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What is the Right Approach to Writing Essays?

To answer this question, I'd like to share a blog post from the University of Richmond's Admissions Blog. A few key points to note:

1. Your college application essays are important
2. Essays can help distinguish your application from others in a competitive applicant pool
3. Your essay is the only place on the application where you have FULL control over what you say
4. Answer the prompt - "this isn't rocket science or psychology trickery!"
5. Focus on finding your unique, authentic voice
6. Don't write what you think admissions officers want to read
7. Don't worry about what others are writing
8. Don't try to cram too much into the essay
9. Approach the essay as an opportunity to think critically and deeply about who you are

And lastly, don't forget to relax and write multiple drafts!

[The Right Approach to Writing Your College Essays](#)

By Tom Nicholas, University of Richmond

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"Recently, I've given several presentations to rising high school seniors on writing your college essays. Each time I do this, I always ask students what makes them most anxious about essays, and two answers invariably come up more than any others: (1) "I know essays

are really important," and (2) "I don't really know what colleges are looking for."

Let's take those concerns one at a time. First, are your college essays really important? Short answer: absolutely. While not all universities require you to write an essay, virtually all selective colleges do (as do all colleges that utilize the Common Application). And I can tell you, from experience, that colleges requiring an essay see it as a critical piece of your application, one that can help distinguish your application from other strong applications in a competitive pool.

Your essay is unique because it's the only place in your application where you have full control over what you tell us – and, thus, it's the best place to share your unique voice and story with us. Everything else in your application comes to us through some sort of lens (grades assigned by teachers, test scores assessed by testing agencies, recommendations written by others, even extracurricular involvement constrained to traditional resume format). The essay, on the other hand, is all you: it's a blank page that you can fill however you want, which also makes it the single best opportunity to tell us who you are. And this is, perhaps, why so many students are intimidated by the essay – which brings us to the second concern, namely not knowing what college admission officials are looking for. This concern is a bit broader, and there are several ways of addressing it, which I'll try to do briefly.

First, and most straightforward, is a secret that's hidden in plain sight: colleges usually tell you exactly what they're looking for, right in the essay prompt. Take a look at the five Common App prompts, for example, and you'll notice immediately that they're really open-ended – that is, you could write about virtually any topic – but they all push you toward introspection, self-analysis, and reflection. This suggests that Common App colleges don't necessarily care what you write about, so long as you communicate something meaningful or thoughtful about yourself in doing so (and reflecting is more important than narrating). For colleges that have their own essay prompt or a supplemental Common App essay, it's usually pretty clear what they're seeking as well. If they ask a really out-of-the-box question,

they're probably looking for creative, out-of-the-box thinking. If they ask a straightforward question about your fit for their college, they probably want to get a sense of how you see yourself fitting in and contributing to their community. This isn't rocket science or psychological trickery!

"But," you protest, "that's obvious. Of course I need to answer the essay prompt. What are you really looking for in an essay? What style of writing is best? What stands out to you? What do you find unique?"

Those are all perfectly natural questions – and they are also the perfect recipe for a generic college essay, when you allow them to guide your writing. If you try to write what you think we want to read, I guarantee you it will come out sounding inauthentic and bland. If you approach your essays with the goal of writing the most memorable essay ever written, one of two things will happen – either your head will explode from the pressure, or you'll come out with something that feels like it's trying way too hard and isn't actually that compelling.

This is, I think, the biggest pitfall of college essay-writing. Don't worry about what you think we might or might not want to read, and don't worry about what your fellow applicants might or might not be writing. Instead, focus on finding your own unique, authentic voice. This isn't as simple or trite as just "be yourself" – one of my least favorite pieces of essay-writing advice, because it implies that you can just do this naturally, automatically, without having to think about it. That's not true; finding your voice takes work, and time, and focus, and lots of brainstorming, and introspection, and many, many drafts. Think about the perspectives you have, the things that matter to you and why they're important; reflect on the experiences that have shaped you, and why they did so; consider what you're hoping to gain in the next four years of your life, what you're looking for in college; try freewriting or stream-of-consciousness typing to get your thoughts flowing; and do all of this before you start trying to answer a specific essay prompt. (Pro tip: this is a lot to try to do during the fall of your senior year, so invest some quality time this summer in figuring out and exploring your authentic voice.)

Again, don't write what you think we want to read, and don't try to be something you're not or write in a way that isn't natural to you, because that inauthenticity will be obvious to us. (Do you see the irony there? If you try to do what you think we want, you're actually doing the opposite of what we want.) If you don't comfortably use big words in your everyday language, don't overuse them in your essay (and please, please don't consult a thesaurus for every adjective and noun). If you're not naturally funny, don't try to be funny. If poetry isn't your thing, don't try to write a poem. In figuring out what to write and how to write about it, start with you and what makes sense to you, what works for you.

I'm frequently asked what sort of essays stand out to me, and what to avoid in them. The truth is, the best essays I read every year are the ones that come across as natural, authentic, and thoughtful – and there's no one topic or way of writing that encompasses them all, since authenticity depends on the individual. So many of the essays I read are, frankly, trying too hard to impress or to get everything right or to stand out from the pack – and those are the essays that come across as generic and gimmicky and run-of-the-mill.

I recently heard an admission colleague from another university summarize all of this really well, and I'll do my best to paraphrase what he said. You can approach the writing of your essay (and, indeed, the college process writ large) as a series of checkboxes, a list of items to get right and hoops to jump through, in order to get to the end goal (namely, acceptance). Or you can approach the writing of your essay, and the college application process, as an opportunity to think really critically (and deeply) about who you are, what makes you tick, what matters to you, and what you want out of this next phase of your life. Essays written by students with the latter approach are, inevitably, far more compelling and interesting than essays written by students just trying to do the correct thing and check all the boxes.

It's my hope that you'll take the second approach, not just to writing your essays, but to your college search and application process as a whole. You'll come out the better for it – and it'll probably make your essays more interesting, too.”



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