

ADVICE ON WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY

Have fun writing **YOUR LIFE STORY!**

CONSIDERATIONS

- Consider and answer the ***specific question asked***. Make sure your essay(s) relate clearly and directly to the question the prompt is asking.
- Because each applicant is an individual, there is no “**correct**” answer. Don’t try to guess or assume you know what a specific college wants you to write. *Your* thoughts or ideas about a topic should interest admissions officers. This is **YOUR** narrative (story).
- **Try to be genuine and authentic.** Admission officers want to hear *your* voice in your response – the experiences, ideas, opinions, beliefs and values – and words - that make you who you are. Choose to describe or relate something you are passionate or excited about so they can know or understand you better. The essay reveals your character, values and true self. You want to inspire admissions officers to understand, envision, cry, laugh, nod (with understanding, not sleep), or learn with you.
- **Avoid listing or describing your academics, activities or accomplishments.** This information is already listed elsewhere in the application, so do not use the essay to repeat these items. The essay is your opportunity to tell the admissions team who you are and what kind of person you are beyond your grades, test scores, and extracurricular activities (sports, music, arts, etc.)
- **Keep the topic or subject more current.** Do not write about an experience or detail from middle school. Admissions officers are assessing your high school performance and more recent growth and development. Use childhood experiences or details when they are still relevant and you can bring them forward and make them reflective of your high school life or future goals (e.g. you liked playing with a stethoscope when you were a little kid, and you are still interested in studying medicine!).
- **Pick a single detail, topic or subject and focus on it.** You have a limited number of words to write your essay (250-650, and sometimes fewer), so go deep on a specific topic rather than superficially across a wide range of topics. When possible, it is best to find a single, compelling detail or focus. An entire life experience (even if you are not yet 18) will not fit into 250-650 words, and an essay should not read like a resume. Rather, one idea, one thought, one quirk, one person, one symbol, one event or one book that moved or inspired you in a unique way gives you the best means to explore and explain your values and

character. What is the one detail or anecdote that can become the focal point for your essay? It is important to choose this detail before writing.

- **Avoid the “Three D’s” – Death, Disaster and Disability.** There are certain types of essays that are an immediate turn off to the admissions teams, because they are too cliché or they are misunderstood as excuses. These include death, disaster or disability essays, community service essays, world travel essays, academic or athletic essays, academic excuse essays, and saving the world essays.
- **Reuse essays (or portions of essays) when possible, especially if you are applying to many schools.** Make sure, however, to review and read again any reused essays before hitting the submit button. The worst possible way to finish your essay to Denver University is to say, “I can’t wait to go to school in Montana.” This actually happens...more frequently than it should.

WRITING REMINDERS

- **Use Conventions of Standard Written English.** Use proper and correct writing rules; avoid contractions, clichés, idioms, slang, “you”, usage and mechanics errors, and grammar errors. This does not mean use pretentious diction or words from a thesaurus, however. Be clear, concise, and coherent in your writing.
- **Do not use silly fonts, big margins, and/or large font sizes.** Write in the standard font of *Times New Roman* and in a standard font size (12).
- **Explain all abbreviations.** You want to explain your specific and local organizations, clubs, awards, teams, groups, and activities.
- **DO NOT PLAGIARIZE your college essay or essay topic.** If you are caught stealing ideas or words from another source, your application will most likely be formally dismissed. Admission folks have access to Google and many other plagiarism-detecting tools.
- **Use topic and tone with care.** Humor, politics, religion, and debate can often be misunderstood by or offend your audience. Write to reach a broader audience with a wide range of beliefs or opinions.
- **EDIT, EDIT, EDIT!! Proofread your essay, and remember that spellcheck is your best friend.** Ask at least two people (English teacher, counselor, etc.) to read and review your essay to check for major errors.

HOW TO BEGIN

Prewriting is necessary to gather ideas, thoughts and content. There are many ways to pre-write; choose a method that makes sense to you. Use one or more of these methods to brainstorm:

- lists or bullet points
- outlines
- graphic organizers
- topic or word charts
- webbing/mapping/clustering

The writing process is just that...a process. To begin, think about the details, narrative or story you wish to tell or the topic you want to explain or explore and just start. As you write, the story or explanation will take form. Do not worry initially about the structure, format or style. You can clean up your work later in the editing process.

Always consider the following when writing the initial draft(s) of your work:

- prewriting strategy –have an initial idea and focus
- audience (college admissions) – consider your audience
- topic – write to the topic
- format – see specific application guidelines
- style/tone – use strong, active verbs and present (when possible) tense
- language - appeal to all five senses in imagery and descriptions – vivid
- narrative – be personal and expressive

EDITING

Editing is an important skill (and also a process) in writing. Some writers even argue that no writing is ever final and can always be improved or rewritten. You can determine when your writing is ready to share or submit. After setting aside the essay(s) for several days or weeks, return to it with a fresh look and perspective. **Read your writing back to yourself aloud**, and you will hear the flow and style and can validate your story, argument or voice with this audible approach to editing. Be ready to add, delete and rewrite.

Consider the following when editing:

- Write in first person – be personal in this essay
- Beware of sentences and paragraphs that are awkward, too long and confusing, or too short and choppy
- Use complete sentences (for the most part)
- Use a combination of simple, compound and complex sentences
- Create balance structurally within the entire essay

- Write clear and understandable transitions
- Eliminate words that do not seem to fit or sound out of place
- Find words that are rich in meaning - less is more, so be concise
- Avoid too many adjectives or adverbs
- Maintain a consistent voice
- Keep pronouns clear and within reference
- Do not use contractions
- Avoid too many “and” s
- Avoid clichés, idioms or slang, unless specific to a writing style
- Avoid redundancy (e.g. this is about my life, in my opinion, I believe...); your ideas and opinions are assumed
- Make sure all grammar, spelling and punctuation is clean and accurate
- Properly reference or cite any ideas from secondary sources
- Use imagery, details and specifics in your writing – the reader should feel, see or hear your descriptions!