

College Application Essays

A Guide to Doing it Well

Florida School Deadlines

- University of Florida
 - November 1st (early decision)
 - General Deadline: Program based
- University of Central Florida
 - May 1st
- Florida State University
 - October 15th with decisions by December 17th
 - January 14th with decisions by March 18th

Florida School Deadlines

- University of South Florida
 - January 2nd to be considered for scholarships
 - March 1st to be considered for financial aid
 - April 15th final application deadline
- University of North Florida
 - Rolling deadline starting in July
 - Ideal application deadline: by October 31

How Much Does the Essay Matter?

- According to USA today, by the time college admissions offices have looked at your GPA, SAT Scores and letters of recommendation, their mind is made up.
- However, "If you have 18- or 20,000 applicants, for some of those students, the essay makes a huge difference, both positively and negatively"

Do They Even Read It?

- The answer to this question is simple...YES
- Admissions counselors at the University of Virginia read every essay looking for the student's voice. *USA Today*
- “For those students who wonder if all their wordsmithing is worth the effort: “The essays are our favorite part,” *Goucher College – Washington Post*

Do They Even Read It?

The Washington Post:

- The next case is a boy with a 3.36 GPA and 1300 SAT. In this case, the test scores are fine, but the transcript is worrisome.”
- The presenter thinks this student is not forthcoming in his essay. “Even his application feels very guarded to me,” she says sadly. Zero votes for fall admission, eight votes to deny, and two to offer spring admission.

How Do Schools Decide Who Gets In?

- Applicants are divided by region and an admissions officer responsible for that region reviews their applications.
- They categorize students into deny and consider.
- Students who are up for consideration are reviewed in front of a panel
- While your GPA, tests scores, and recommendation letters often get you in the consider pile, once you are presented to the panel, essays often make the difference between who will get in and who won't.

Picking a Topic:

- **Make it personal!**
- "It shouldn't be an essay about community service. It should be about a moment of time," he said. "Start writing an essay about John who you met at a homeless shelter who talked to you about his life. Like any piece of good writing, then you're going to make that come alive. (admissions officer University of Alabama- *USA Today*)

Picking a Topic

- **Narrow your focus** (they give a word limit for a reason)
- The biggest problem for students, he said, is starting with too wide a focus. "By the time they get to the details, they run out of space," he said. "I'm all for cutting to the chase."
- Brandenburg said her biggest frustration was keeping within the word limit. "In the end, it helped me refine what I wanted to say and it became more to the point," she said. *USA Today*

Finding Your Voice

- **Be honest**

- “Don't embellish your achievements, titles, and offices. Not everyone has to be the star at everything. You will feel better if you don't strain to inflate yourself.” *US News*

- **Be an individual**

- Not necessarily through your achievements but through your voice!

Make it readable

- **Be coherent:**

- “Don't try to cover everything in an essay. Doing so can make you sound busy, but at the same time, scattered and superficial. The whole application is a series of snapshots of what you do.” *US News*

- **Be accurate:**

- “I don't mean just use spell check (that goes without saying). Attend to the other mechanics of good writing, including conventional punctuation in the use of commas, semi-colons, etc.” *US News*

Traits of a Good Essay

- **Be Vivid:** Show don't tell
 - Think about the trait you want college's to associate with you most. Then, instead of telling them that you have this trait, show them a moment where you demonstrated it.
 - “A good essay is often compared to a story: In many cases it's an anecdote of an important moment.”

Traits of a Good Essay

- **Be likable:**

- “Colleges see themselves as communities, where people have to get along with others, in dorms, classes, etc. Are you someone they would like to have dinner with, hang out with, have in a discussion section? ” *US News*

- **Be Cautious in your use of humor:**

- Don't go into the realm of offensive or risk making the admissions officer think you don't take your application seriously.

Traits of a Good Essay

- **Be controversial (if you can).**
 - “So many kids write bland essays that don't take a stand on anything. It is fine to write about politics, religion, something serious, as long as you are balanced and thoughtful. Don't pretend you have the final truth. And don't just get up on your soapbox and spout off on a sensitive subject; instead, give reasons and arguments for your view and consider other perspectives (if appropriate). Colleges are places for the discussion of ideas, and admissions officers look for diversity of mind.” *US News*

Traits of a Good Essay

- **Be smart.**

- Colleges are intellectual places, a fact they almost always keep a secret when they talk about their dorms, climbing walls, and how many sports you can play. It is helpful to show your intellectual vitality. What turns your mind on? This is not the same thing as declaring an intended major; what matters is why that subject interests you.

Great Essay Examples! Introductions

I strode in front of 400 frenzied eighth graders with my arm slung over my Fender Stratocaster guitar — it actually belonged to my mother — and launched into the first few chords of Nirvana’s ‘Lithium.’ My hair dangled so low over my face that I couldn’t see the crowd in front of me as I shouted ‘yeah, yeah’ in my squeaky teenage voice. I had almost forgotten that less than a year ago I had been a kid whose excitement came from waiting for the next History Channel documentary.

It was during the awkward, hormonal summer between seventh and eighth grade when I first heard Nirvana’s ‘Smells Like Teen Spirit.’ The song shocked my senses — until that point my musical cosmos consisted mainly of my father’s Beatles CDs.

Great Essay Examples! Introductions

My head throbbed as I closed my eyes and tried to convince myself to give up.

‘Come on, Ashley. Put the pencil down. Just put the pencil down and go to bed,’ I told myself sternly. I had been hard at work for hours — brutal, mind-numbing hours. I groaned as I moved over to my bed, collapsing in a pile of blankets and closing my eyes.

I lay there for a moment or two, gathering strength, gaining courage. My tense shoulders began to unclench as I stretched out and opened my bleary eyes...

Suddenly, I bolted upright on my bed, eyes wide, blankets flying. Everything had fallen into place. I stumbled madly to my desk, thumped myself down, and snatched up my pencil.

‘I’ve got it! That’s it!’ I whooped, scribbling furiously, as my brother pounded on my wall for silence.

I had just won another skirmish in my ongoing battle with the crossword puzzle.

Open with a bang!

- **Organization is important...start with an interesting opener, you can explain yourself latter.**
- Joe's family has been friends with my family since our parents were young. We grew up knowing each other so we just called each other cousins. Joe was always so quiet when you first met him but once he warmed up to you he was one of the most amazing people you would have ever met. He was so caring, funny, and down to earth. He always made new friends. Joe was never the kind of person you would think of to take his own life. Although we never exactly found out what happened, Joe was most likely a victim of bullying. He meant so much to me I never would have thought Joe could have been so hurt by someone's words. Someone's words and actions pushed my friend to kill himself. The craziest part was that Joe was only fourteen years old. I think bullying is a major problem here in the United States and I want to take part in changing the way people treat each other. I am an active member in my high schools Anti-Bullying Club. I want to spread the message that words can kill. We cannot just sit around and watch it happen. The part of me that is Joe is being a friend.

Revising: Showing instead of telling

- Joe's family has been friends with my family since our parents were young. We grew up knowing each other so we just called each other cousins. Joe was always so quiet when you first met him but once he warmed up to you he was one of the most amazing people you would have ever met. He was so caring, funny, and down to earth. He always made new friends. **Joe was never the kind of person you would think of to take his own life.** Although we never exactly found out what happened, Joe was most likely a victim of bullying. He meant so much to me I never would have thought Joe could have been so hurt by someone's words. Someone's words and actions pushed my friend to kill himself. **The craziest part was that Joe was only fourteen years old.** I think bullying is a major problem here in the United States and I want to take part in changing the way people treat each other. I am an active member in my high schools Anti-Bullying Club. I want to spread the message that words can kill. We cannot just sit around and watch it happen. The part of me that is Joe is being a friend.

Revising: avoiding redundancy and passive voice

- Joe was never the kind of person you would think of to take his own life. The craziest part was that he was only fourteen years old. Joe's family has been friends with my family since our parents were young. We grew up knowing each other so we just called each other cousins. Joe was always so quiet when you first met him but once he warmed up to you ~~he was one of the most amazing people you would have ever met.~~ He was so caring, funny, and down to earth. He always made new friends.
- Someone's words and actions pushed my friend to kill himself. Although we never exactly found out what happened, Joe was ~~most likely~~ a victim of bullying. ~~He meant so much to me~~ I never would have thought Joe could have been so hurt by someone's words. ~~I think~~ bullying is a major problem here in the United States and I want to take part in changing the way people treat each other. I am an active member in my high schools Anti-Bullying Club. I want to spread the message that words can kill. We cannot just sit around and watch it happen. The part of me that is still Joe's "cousin" is reaching out to prevent more unnecessary deaths.

Mistakes you should never make

- Neglecting to read directions
- Letting parents take the lead
- Hitting submit without proofreading
- Waiting until the last minute
- Repeating yourself
- Giving colleges what you think they want
- Writing a one-size-fits-all essay

The Un-athletic Department

A blue seventh place athletic ribbon hangs from my mantel. Every day, as I walk into my living room, the award mockingly congratulates me as I smile. Ironically, the blue seventh place ribbon resembles the first place ribbon in color; so, if I just cover up the tip of the seven, I may convince myself that I championed the fourth heat. But, I never dare to wipe away the memory of my seventh place swim; I need that daily reminder of my imperfection. I need that seventh place.

Two years ago, I joined the no-cut swim team. That winter, my coach unexpectedly assigned me to swim the 500 freestyle. After stressing for hours about swimming 20 laps in a competition, I mounted the blocks, took my mark, and swam. Around lap 14, I looked around at the other lanes and did not see anyone. "I must be winning!" I thought to myself. However, as I finally completed my race and lifted my arms up in victory to the eager applause of the fans, I looked up at the score board. I had finished my race in last place. In fact, I left the pool two minutes after the second-to-last competitor, who now stood with her friends, wearing all her clothes.

The blue for the first loser went to me.

However, as I walked back to my team, carrying the seventh place blue, listening to the splash of the new event's swimmers, I could not help but smile. I could smile because despite my loss, life continued; the next event began. I realized that I could accept this failure, because I should not take everything in life so seriously. Why should I not laugh at the image of myself, raising my arms up in victory only to have finished last? I certainly did not challenge the school record, but that did not mean I could not enjoy the swim.

So, the blue seventh place ribbon sits there, on my mantel, for the world to see. I feel no shame in that. In fact, my memorable 20 laps mean more to me than an award because over time, the blue of the seventh place ribbon fades, and I become more colorful by embracing my imperfections and gaining resilience-but not athleticism.

Example 1 Feedback

- “The first thing that stands out about this essay is the catchy title, which effectively sets up an essay that is charmingly self-deprecating. The author goes on to use subtle humor throughout the essay to highlight one of her weaknesses but at the same time reveals how she turned what some might have considered a negative event into a positive learning experience. Not only is this essay well-written and enjoyable to read, but it reveals some important personal qualities about the author that we might not have learned about her through other components of her application. We get a glimpse of how she constructively deals with challenge and failure, which is sure to be a useful life skill she will need in the real world, starting with her four years in college.”
- —*Senior Assistant Director Janice Heitsenrether*

Undecided

I was born in the wrong century.

A combination of an avant-garde homeschooling education and liberal parents produced an inquisitive child who dreamt of versatility. I want to be an Aristotle, a Newton, or, if nothing else, an engineer who can perform titrations and analyze works by Rand or Fitzgerald.

Growing up in Miami, Florida, a mecca for diversity, I've seen interests and talents splattered across the entire spectrum. Sports coaches who write computer code after practice, cross country runners who dabble in cancer research and community service management, these were the people who influenced my upbringing. From these inspirations, I've crafted an ideal for my future, one where I can play a few varied roles, yet play them well. But I am atypical too. A water skier who spends mornings in the Everglades with my camera, and flies remote airplanes on the weekends.

I know I'll have to find the right focus, eventually. But first, I'll figure out what I love. There will be dozens of internal debates over my interests. I'll deliberate and dispute, unsure of whether I truly love what I'm doing, hesitant about whether this is what I want to be doing five years from now. But it doesn't matter; it's part of the process. When I find what I want to study, I'll know. If I were a wonder of the world, I'd be the Great Pyramid. Starting broad, before refining myself to a point, I think Maslow would've approved.

Example 2 Feedback

- “What stood out to me about Daniel’s major essay was that, while he applied undecided, he still crafted a really well written essay about his interests. Daniel writes about how his upbringing and where he’s from has led him to be inquisitive and explore a range of interests. He does a great job of tying it all into using his academic experience at Hopkins to pinpoint what exactly it is that he wants to study in the future.”
—*Admissions Counselor Monique Hyppolite*

A Home Destroyed

I was seven years old when I saw the ocean for the first time. My grandmother had invited me to visit her near Okinawa, Japan. I will never forget that encounter—the intense sun, the endless horizon, the infinite shades of blue that dissolved any boundary between sky and waves. And most of all, the secret of the water. Swimming in those waters was like diving into a kaleidoscope, deceptively plain on the outside, but a show of colors on the inside, waiting to dazzle me, mesmerize me. Those colors! Coral reefs—pink, green, red, purple—covered the seafloor; streaks of sunlight illuminated them, the swaying water creating a dance of hues. And weaving in and out of the contours of coral swam brilliant fish that synchronized every movement with the water, creating one body, one living entity. I longed to join and flow with them to the music of the waves; that's where I felt I belonged. And leaving was like parting home, not going home.

Five years later, I returned. At first, all seemed to match my memory: the crystalline waters and that open horizon with the sun daring to come closer to Earth. But the second I dove in, I knew my home had vanished...white. That's all I could see around me: bone-white death. I couldn't accept it. I kept swimming farther out, hoping to catch even the smallest hint of color. But there was no sign of that brilliant garden I remembered, just fragments of bleached coral. It was like looking down onto the aftermath of a war: a bombed city, with only the crumbles of cement to testify for the great buildings that once stood. But who was the culprit behind this egregious attack?

Though at the age of twelve, I couldn't even begin to guess, I now know the answer is us. Humans are an impressive species: we have traveled to every continent, adapted to countless environments, and innovated to create comfortable means of living. But in the process, we have stolen the colors from nature all around the globe, just as we did that coral reef. Our trail of white has penetrated the forests, the oceans, the grasslands, and spread like a wild disease. I, too, have left a white footprint, so I have a responsibility to right these wrongs, to repaint those colors, and to preserve the ones that remain. Some question why I should care. The answer is simple: this planet is my home, my birthplace. And that, in and of itself, is an inseparable bond and a timeless connection. Nature has allowed me my life, so I have no right to deny its life. As Jane Goodall once said, "If we kill off the wild, then we are killing a part of our souls." This is my soul—our soul. I know that I alone cannot protect this soul, so I will not make a promise that I cannot fulfill. But this promise I will make: I will do what I can do.

Example 3 Feedback

- Reading the essay, I get the sense that Nina is both intellectually curious and committed to scientific and environmental research. Though Nina's essay is well written, what makes it so strong is that it also conveys a personal connection to larger environmental issues. Too often, students write about issues—political, educational, environmental, etc.—in an impersonal and argumentative way. The college essay isn't a thesis; it's meant to be a reflection of who the student is, and Nina's love of the ocean, of travel, and of the environment gives me a glimpse of who she is as an individual.

—*Dana Messinger, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions*

RESOURCES

- http://usatoday30.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-07-12-college-essays_N.htm
- <http://www.washingtonpost.com/sf/feature/wp/2013/04/11/the-education-issue-does-anyone-read-all-those-college-applications-a-parent-finds-out/>
- <http://www.in500wordsorless.com/>
- <http://thechoice.blogs.nytimes.com/2010/12/06/today-essay/>
- <http://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays/2016/>