

College Essay Prompt

Discuss an accomplishment or event that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Length: 500-1000 words

Alternative topics:

- a. Describe a setting in which you have collaborated or interacted with people whose experiences and/or beliefs differ from yours. Address your initial feelings and how those feelings were or were not changed by this experience.
- b. Describe a circumstance, obstacle, or conflict in your life, and the skills and resources you used to resolve it. Did it change you? If so, how?
- c. Considering your lifetime goals, discuss how your current and future academic and extra-curricular activities might help you achieve your goals.
- d. Describe a significant setback, challenge or opportunity in your life and the impact that it has had on you.
- e. Write an essay in which you tell us about someone who has made an impact on your life, and explain how and why this person is important to you.

What not to write about:

1. Your Drug Use

Probably every college in the country has to deal with substance abuse on campus, and most people who work at colleges have seen students' academic careers and lives ruined by drugs. If you've had problems with drugs in the past, even if you overcame those problems, the essay isn't the best place to draw attention to your use of illegal substances.

2. Your Sex Life

Yes, sex is usually a bad essay topic. The admissions officers probably don't care whether or not you have an active or interesting sex life. More importantly, an essay on your sexual experiences is going to make many readers cry, "too much information!" You don't want to write about something that might be embarrassing for your reader.

3. Your Time in Jail

Lots of successful students have had run-ins with the law, but it's not something you want to draw undue attention to in your application. The admissions staff is always working to create a safe campus community, and the image of you sitting behind bars isn't go to work in your favor.

4. Your Heroism

Sure, if you acted heroically in some way, it's a fair topic for a college admissions essay. It becomes a bad essay topic when the essay is self-absorbed and arrogant. I've read a lot of annoying essays about how an applicant single-handedly won the football game or turned a friend's life around. Humility is more pleasant to read than hubris.

5. One-Track Social, Religious or Political Lectures

Be careful with divisive issues like abortion, capital punishment, stem cell research, gun control, and the "war on terror." You can certainly write an excellent and thoughtful essay on any of these topics, but too often than not applicants stubbornly and closed-mindedly argue what they see as the "right" side of the argument. The readers of your application don't want to be lectured to, nor do they want to be told they are wrong. The chances of offending your reader are high with some of these touchy topics.

6. Woe Is Me

Writing can be excellent therapy for working through difficult and traumatic events in life -- assault, rape, abuse, incest, attempted suicide, cutting, depression and so on. However, you don't want your college admissions essay to be a self-analysis of your pain and suffering. Such topics might make your reader uncomfortable (a fine thing to do in other contexts, but not here), or they might make your reader question how ready you are for the social and academic rigors of college.

7. The Travel Journal

Colleges like students who have traveled, and travel can lead to a life-changing experience that could make a great college essay. However, travel is a remarkably common topic for college essays, and it often isn't handled well. You need to do more than highlight the fact that you have traveled. A travel essay should be an analysis of a single and meaningful experience, not a summary of your trip to France or South America.

8. A Comedy Routine

The best essays often reveal a writer's sense of humor, but the jokes shouldn't be the point of the essay. Don't use the essay to showcase how witty and clever you are. A good college admissions essay reveals your passions, intelligence and strengths. A 500-word comedy routine doesn't do this.

9. Excuses

If you had a bad semester or two in high school, it may be tempting to use the essay to explain your low grades. Perhaps you were ill, your parents were getting divorced, your best friend died, or you moved to a new country. You will want to convey this information to the college, but not in your essay. Instead, have a guidance counselor write about your bad semester, or include a short supplement with your application.

10. Your List of Accomplishments

A college application gives you a space in which to list your jobs, community involvement and extracurricular activities. Don't use your essay for repeating this information. Redundancy isn't going to impress anyone, and a tedious list of activities isn't going to make a good essay.

Suggestions for College Essays

When you apply to college, you'll need to complete an essay as part of your application. This is your opportunity to show admission officers who you are and to provide information about yourself that didn't fit in other areas of your application. The essay also reveals what you can do when you have time to think and work on a writing project.

The number one piece of advice from admission officers about your essay is "Be yourself." The number two suggestion is "Start early." Check out these other tips before you begin.

Choose a Topic That Will Highlight You

Don't focus on the great aspects of a particular college, the amount of dedication it takes to be a doctor or the number of extracurricular activities you took part in during high school.

Do share your personal story and thoughts, take a creative approach and highlight areas that aren't covered in other parts of the application, like your high school records.

Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

Don't try to cover too many topics. This will make the essay sound like a résumé that doesn't provide any details about you.

Do focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are. Remember that the readers must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask a parent or teacher to read just your introduction and tell you what he or she thinks your essay is about.

Show, Don't Tell

Don't simply state a fact to get an idea across, such as "I like to surround myself with people with a variety of backgrounds and interests."

Do include specific details, examples, reasons and so on to develop your ideas. For the example above, describe a situation when you were surrounded by various types of people. What were you doing? Whom did you talk with? What did you take away from the experience?

Use Your Own Voice

Don't rely on phrases or ideas that people have used many times before. These could include statements like, "There is so much suffering in the world that I feel I have to help people." Avoid overly formal or business-like language, and don't use unnecessary words.

Do write in your own voice. For the above example, you could write about a real experience that you had and how it made you feel you had to take action. And note that admission officers will be able to tell if your essay was edited by an adult.

Ask a Teacher or Parent to Proofread

Don't turn your essay in without proofreading it, and don't rely only on your computer's spell check to catch mistakes. A spell-check program will miss typos like these:

"After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to get a summer job."

"From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

Do ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes. You should also ask the person who proofreads your essay if the writing sounds like you.

Adapted from The College Application Essay by Sarah Myers McGinty.