



Extraordinary College Essays Tell “Ordinary” Stories

Are you getting ready to apply to colleges? If so, the thought of writing your college essays probably has you sweating a little. You probably have all sorts of questions running through your head, like:

- What topic should I choose?
- How will I grab the audience’s attention?
- What will I do to keep people interested in what I have to say?

These are very important questions. After all, particularly in highly-selective colleges, your application essay carries a lot of weight in the admission process. In fact, some college insiders estimate that these essays account for 10 - 30% of admissions decisions!

Why do essays matter so much? Because colleges are looking for students who know themselves well; have academic goals and a career direction; and can articulate them clearly. And, while the standard sections of the college application provide information about your SAT / ACT scores; grades; rigor of your coursework; and your extracurricular, volunteer and work experiences, these matter-of-fact details tell college admissions representatives *how well you work*.

Yet, admissions reps also need to know *how you think*. So the primary purpose of the college essay is to give you the opportunity to tell your *whole* story...*especially* the parts of you that undoubtedly cannot be voiced through a fill-in-the-blank form.

The Leading Question

When it comes right down to it, your essay can set you apart from applicants with similar academic achievements. That’s precisely why college essay questions are *meant* to be challenging. Most college applications give you multiple essay prompts to choose from — all of which are broad and open-ended by design. Therefore, the essay exercise essentially boils down to that *one* leading question: “***What do you want the readers of your application to know about you?***”



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Tell Your Story

To write a personally-meaningful college essay that tells college admissions reps who you are as an individual:

- **Choose a topic that recounts “that moment when”...**

The most impactful and memorable college essays focus on an ordinary topic that resulted in deep self-reflection and increased self-insight. In your own voice, tell a story that reveals a *defining moment* that helped to shape who you are today and influences who you’ll be tomorrow. In other words, your college essay should give the reader a real sense of your unique personality, characteristics, and qualities.

As such, outstanding college essays don’t always center on stellar accomplishments. Sometimes they expose weaknesses or struggles instead. Say, for example, you’re on the varsity basketball team. Did you learn more about yourself when you *made* the winning shot or when you *missed* it? An essay that shows your humility, vulnerability, and authenticity is usually much more powerful than one that recounts your accolades.

You can write about pretty much anything — *an experience, an inanimate object, a movie, a place, a person* — as long as your essay reveals how that circumstance, experience, thing, movie, place, or person made an impact on you.

- **Don’t bury the lead...**

College admissions reps read hundreds of applications each year; yet, they rarely come across an essay that really *surprises* them. So, to capture your reader’s attention from the very first sentence, start your story in the *middle* of the action (rather than writing in a linear fashion).

For instance, instead of opening with “As a member of the varsity basketball team, I played in some really close games,” hook the reader with “There were only five seconds left in a tied game against our rival team when I stole the basketball on the inbound play.” No doubt the admissions rep will *want* to know the rest of your story — no matter whether your action resulted in a win or a loss for the team!

- **Let ‘em “read you like a book”...**

To keep the reader’s attention, use language that transports the college admissions rep to the time and place you’re describing; provides insight into your



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experience, thoughts, and emotions; and (perhaps most importantly) reflects on the lessons you learned.

The Moral of the Story

The college admission essay is your opportunity to let college admissions reps know who you are. Turn your “ordinary” story into an extraordinary essay by captivating your reader while providing insight into the qualities, characteristics, and traits that make you *uniquely you*.