

# The National College Planning Summit

## Telling Your Story!

### What Colleges Are Looking For In The Application Essay

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#### 1. What are colleges looking for in the Essay?

- a. Colleges want to know, “Can the student write at the academic level required at that college? Can they handle the work they will be doing at that college?”
- b. Additionally, the colleges want to know “Who are you?” and “How will you fit into our campus?”

#### 2. Why does the college need to know “Who are you?”

- a. Here is something Parents and Students probably don’t know. Colleges have what they call “Institutional Priorities.” What it really means is they are putting together a class that meets the college’s need – For Example:
  - i. Public Universities – their mandate is from the State to educate the best students in the state.
  - ii. Private colleges – may have their own Mission Statement such as leadership or dedication to public service.
  - iii. Faculty – wants interesting students.
  - iv. Student Life – wants to make sure there are students to participate in all the different organizations.
  - v. Administration & trustees – want to create geographic, cultural & socioeconomic diversity.
  - vi. Culture and personality – some universities have a culture and want to make sure the university keeps their culture.
  - vii. The job of the Dean is to listen to all the voices in the university and craft a class based on that.
- b. That is why colleges need to know what the students are really like.
- c. Students need to show who they are and what they want and show that in their application.

#### 3. How many people will review the application?

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- a. It varies from college to college - one to two people read the applications and then the applications go to committee.

### 4. How should the student start the essay process?

- a. The Common Application has 5 prompts – see if one jumps out at you. If not, put a microscope to your life.
  - i. “How do I spend my time?”
  - ii. “What do I like to do?”
  - iii. “What is my family like? Do we have any interesting rituals or traditions?”

### 5. Here are some brainstorm topics:

- a. In 5 minutes make a list where every line starts with “I am really good at...”
- b. Or, imagine you are in a room with someone you have never met and you have 5 minutes to tell him/her everything about yourself.
- c. If you were like Tom Sawyer and could eavesdrop at your own funeral, what would people say about you?
- d. What did you throw away from your childhood that you wish you had back?

### 6. Why is the essay so important?

- a. The essay is the only place in the application where the student is speaking for themselves.
- b. Everything else in the application is either the teacher or recommenders, your grades or scores – but the essay is your chance to say “This is who I am.”
- c. The essay is not broad in scope, it should shrink down and be very specific.
- d. An intimate, personal essay gives the college a clue about the student’s character.
- e. High School students find it difficult to write about themselves but the essay must be uniquely personal to that individual.
- f. There is not a “perfect” topic.

### 7. How should the student approach the questions that many Supplemental Applications require? The general form of the question is “Why Us? Why do you want to attend our University?”

- a. Students should do research about the college that they are applying to – this will help them understand the campus programs and the feel of the university. This will help them write a meaningful response to “Why us?”

### 8. Do all the Colleges require an Essay?

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- a. Every college has different writing requirements – not all Common App Schools require the essay. Keep track of the requirements for different schools.

### 9. How long should the essay or personal statement be?

- a. The Common Application personal statement is between 250-650 words and the supplemental essays may be short answer or up to 150 words.

### 10. What writing advice can you give to our students?

- a. The essay is the time to put your best foot forward. It is not a time for talking about failings, mess-ups or setbacks in your life.
- b. It should not be too creative – no iambic pentameter.
- c. You must write about yourself.
- d. Map out a draft process – write, revise, revise again and finally polish.
- e. No gimmicks or agendas.
- f. Make sure you are likeable.
- g. Don't write about any illegal activity of any kind, recreational drugs, alcohol, etc.
- h. Don't write about young love.
- i. No whining or complaining or lies.

### 11. Here is some specific advice about the essay:

- a. Write in the active voice – not passive voice. Passive takes away emotion and color.
  - i. For example - I crossed the road. (active) vs. The road was crossed. (passive)
- b. Read the essay out loud to family and friends to make sure it sounds like you.
- c. Details make the essay come alive – meaningful, well observed details.
- d. Most important - Show don't tell – for example, if you play water polo:
  - i. Show your dedication by writing about the commitment of waking up to the alarm clock at 5 AM.
  - ii. Show how it feels jumping into the water.
  - iii. Show what it is like doing Calculus homework in the back of the bus, in the dark, on the way home from the meet.
- e. Don't tell you're a leader:
  - i. Show about your experience as a camp counselor with a group of 5 year old campers.

### 12. Always do a final proofread before submitting!

- a. A good person to proofread would be a teacher, family friend, or aunt or uncle. A parent may not be the best to ask to proofread.

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- b. Don't involve too many people into giving you input into your essay – the essay must be your voice.

### 13. What can you tell us about the Short Answer Essays on the Common Application?

- a. Short answer essays may be listed as optional, but students should always answer them.
- b. Short answers require as much preparation as the longer essay, including revising and proofreading.

### 14. When should I start working on the essay?

- a. The summer before your senior year – The Common App prompts have been available before the entire application is available on August 1st.

### 15. What is more important – Good Grades or a Good Essay?

- a. Grades, Strength of Curriculum, Test Scores, and Grades in all courses are most important - followed by the Essay.
- b. Students must keep their grades up – if it is a choice between grades and writing the essay, make sure your grades do not suffer because of the essay.

### 16. What final advice do you have for students?

- a. Be Authentic and Be Yourself.
- b. Colleges don't expect you to know everything about yourself.
- c. Colleges care about the context of your life.
- d. Colleges need to know who you are so they can put together their class.

### 17. How can our listeners contact you?

- a. Email: [ckv@collegeadmission.com](mailto:ckv@collegeadmission.com)
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