



## Essay Writing Checklist

### General Advice

- Research application deadlines and essay questions for your colleges early.
- Give yourself plenty of time to develop your essay(s).
- Read examples of successful college admission essays found in books or on the internet.
- Do the work yourself. Others can help by proofing and critiquing.
- Be mindful of essay length requirements and other specific instructions.
- Remember, the goal is to tell the admissions officers something of who you are through the essay.

### Brainstorming for a Generic Personal Statement or Essay

- Make a list of your strengths and positive personality or character traits.
- Get input on your list from others who know you well.
- Next to each trait, list several things that you've done that illustrate that trait.
- Organize, sort and group your list(s). Look for threads or stories that tie your list together.
- Develop a theme if it hasn't already emerged.
- Still not satisfied? Try a different approach – ask yourself these questions and jot down whatever comes to mind:
  - What am I passionate about?
  - What sets me apart from others?
  - What major life lesson(s) have I learned and how? From whom?
  - How have I grown and from what experience(s)?
  - Where or when have I made a difference? What were the circumstances?
  - Did I overcome a hardship?
  - Do I need to explain something about my academic record? (like a dip in grades)

Like these ideas better? Then go back and develop the best one.

- Generally avoid controversial topics or the trite “eliminate world hunger” or “world peace” type of categories. Also avoid talking about your girlfriend/boyfriend or problems you've had with substance abuse or the law unless you can really pull a compelling life story out of it. If in doubt, avoid those risky areas.
- Be careful with humor unless you are VERY good at it. It often fails to have the intended result.

### For a Specific Quote Analysis or Essay

- Read the quote or question MANY times!

- Jot down whatever comes to mind as you read it – let your mind flow freely.
- Review your general brainstorming from above. Are there any ties to this specific quote or question?
- Can you tell a story or show the reader something about yourself while answering the question?

### **The Rough Draft**

- Look at your theme and use a couple of sentences as an introduction that grabs the reader – make them want to read on. Try to state or allude to your theme. Capture their interest.
- Develop supporting paragraphs that are well organized and develop your theme or support your points. Generally there might be 3-5 paragraphs depending on the essay length.
- Develop a concluding paragraph that circles back to your theme and provides a strong wrap-up. Demonstrate that you learned, you changed, you grew – whatever your theme implies. Tie everything up nicely.

### **Critique and Edit Your Draft - Avoid These Pitfalls**

- Don't use the essay to list accomplishments. There are other places for that on the application.
- Don't use slang or "I" too much.
- Don't repeat yourself and don't include extraneous (non-useful) words. Be clear and concise.
- Be sure the essay flows logically and with proper grammar.
- Does it sound contrived or superficial? Boring? Try to demonstrate depth and intellectual curiosity.
- Be sure it SHOWS the reader something about you rather than just stating it. Demonstrate with vivid and specific examples, quotes, facts, events etc. SHOW don't TELL!
- Be mindful if there is a strict word count – have you checked? Make adjustments as needed.

### **The Polishing**

- Give it a break. Put the essay away for a few days and come back to it.
- Look it over again and make adjustments. Review the pitfalls above and double check.
- Give it the "So what?" test. Read your essay as if you are an admissions officer trying to learn more about you. Would they finish your essay and say "So what?" Be sure you have shown that you will make a unique and valuable contribution to their school.
- Ask someone you trust to read your essay and determine if your intended message/theme comes across. Consider a parent, teacher, counselor or adult friend. Discuss improvements with them.
- Proof it again and again looking for spelling and grammar errors. Don't rely only on spell-checkers.
- Follow the college's specific instructions for getting your essay to them, as it won't always be the same. If it is uploaded or sent via some other electronic method, try to check to be sure it was successfully transmitted.

**Good luck and don't worry – you CAN do it!**