

College Application Essays

Advice from Dr. Mandy Suhr-Sytsma, Director of the Emory Writing Center

Audience

- They want to know about YOU.
- They want to read something UNIQUE.
- Emory Admissions says, “We read essays and short answer responses closely. These writing samples are your best opportunity to communicate who you are, what you enjoy, what issues interest you, and what arouses your curiosity.”

Structure

- This genre requires a SPECIFIC anecdote-driven structure, not an argument-driven structure.
 - College Essay Advisors: “The perfect essay topic showcases your personality, passions and/or ambitions without trying to do too much at once. Talking about your family’s adoption of a three-legged dog and how your pet’s perseverance and quirky attitude influenced the way you live your life, will make a better essay than a super general diatribe on why you like dogs, for example. If you find yourself getting lost while writing, ask: what am I trying to say about myself, and am I using a specific, compelling example to tell my story?”
- A narrative tension/turn structure rather than a support/claim structure works well.

Process

- Brainstorm multiple options, and get input on those ideas.
- Write one or more full drafts based on one or more anecdotes.
- Get feedback, revise substantially, get more feedback, revise some more, etc.
- Proofread last, not as you draft.

Examples and Advice

- Check out the College Essay Advisors website.
 - You don’t need to (and I wouldn’t encourage you) to pay for their individualized tutoring to see their good general tips as well as their guidance for each common application essay prompt.
 - I especially like their “Think small” and “Kill those clichés” advice as well as the examples they give for each prompt to show the difference between relaying information and providing a specific engaging story.
- Look at admissions websites for colleges and universities.
 - I especially like the site at Johns Hopkins because they post actual successful student essays and provide commentary from admissions counselors explaining why they like those essays.
- Look at the websites of writing centers, including handouts on personal statements.
- Talk to your summer program instructors and staff.
- Talk to your high school teachers and guidance counselors.

Perspective

- Emory Admissions says: “The Admission Committee will put the most emphasis on your high school curriculum and grades.”
- You don’t know who your readers will be, but you know who you are, and you have plenty of interesting stories to share!

Beyond the College Essay

- Whatever you’re writing: consider genre, audience, and purpose; write multiple drafts; get feedback; and revise.
- Visit your college’s writing center!

More Advice from the Admissions Team at Johns Hopkins University

- **Write about *your* personal experiences.** You can write about a family member, coach, teacher, etc., but we are looking to admit you, not your grandmother.
- **Don’t try to include everything.** Focus on one topic, not everything you’ve been involved in during high school. Essays are a chance to elaborate on something that is important to you.
- **Tell us something about you that we won’t get to see anywhere else in the application.** Listing extracurricular involvements again is a missed opportunity to show a different aspect of you.
- **Pull us in from the beginning.** An attention-grabbing intro is the first stop to a memorable essay. We read thousands of applications and your GPA and testing are important, but not what sets you apart—that’s what your essay should do.
- **Answer the question** that is being asked in the prompt.
- **Be conscious of hot topic issues and potentially controversial topics** (politics, religion, war, pending/recently passed legislation). If an opinion or idea is an important part of who you are, don’t be afraid to write about, but be sure to be respectful of both sides of any issue and remember that regardless of your individual opinions, your essay is a professional document.
- **Write naturally.** Use your voice to show your personality. Be expressive, but your goal shouldn’t be to dazzle us with your word choice (or command of a thesaurus).
- **Be you.** Your essay can be funny, if that is your personality. But if you don’t consider yourself funny, this isn’t the space to try to be.
- **Edit and proofread your essays carefully.** Then have someone else, preferably a teacher or counselor, edit and proofread them as well. Spell-check doesn’t catch everything.