

## **The Application Essay**

*Excerpt from a college handbook*

Think first about the purposes the essay serves. One purpose, obviously, is to give us a sample of your writing. Since liberal arts colleges place a premium on strong writing skills, we look for a mastery of mechanics as well as fluency and originality. A two or three page essay gives us a taste of the maturity of your thinking and writing, and of your readiness for a competitive liberal arts program.

A second reason for the essay is for you to share something of yourself that may not be reflected in the rest of your application—something that has shaped your perspective or challenged your beliefs. Or it may show how you see yourself and your place in a community. These qualities are important for us to know about as we decide on applicants. The essay takes us beyond numbers and statistics to your creativity and substance.

There is no formula for a “perfect” essay, but it’s one of the most carefully considered, influential and revealing pieces of your application. Choose your topic thoughtfully. Try out a few topics and see which one feels the most natural to you, and the closest to your own “voice.” Don’t pick a topic that is too broad or impersonal. Structure your material well and be concise; make a point and get to the point. Write—and rewrite!

The essay is the one piece of the application that you have full control over—so use it to your advantage.

## **College Essay Writing Hints**

*Adapted from Tim Averill’s suggestions*

- Be yourself. As Dean Jewett of Harvard has stated, “things that are fake, CLANK!”
- Be personal. Use specifics and details—college admissions officers remember them when they discuss applications (“He’s the kid who broke his leg sky-diving.”)
- Respond to the topic suggested and stay within the length recommended. Imagine yourself as an admissions officer.
- Use the essay to elaborate on something that is not otherwise evident in reading your application (i.e. a talent, interest, political view, or achievement).
- Address your weaknesses, by making them implicit strengths.
- Write a different supplement essay for each school, if appropriate. They’re looking for “match and merit”.
- Generally speaking, the admissions office is looking for evidence of 1) academic ability, 2) motivation, 3) creativity, 4) self-discipline, and 5) intellectual capacity, and 6) maturity.
- Don't procrastinate. Write this essay as though a small part of your life depended upon it. Get feedback from a writing teacher and revise or even rewrite your essay(s). There is no excuse for typos, misspellings, or poor grammar—be meticulous in your mechanics.

*Revised September 2010*