Possible answers involve, but are not limited to, statistics, chemistry, physics, linguistics, and philosophy.

Essay Option 6. In the spirit of adventurous inquiry, pose a question of your own. If your prompt is original and thoughtful, then you should have little trouble writing a great essay. Draw on your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, citizen of the world, or future citizen of the University of Chicago; take a little risk, and have fun.