

Getting Started: Choosing Your Topic

Exercise #1

Your topic: Who has influenced you the most in your life?

(This is one of the most common essay questions. It is almost always on the Common Application, so try coming up with original responses to this common question.)

Try writing the first 5 answers/subjects that come to your head.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

4. _____

5. _____

Chances are, you have some pretty obvious items on that list. Maybe you wrote ‘Mom, dad, sister, grandpa, teacher.’ Maybe you had a football coach on there, or a historical figure like Martin Luther King or Gandhi. Those are all good people, but know that many many others have already written essays on them.

Whatever your topic, the point is the same. There are obvious answers that anyone could come up with, and it can be hard to find an original take on a familiar subject. As much as we may admire Abraham Lincoln, did he really influence you in a personal way? Better to come up with a more novel response in the first place.

Try coming up with ten more responses to the question/topic:

Exercise #2: Make Your Essay Fit Your Overall Application

Try to match your career goals and academic interests with a common essay topic. Some of the best college applications are those that show a common interest running throughout the application, an interest reflected in one’s choice of classes, extracurricular activities, teacher recommendations, summer jobs/internships, and stated future plans for college and beyond.

First, complete the following sentences with your ideas of a perfect career:

Twenty years from now I see myself _____.
(Try a few different answers for a few different long-term career goals.)

Ten years from now I see myself _____.
(This is the job that’s going to launch you into that perfect job you wrote above. Again, try several different versions. Brainstorm!)

Four years from now I see myself _____.
(Here you’re imagining yourself as a college senior. How do you imagine your college life has gone? Stick with academic ideas here, or with extracurricular activities connected to some career-oriented or academic interest. This is not the place to talk about parties, sports, etc.)

Now that you have given some thought to these goals, you’re ready to brainstorm some topics for another one of the most common college essays.

Why is College X the right place for you?

(When colleges ask this, they want to hear why their school is the right one for you given your academic interests, their strengths—do your homework on every school!—and your career goals.)

Give 10 reasons why College X is the best place for you:

Exercise #3: Your Strengths and Weaknesses

Colleges love it. Students hate it. If you apply to one or several schools, odds are pretty good they're going to ask you this one. Even if they don't, this is going to come up in interviews, so it's good to think in advance about what you would say.

Let's start with the positive. List 20 strengths. Try to think of all different kinds of strengths. If you're good at math, put that down. But don't limit yourself to that. Maybe you're also good at helping others understand math; maybe you tutor your friends or work well in groups. Outside of school, think about your extracurriculars. Think about personal qualities, too. Most of all, don't be modest! You're using these essays to sell yourself to some people who have never met you!

My Strengths:

Now for the hard part. When an essay (or an interviewer) asks about your weaknesses, they want you to be candid and honest. But remember that you are trying to be positive, so any time you write about a weakness, you should be able to also say what you are doing about it. Don't make excuses for a weakness. Instead, tell the reader about what you're doing to fix it.

My Weaknesses:

Handout: Some Notes for the Student as You Get Started

The scary part is that it's important. A strong essay can set you apart from other candidates whose raw numbers may look a lot like yours. No matter how good (or not so good) your grades and scores are, there are going to be hundreds or even thousands of other candidates who have similar numbers.

What's going to make you stand out? Your essay, for one. The essay proves your ability to express yourself clearly and confidently—one of the most important skills for college. A good essay demands that you grab the attention of a total stranger (a total stranger who has read a few hundred of these essays already) and convince him or her that you are the most interesting person with a 3.4 GPA and 1150 on the SAT they have seen.

You know yourself. Your admissions officer does not know you, so as long as you give your point of view and tell your story, it won't be something he or she has read a dozen times already. This presentation is going to get you writing college admissions essays and help you turn a single idea into the unique and personal statement only you can write.

5 Myths about the Admissions Essay

You have to convince them that you're really smart.

The admissions essay is not the place for you to prove how much you know about math, science, or some other subject. Instead, write about something important to you and do it in a way that engages your reader's attention and (ideally) emotions.

Big words = good writer.

Good writers use the best words, not the biggest words. Read an article in *Newsweek* or the *New York Times*, and you will not find an unreadable clutter of 5-syllable words. Write in correct, but conversational, English. You might find just the right word in the thesaurus, but for the most part, an essay filled with 10-dollar words sounds like you're trying too hard. Keep it simple.

The admissions officer is looking for reasons not to accept me!

You may have a picture of the admissions officer as some crusty old professor-type in a tweed coat, grumbling over misplaced commas and complaining that the essay sounds like it was 'written by a high school student.' Most admissions officers are young, fairly recent graduates from college themselves. In a typical year, they will read hundreds of these, so your job is to do anything you can to keep them interested. Make them laugh, cry, and say, "Look what this girl wrote!"

Nobody's going to read this anyway.

No matter what, an admissions officer is going to read your essay. It's true that some schools put extra weight on the essays, but every school that asks for an essay will read it. The simple truth is: Do a good job and it will set you apart from the rest and improve your chances of admissions. Do a sloppy job or write a dull essay, and it won't help.

I'm not a good writer!

There is nobody more qualified to write an essay about you than you. There is only one reason why the admissions officer is reading your essay. It's not because they're bored and have nothing better to do. And it's certainly not because they don't have anything else to read. They are reading your essay because they are looking to create a diverse class of interesting people, and they don't have a 'you' yet.