

Housekeeping Notes

- This session will be recorded.
- Audience will be muted to reduce background noise.
- Please do not use the "chat" for side conversations. We will reserve this space for you to type in questions, which will be answered at check-ins along the way.
- Final Q&A at the end of the presentation.



How many essays?

- ❖ **College Admissions Essay/Personal Statement (650 words)**
- ❖ Additional Information (250 words, optional)
- ❖ Supplemental Essays (length varies, required by certain schools)
- ❖ Covid-19 Question (250 words, optional)



What is the purpose of the personal essay?

- Fill in gaps in your application. Illuminate, not repeat, information already given.
- Find out what kind of a person you are and how you would add to and thrive in their community.
- Make you stand out from other applicants with similar grades and test scores.
- Show evidence of strong writing skills.



Who is your audience?

College admissions readers (individual or teams)

Thousands of essays read

4-5 minutes tops!

First impressions count!



What should you write about?

Who are you? What makes you, you? (Character, values, experiences, important identity pieces)

What is your “why”? What drives you? What is your sense of purpose, your passion? Who do you want to be? Why do you do what you do? What is your mission?

Reveal qualities, experiences, deep interests that will enable success in college environment (and beyond!)



Topics you might try to avoid

Cliches (Sports, Travel, Community Service)

Too much politics or religion

Stories without self-reflection

An important person in your life (Whose essay is this?)

Suffering or difficulty without some resolution/strength/positive outcome



The Common Application Questions

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?



Common App Questions, cont'd

4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

When should you write it?

BEFORE THE WEEK IT'S DUE!

Summer between 11th and 12th grade is ideal.

Start brainstorming this weekend!



How should you write it?

WITH **AUTHENTICITY**

- Experience
- Voice

USING CONCRETE EXAMPLES (SHOW, DON'T JUST TELL) using SENSORY DETAILS, DESCRIPTION

Put your “thesis” toward or at the end, not at the start.

AS A PROCESS (BRAINSTORM, OUTLINE, DRAFT, REVISE, EDIT, READ ALOUD TO PROOFREAD)

MULTIPLE DRAFTS, EDITS

Who else should read it?

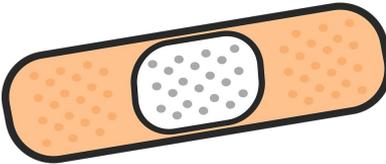
A trusted adult who is familiar with what the colleges are looking for.

Someone who is good at picking up typos and other errors.

Avoid people who want to rewrite it for you.



Additional Information Section OPTIONAL (250 words)

- Award, honors that wouldn't fit into the rest of your application 
- Important additional details about activities that don't fit into the "list" format
- Extenuating circumstances (Illness, injury impacting your ability to get your best grades)
- Explanations of "red flags" on application 
- Things that may have impeded your ability to engage in traditional extracurricular activities 

Supplemental Essays

Vary by college

“Why this college” is most common.

Do your homework/research online.

Use specifics wisely and relate them to your life and goals: Why are you and this college a good fit? What do you have and what do they have and why do those two add up to a great match?

Avoid talking about location, weather, mascots, flattery.



To COVID, or not to COVID?

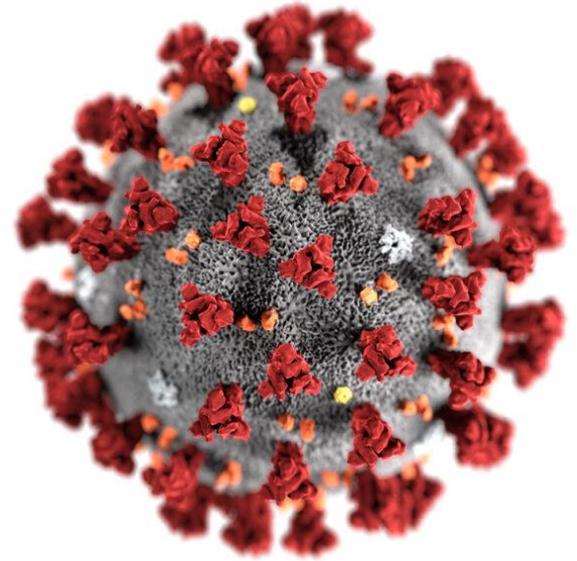
New for this year!

Additional, Optional, 250 words

“Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

– Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N

– Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you.”



First lines, first impressions....

1. I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.
2. When I was in the eighth grade I couldn't read.
3. While traveling through the daily path of life, have you ever stumbled upon a hidden pocket of the universe?
4. I was paralyzed from the waist down. I would try to move my leg or even shift an ankle but I never got a response. This was the first time thoughts of death ever crossed my mind.
5. The spaghetti bubbled and slushed around the pan, and as I stirred it, the noises it gave off began to sound increasingly like bodily functions.
6. I stand on the riverbank surveying this rippled range like some riparian cowboy -instead of chaps, I wear vinyl, thigh-high waders and a lasso of measuring tape and twine is slung over my arm.
7. I had never seen anyone get so excited about mitochondria.

Sample Essays

1. How do they use a concrete setting or event as a vehicle for talking about something larger?
2. What is the essential truth of this person's life that they chose to write about? What makes them, them? What character or personality qualities are revealed?
3. How do they use sensory details to show vs. just tell? How do they draw you into the story using imagery?
4. Where do you see self-reflection and insight?

Standing in front of the kitchen counter, my small hands are placed on the cool granite top and my eyes rest on the empty bowl set out in front of me. On one side lies a pack of masa harina and on the other, a pitcher filled with water. Tortillas are considered to be somewhat of a staple food in Guatemala and in Central American cuisines. Whenever my mom asks me to make tortillas, I groan internally; not because I dislike tortillas, but because I simply cannot make them. What should come naturally as a Guatemalan native is foreign to my small hands. My hands are unable to form the perfectly sized circles because they are trying to decide what dominates more—my Guatemalan roots or the American culture I grew up in.

Minutes pass and I have done absolutely nothing. Finally, I extend my hesitant arm to pick up the pack of masa harina and proceed to pour it into the bowl. As I pour the masa harina, I cannot help but think about how much it resembles my journey to America. When I moved, I brought my Guatemalan heritage with me into the massive bowl that is the United States. Continuing with the recipe, I gradually add water to the masa harina and knead it until it becomes the desired texture. Assimilating into American culture and the American way of life was no easy feat for me and I struggled at first, but I found ways to manage. Although my parents were not fluent in English, I was able to learn English with the help of Dora the Explorer, Barney, and my surroundings. Little by little, American culture poured into my life, intermingling with my Guatemalan roots.

My next step is to grab a small amount of masa in my hands and begin to roll it into as much of a perfectly shaped sphere as I can. Flattening the ball of masa between my hands, I begin to shape it into a tortilla. Similar to how I have a preconceived notion of how I want the tortilla to turn out, I tend to idealize how I want my life to turn out. Regardless of my efforts, I can't help it if my tortilla tears as I attempt to shape it. Just like the cracks and tears in my tortilla, I face obstacles in life. However, I have learned to not let them bring me down or keep me from continuing to try. For instance, I come from a low socioeconomic background, but I have never let that stop me from pursuing my aspirations. It is not just about the tortilla that I am making right in front of me. It is about me, my life, and what kind of tortilla I will end up being. Will I be a tortilla that looks like every other one? Or will I be a tortilla, uniquely made in the most perfect imperfect shape?

Despite my many failed attempts at making tortillas throughout my life, I have discovered the key ingredient to the tortilla recipe, and ultimately the recipe of life: persistence. If trying to make tortillas has taught me anything, it is that: it's not about the shape of the tortilla, it's about how the tortilla faces the hot griddle of life..

Comments from the admissions committee:

Rocio's essay uses the tortilla-making story to introduce us to her sense of multiculturalism, an identity that is clearly important to her. By utilizing the example of struggling to cook well in the kitchen, the writer is able to effectively relate to readers of all ages and backgrounds. We believe that Rocio's sense of perseverance will translate to her college experience as well.

Sample Essay #2

I looked up and flinched slightly. There were at least sixty of them, far more than expected. I had thirty weeks to teach them the basics of public speaking. Gritting my teeth, I split my small group of tutors among the crowd and sat down for an impromptu workshop with the eighth graders. They were inexperienced, monotone, and quiet. In other words, they reminded me of myself...

I was born with a speech impediment that weakened my mouth muscles. My speech was garbled and incomprehensible. Understandably, I grew up quiet. I tried my best to blend in and give the impression I was silent by choice. I joined no clubs in primary school, instead preferring isolation. It took six years of tongue twisters and complicated mouth contortions in special education classes for me to produce the forty-four sounds of the English language.

Then, high school came. I was sick of how confining my quiet nature had become. For better or for worse, I decided to finally make my voice heard.

Scanning the school club packet, I searched for my place. Most activities just didn't feel right. But then, I sat in on a debate team practice and was instantly hooked. I was captivated by how confidently the debaters spoke and how easily they commanded attention. I knew that this was the path forward.

Of course, this was all easier said than done. Whenever it was my turn to debate, I found that I was more of a deer in the headlights than a person enjoying the spotlight. My start was difficult, and I stuttered more than I spoke in those first few weeks. Nonetheless, I began using the same tools as I did when I learned to speak all those years ago: practice and time. I watched the upperclassmen carefully, trying to speak as powerfully as they did. I learned from my opponents and adapted my style through the hundreds of rounds I lost. With discipline, I drilled, repeating a single speech dozens of times until I got it right.

(cont'd)

Sample #2 (cont'd)

Day by day, I began to stand a little taller and talk a little louder both inside and outside of debate. In a few months, my blood no longer froze when I was called on in class. I found I could finally look other people in the eyes when I talked to them without feeling embarrassed. My posture straightened and I stopped fidgeting around strangers. I began to voice my opinions as opposed to keeping my ideas to myself. As my debate rank increased from the triple to single-digits, so too did my standing at school. I began interacting with my teachers more and leading my peers in clubs. In discussions, I put forward my ideas with every bit as much conviction as my classmates. When seniors began to ask me for advice and teachers recruited me to teach underclassmen, I discovered not only that I had been heard, but that others wanted to listen. At heart, I am still reserved (some things never change), but in finding my voice, I found a strength I could only dream of when I stood in silence so many years ago.

Standing in front of the crowd of students, it was my hope that by founding this program, I could give them an experience that was as empowering as mine had been for me. As the weeks passed, the students inched past their insecurities and towards finding their voices, just as I had always wanted to do. On the last day of class for that year, I looked up and saw each of the students standing confidently, equipped and ready to speak their minds in whatever they wanted to do. They had come a long way from being the shy and stuttering novices that they were just thirty weeks before—I can't wait to see how far they can go from here.

Comments from the admissions committee:

Jerry's essay helped the admissions committee understand his background and how he persevered and grew through debate. Although we had already learned about Jerry's enthusiasm for debate in other parts of his application, this essay gave so much more depth into why this activity is meaningful for him. Given what he shared in his essay, we can imagine Jerry being an active participant both in and out of the classroom.

Now it's your turn!

Brainstorm 5-8 important values, important experiences, events, aspects of your identity, or character traits that you think have played an essential part in making you the person you are today, and perhaps in directing where you want to go in the future (college and beyond).

Which ones do you feel most passionate about? Which ones motivate you to write?

Which ones have the best potential to show your growth, self-reflection? Which show you in a positive light with potential?

Start writing a rough draft, see where it goes!

More resources for you....

Avoid mistakes:

<https://blog.prepscholar.com/bad-college-essays>

<http://inlikeme.com/19-common-application-essay-mistakes-and-how-to-avoid-them/>

[9 College Essay Mistakes](#)

Cutting Words:

<https://wowwritngworkshop.com/how-to-shorten-your-college-application-essay-without-ruining-it/>

In General:

<https://blog.prepscholar.com/how-to-write-a-college-essay>

<https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/college-essay-tips>

<https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/>