COLLEGE ESSAY Writing
Why does the college essay matter?

• Some colleges/universities require an essay for their admissions application
• Even if you don’t have to write an essay for admissions, some scholarships will require an essay
• When looking at a students application folder- most admissions officers rank the essay as one of the top 5 most important things they look at (GPA, course rigor, rank, ACT/SAT scores and college essay)
• It’s the highest ranked non-academic factor and the last thing you have control over when completing your application
• The application process can be very impersonal, your essay gives you an opportunity for the admissions officers/scholarship committee to get to know you as a person, not as a file
Introductory Exercise

• The following slides will have essays by 3 different students. Read these as if these students are applying to be your foreign exchange student and you have to choose which one you would want to come live with you....
During my sophomore year, I was fortunate enough to be elected as treasurer of student government. This was a great honor given that I ran against two other very qualified students. I was nervous at first about taking the job, but I was confident that my organizational skills could be put to good use to maintain accurate records to account for incoming and outgoing funds. My experience turned out to be much more valuable than I expected. In fact, my time as the student body treasurer helped me appreciate just how rewarding it can be to work as a member of a team, and I realized that I have many qualities that make me a true leader.
I first became interested in volunteering when my mother informed me of an opportunity to volunteer at the senior center where my grandmother lives. They were hosting a Mother’s Day breakfast and were looking for volunteers to assist with the preparation of food, serving, and clean-up. I was apprehensive to commit due to my rigorous course schedule and numerous activities. However, I knew that my grandmother was looking forward to seeing me and I didn’t want to disappoint her. I personally believe that nothing is more important than family. When that Saturday came, I was at the senior center at 7 in the morning and worked until 11 a.m. Looking back, it was one of the most rewarding activities I have participated in.
Essay #3 (Daniel)

• I make the world’s worst chocolate chip pancakes. Seriously, I really do. My mom loves homemade pancakes, so I tried to surprise her with a batch for breakfast on her birthday last year. What a disaster. I thought I followed the directions perfectly, but for some reason, all the pancakes had lumpy raw dough in the middle of them. They were disgusting. I was too embarrassed to serve them to my mom. I threw them away and offered to take her out to breakfast instead. It’s a good thing Gus’s Deli doesn’t serve breakfast or I probably would have been fired from my part-time job there a long time ago. I am terrible with pancakes, but I can make the best corned beef on rye you’ve ever tasted.
Who did you choose?

• Which of the “applicants” did you choose as your exchange student?

• You may have different opinions - not everyone will choose the same student.

• When this exercise is conducted in conferences, Daniel always wins by a landslide, but NEVER unanimously - this just goes to show that people have different opinions and what some admissions representatives like, others may disagree with; however, writing an essay that gives the reader a glimpse of your personality and who you really are, is VITAL!
Keys to writing a great Essay -

Tip #1

TIP #1: Don’t try to impress the admissions officers (or scholarship committee); just be honest

- Ex: During my junior year, I was fortunate enough to be given the unique opportunity to perform over 50 hours of volunteer work at the hospital. I sought out the internship because of my interest in becoming a doctor, and I believed the hospital would allow me to broaden my knowledge about medicine. The experience has been truly rewarding, because I feel that I am truly making a difference in the lives of the children I work with.

- Imagine there is a new kid in school and you invite him/her to eat lunch with you and your friend. The first thing they say to your group is the above statement- what would you think about this new kid?

- He’s impressive...but not very personable

- When colleges or scholarship committees are reading your essay, they want to get to know you better- tell the truth and be yourself. Don’t worry so much about what’s going to sound good or what they want to hear.
Keys to writing a great essay-
tip #2

Tip #2: Own your Story

• Write an essay that no one else applying to the college or for the scholarship will write- inject enough detail into the essay to own it- it’s YOUR story (even if it’s a shared experience)

• Ex. WITHOUT detail: I was extremely nervous before the orchestra started playing. However, I knew that this was an important performance and I needed to play well. I took a deep breath, relaxed, and did my best to concentrate.

• Example WITH detail: I was sitting there on the stage with my violin resting on my shoulder, and I was sure I’d never been more that nervous. I looked out into the crowd of 200 people and somehow, I found my dad. He was holding his video camera. It’s the same camera he used to record my first home run in little league and my entrance onstage in my first school play. Now, as I was about to play as the first chair violinist in my community orchestra, there was my dad, once again, with our family video camera ready to go. Something about that seeing him there just made me feel more relaxed and comfortable. I knew I was going to be OK. My dad gave me a quick thumbs-up and mouthed the words, “Good luck.” As the conductor raised his wand, I smiled at my dad, nodded back at him, and started to play.
Pointers...

• Write stories that nobody else could write by including as much detail as you can.

• If you can’t find detail for a story, consider another story....
Keys to writing a great essay- tip #3

Tip #3: Don’t repeat information from the rest of your application

• Write about something not already on your application OR write about something that may be on your application, but share NEW information about the event/activity/fact, etc.
Tip #4: Your essays should sound like you

- Let’s say you were going to write an essay about how you struggled but prevailed in chemistry. Here are 2 different versions of the 1st paragraph.

  1. Throughout our lives, we are often forced to confront challenges that we successfully overcome. I found this to be the case when I chose to enroll in AP chemistry my junior year. In spite of my best efforts, I consistently struggled with chemistry (my natural strengths are in English and history). But I persevered, and I’m very thankful that I did, as I successfully completed the course and proved to myself that I can finish what I start.

  2. In the middle of my junior year, chemistry and I were having irreconcilable differences. The divorce was going to get ugly. Really ugly. I don’t know why, but no matter who many days I spent after school while my teacher, Mr. Chapman, patiently tried to help me, I just couldn’t get it. In fact, after finishing the class, pretty much the only thing I’m sure about when it comes to chemistry is that I could never be a chemist. Believe me, that’s good news for the scientific community.
Which one would you choose?

- Of the preceding two essays, which one would you want to keep reading? Why?

- When you’re writing your essay, ask yourself:
  1. Is this something I would actually say?
  2. How would I describe this to a teacher I like/respect? (you want to sound like you, but also be respectful and appropriate)
Into-through-beyond

• **Into:** Pull the reader right into the action or the scene...think about being 70 minutes into a movie

• **Through:** Once you’ve got the reader, fill out the rest of the picture, take them through the scene. Show them, show them, show them!

• **Beyond:** Show yourself, pull it into the bigger picture and deeper meaning- how does this event affect who you are and how will it affect your future (either in college or in life).

• **TIPS...**

  • **Two-Thirds Rule:** Remember to make it about YOU! The college is accepting you, not the experience, not the person you look up to, or the book you write about. This essay is about YOU.

  • **Scope, Focus, Specificity:** Have a narrow scope. Your essay should be focused and specific. Write about the “chair” vs. the “room”. Write about the “play” vs. the “entire season”
Thoughts on voice and style

- Use your voice- and always make it 1st person (yes, you can say “I”)
- Ditch the Thesaurus
- Stanford Study 2007: those who use complicated language in college essays are generally viewed as less intelligent than those who choose simple and concise words
- Use a writing style appropriate to your topic (no one want to read the uncomfortably humorous essay about your grandma’s funeral)
- Maintain active voice and powerful verbs- create movement
- Keep it focused and cut to the chase
- This isn’t an email or text- use appropriate language, spelling, grammar, etc.
- Evidence, details, and proof are the key to vividness, not words
- EDIT, EDIT, EDIT- chip away at the rock until you find the diamond
The plan in steps

1. Perfect your resume (detailed resume)
2. Brainstorm about yourself- study yourself like a topic in class, use your resume and thinking to come up with the themes of who you are
3. Read and work with samples
4. Pick your topics and start your shorts (short versions of what will ultimately become your essay- similar to the examples in this powerpoint)
5. DRAFT, DRAFT, DRAFT!
Details, Details, Details...

- Follow directions for length of essay.
- Choose a good story.
- Stay on track with the essay prompt.
- Be sure your essay is technically correct.
- Use the correct college name.
Sites for more examples

• If you want more examples check out some of these sites/resources:
• Tufts: 14 Essays We Loved: http://admissions.tufts.edu/?pid=195
• Johns Hopkins University: www.jhu.edu/admis/apply/essays.html
• Your English teachers are excellent resources!
• Personal narratives by Maxine Hong Kingston, Joan Didion, John Updike, Jonathan Swift, Henry Throeaou, etc.
Sample Essay prompts

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence (on you).
4. Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence.
5. A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.
References

• Information for this presentation provided by:
  • Collegewise
  • www.collegewise.com

and

• Mr. Matthew Miltenberg and Mrs. Susan Lutz