

Essay Writing Tips

General

Read and answer the question asked.

You'd be amazed how many essays we receive that don't relate at all to the question we were asking!

Be authentic.

We want to hear your voice in your response – the experiences, opinions and values that have shaped you. Feel free to write on something you are passionate about so we can get to know you better.

Be proactive!

Each year, we talk to students who have everything ready but their essays – if they could just get them finished, their application would be complete. Get started on your essays soon, and don't spend months agonizing over whether they're perfect. We don't read through them with a red pen in hand!

Avoid re-writing your accomplishments.

You've already given us that information in your application.

Re-use essays (or portions of essays) when possible.

However, make sure to re-read before hitting the submit button or mailing them in! The worst possible way to finish your essay to U-M is to say, "And I just can't wait to be a Spartan!" This happens. Seriously.

A research paper is different from an essay.

If you are re-using something you've previously written, make sure it directly answers our question and not one that a teacher posed to you for an assignment.

There is no "right" answer.

Don't think you know what we want to hear. Whatever you have to say about the topic is of interest to us.

English 101

Use mature professional writing skills.

Avoid contractions, slang, and "you." If you have questions, talk to your English teacher.

Avoid funny fonts, big margins, large font size, etc.

We were once in school too, and we know all the tricks for making things appear longer than they really are! Work with a standard font and size.

Explain any abbreviations.

Sure, we know the obvious ones (NHS), but talking about the B.O.B. award that you won for participating in the F.D.R. may not make sense to someone who doesn't go to your high school.

If making an argument, back it up with consistent facts.

Have an opinion about global warming? Affirmative action? Think that capital punishment is evil? Why? Your argument should be supported by facts, not the opinions of others.

Plagiarism is academic fraud and will cause your application to be thrown out of consideration.

You know those great websites that will write your essays for you? We know about them too. Aah, the power of Google...

Pick one topic and stay with it.

You don't have a lot of room to discuss a variety of different topics, so strive for depth on one subject versus breadth.

Use spell-check and proofread your essay.

Look at this slightly different (from actual essays) spelling of a, um, common word – that spell-check wouldn't flag.

"My work as a Candy Stripper has really influenced me to become a nurse."

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Please have at least 2 people read your essay to check for major errors. Bonus if you use people who don't have a massively vested interest in your college education.

Make sure your essay can stand alone.

Avoid saying something along the lines of, "As I stated earlier in my application..." Please re-write the topic at the top of the essay so we can quickly identify what you're writing about.

Be careful with humor.

It can be tough to pull off in writing. And remember – you don't necessarily know your audience. Your essay will be read by a number of different people from a wide array of ages and backgrounds.

What we're looking for

Tell us what is unique about you.

Why would you stand out among our 30,000+ applicants? Is there something different about your personal experiences? Your response should provide us with an opportunity to get to know you on a more personal level, beyond your GPA, test scores, and curriculum.

Use recent examples.

It's always best to focus on issues that occurred while you were in high school, since we're only reviewing your high school performance when determining if you'll be admitted. If something happened when you were younger that has significantly affected you, talk about it, but then put the focus on how this event has affected you in recent years.

Watch your tone.

There's a big difference in focusing your essay on "U of M needs me as a student because..." versus "please please please admit me!"

Don't make excuses.

If you've had a poor or inconsistent grade performance due to unusual or stressful circumstances, feel free to share that information with us; it can be useful. But don't strain credibility by making up false excuses. Be honest – we'll respect that.

Be truthful, but make sure you're comfortable with your potential audience.

Students often feel compelled to share extremely personal and even traumatic experiences in their responses – health issues, death of a family member, abuse, etc. We will absolutely keep your information confidential; however, if you decide to reveal something deeply personal, be aware that a number of people will potentially be reading your essay.

Tell us why we're great.

Talk about campus programs you've attended. Tell us why you're a great fit for Michigan. Remember that athletics can be a reason, but should not be the only reason you want to come to Ann Arbor!

DR. REBECCA JOSEPH'S TEN TIPS FOR BRAINSTORMING GREAT PERSONAL STATEMENT TOPICS

It's time for kids to write great college application essays. The Common App went live on August 1 with more than 450 colleges using it, and many public universities are opening up their applications.

Yet so many kids get stuck just coming up with unique topics for their personal statements. That leaves so many admissions offices with general, uninteresting essays to read.

So here are some creative ways to help your high school seniors get started with writing active, engaging essays that truly communicate their stories to admissions officers.

1. **Write your resume.** Include everything you can from high school. Categorize your activities, community service, work, internships, athletics, arts, and more. Include descriptions of your leadership and initiative. Maybe in writing the resume you will remember some key event or story that will turn into a great application essay. See my 10 tips for writing great college resumes at <http://getmetocollege.org/hs/application-essay-tips/resume-building-and-writing-tips>.
2. **Start first with three short activity paragraphs.** In writing them, make them as interesting and exciting as possible. Start with a story. Keep them to 1,000 characters. Maybe one of these can turn into a long. Shorts are easier to throw away than longs and very useful for the Common Application and supplemental essays. None will ever go to waste.
3. **Write a list of your most quirky features.** I love Stanford and BU's supplemental Letter to Your Future Roommate. These letters are often so much more interesting than the other essays. Makshya wrote about her fetish for making lists and provided her list. Every item from her list could turn into a great essay starter. Samples from her list include: "I have the ability to create and develop different fonts in my handwriting" and "One of my favorite words is 'ubuntu,' which means humanity in Xhosa." Start with a list of what makes you, you. Make that will spark an essay topic.
4. **Look at sample essays posted on actual college websites.** Connecticut College offers great samples. Johns Hopkins even provides admissions officers' feedback after each sample essay. Reading these, you can see the huge range of topics. At least, you can see how they all begin with an amazing in the moment first paragraph. You can do the same.
5. **Read George Lyon's "Where I'm From" Poem.** Think of where you are from. Read the poem to get ideas to write your own and start an amazing essay.
6. **Read past and present supplemental essay topics from other colleges.** The University of Chicago has great supplementary essay topics every year. A couple of years ago, one topic was: "It Isn't Easy Being Green" by Kermit the Frog. That turned into a great long essay for several kids I know who never applied to U Chicago. This year's topics are great as well. Go to <https://collegeadmissions.uchicago.edu/apply/essays/> and read the topics. Tufts also has great prompts at <http://admissions.tufts.edu/apply/essay-questions/>. Perhaps one of these topics will spark an idea.
7. **Read sample essays from older kids at your school.** But don't copy. Just get ideas. You need to truly match your writing and style to the level of school. Admissions officers are begging for gripping, non-general stories. Give them a gift.

8. **Follow Dr. J's Into, Through, & Beyond Approach.** Your essay needs to grab readers from the first word. You are competing for the fleeting attention of admissions officers who have dozens if not hundreds or thousands of essays and files to process. So don't waste their precious time and tell them a story that no one else can tell. That will help you get admitted to the match college of your choice. Follow my three pronged approach:

INTO: With your INTO, grab us into the story with a moment in time. That moment must reveal a core quality. The INTO can be a sentence, paragraph, or series of paragraphs.

THROUGH: Then go into two levels of THROUGH.

- **THROUGH 1** provides the immediate context of the INTO.
- **THROUGH 2** provides the overall context.

BEYOND: End with a BEYOND that is not sappy but powerful. Think of a metaphor that guides you and weaves through your story and into your ending.

9. **Great, great essays can take us through an event and weave in core features.** Do not feel confined by any rules other than to engage and stimulate the admissions officers to see you come to life before them. And yes, you must grammar edit your essays.
10. **Don't be bound by five paragraph essays.** Your story will guide the form of the essay. You can use dialogue, quotes, song lyrics, poetry. Let your story and message guide you.

My mothers, who span from my blood family to masses of people, have given me something greater than most things I will ever learn: the importance of giving back. It was when I felt unimportant, even less than human, that someone reached out to me. Since then, I have tried to reach out to others, whether that means I'm volunteering at battered women's shelters or just being a good friend. I want to be active in provoking change in a world that teaches me how to live every day. I can dare others to learn lessons about forgiveness. I can teach people to fall in love with the world, the same way I did—but with their own experiences, their own way. I know that I am full, open, and will forever be, a mother to the world.

COMMON APPLICATION LONG – EARLIER DRAFT

When I was eight years old, I realized my mother was gone. She was eaten up by her crack addiction, and thrust into a world of drugs and lies, one that did not include the rest of my family. The first few times it happened, I would wait for her to return, whether it was hours, days, or even months. And she always would. There were nights where I refused to sleep. I would only sit anxiously, waiting for the moment of my mother's arrival.

"I'm sorry," she would say. "I won't go again, I promise."

And every time she said sorry, I replied, "It's okay, just don't leave me anymore." Each time we would begin a new mother-daughter relationship with a messy foundation built on her broken promises paired with my unwavering faith in her. Every time she would tumble into our home, tracking the dirt of her damaged world all over the floor behind her, I would take her back. I took her back because I always hoped that this time would be the last.

One day she didn't come back. Days and months passed and the seasons came and went. Before I knew it, it had almost been two years. And so, instead of thinking that this time she'll come home for good, I spent nights hurting and thinking that she would never return to fulfill her duty as my mother.

Eventually, things reached a point where my sisters and I were left home alone for days, afraid of what was going to happen next. My grandmother, the shining light throughout my entire experience, adopted us, and we began to live with her. I started embracing distractions to ease the pain, instead of staying home and waiting for my mother to return, as a sunflower seed awaits spring's first rain. I looked for people to meet and tried to find anywhere else to be, as long as it was not my own home. Reading became an important part of my life, because there was something valuable about being able to escape into the lives of the characters. It was easier to feel empathy for the stories being played out in the novels, rather than feel bad for myself. I started playing Ultimate Frisbee, because playing a team sport presented an opportunity for me to gain emotional stability and support. In addition, I began playing the oboe, and joined a number of different wind ensembles and orchestras. I found some connection between the music and my emotions, and I began to fall in love with the music I was playing. I tried to busy myself with these and other activities in my attempt to mask what was really going on at home in my family life.

More than anything, I began to lose myself in my studies. Not only did doing my homework keep my mind busy, but it also led me to understand at an early age how much I wanted to escape of the confines of my home and the hostile environment I was growing up in. I found new meaning in going to school. I went to a program with the Civic Leadership Institute where I spent time working in New York City in soup kitchens, food pantries and domestic abuse shelters. I traveled to South Africa for five weeks and spent my summer traveling around the country learning about an amazing nation filled with a powerful history. I spent my favorite part of the trip living in a township off the coast of Plettenberg Bay staying with an incredible family.

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As all this was happening, however, my grandmother was still in the role of a single parent, working to make ends meet for my sisters and me. I struggled to feel comfortable at school, because I was constantly in the midst of my friends whose parents had more money than my family did. Unlike them, I never had enough money to go see the newest movie or buy the prettiest dress. But I never allowed that to discourage me. Although my family was struggling to make ends meet, I remained strong in the midst of everything going on at home.

When I was eight years old, I realized that my mother was gone. I spent years waiting- not only for her homecoming, but for someone to tell me how to deal with it, and who to become.

Nine years later, I am a strong woman with a powerful story- one of steadfast courage and sheer resilience. More importantly, I am happy. I am finding the things that I love to do, such as Ultimate Frisbee and playing oboe. I know that I want to spend my life promoting education reform in public schools across the nation- because I've realized the key role education plays to changing children's lives. I've learned how to live in fear, and I've learned how to find shining rays of light when I'm surrounded by the darkness of the ocean floor. My experience has illustrated the connection that I make between strength and beauty, rendering myself a beautiful soul.

There are nights where I find myself still waiting. But this time, I am not waiting for the mother who left me. I am holding out for the mother who changed me, the one who showed me how to fly.

COMMON APPLICATION – SHORTS: ULTIMATE FRISBEE AND TUTORING

Ultimate Frisbee

The most important principle in the sport of Ultimate is "Spirit," which encompasses the level of respect and sportsmanship every player brings to the game. Because of the self-officiated nature of the sport, Spirit is critical to every single player. I began playing Ultimate as a sophomore and I cherish both the spirit and the sportsmanship involved in the game. Today, there are about five million Ultimate players in the United States, a number representative not only of how big the sport is becoming but conversely, of the large sense of community. I love traveling across the East Coast with my team and meeting players from across the country. Whether we're fighting it out in the finals of East Coast Championships or exchanging cheers with the other team after a hard-fought win, I treasure being a part of a community that praises Spirit and a never-ending sense of camaraderie.

Tutoring

Seven and eight year olds are amazingly talented at finding the pictures in Hidden Pictures. That's what I learned when I spent two days a week tutoring first and second graders at Hoffman-Boston Elementary school for seven months this past year. In minutes, they could find 19 of the 20 hidden pictures and then spend their time collectively trying to find that last toothbrush cleverly hidden in the panels of the roof.

I spent the year tutoring 45 students whose test scores did not meet the Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) standards set by the state. Throughout the year, I spent the time playing word games and math games with the kids, while secretly trying to find the secret to winning those games. My time spent at Hoffman-Boston was such an amazing experience, but it was anything but easy. There were days when the students were frustrated, and even days when I was discouraged. But I never gave up on them. I always came back the next Tuesday, ready to show them addition and subtraction tricks I had up my sleeve. When they took their tests in May, 43 of the 45 students met the standards that they did not meet the year before. Upon being recognized by the county for my volunteer work, I realized how much we were helping these kids.

On a larger scale, I realized how much I cared about the well-being of the students in the public school system. My work with these kids paralleled my desire to excel at the hidden pictures. Those pictures, hidden within the contour of the portrait, mirrored the potential of these kids, many of whom lived in single parent families, to push themselves and succeed.

STANFORD ESSAY – “WHY STANFORD?”

At Stanford, I will blossom. In a place where there are no limits to my possibilities, I can experience a long overdue immersion in communities that stir the restlessness of my mind, spirit and soul. I will flourish as part of Stanford’s Black Community Services Center, a group of people constantly working to foster intellectual and personal growth. I will be opened to a movement where I can be a change agent both in and out of my community.

My Stanford experience will begin in the classroom, with influences such as Linda Darling-Hammond, one of the most influential people in educational policy. I can learn under Professors Juel and England who co-teach Education and Sociology. Outside of the classroom, I can be a part of Ravenswood Reads, a tutoring program for elementary-school students aimed at developing one-to-one interactions and supporting literacy growth.

As both a student and a tutor, I have experienced firsthand the tremendous social, racial, and cultural inequities in public education. At Stanford, I can gain unique insight about education policy in America and pursue my passion both in the classroom and in the wider world. I can work with students, teachers and policy makers in the school system of East Palo Alto that houses predominantly low-income families. I can participate in the East Palo Alto Stanford Academy (EPASA) as a tutor for middle school students.

At Stanford, I can pursue other passions. I can play Ultimate Frisbee on one of the country’s best women’s teams. I can be a part of Mixed Company, Stanford’s oldest a cappella group. I can be a writer for Enigma, a literary publication that showcases creative non-fiction.

My Stanford experience will broaden my outlook on the world, allowing me to be a proponent of change in all facets of my life.

STANFORD ESSAY – INTELLECTUAL QUALITY – FINAL DRAFT

“The outside of me shines like the moon, but still my soul continues to fight, trying to emerge. But there is no spotlight.”

During my sophomore year, I began writing a blog at my primarily white school, in which I dared others to attempt to understand my position of straddling two separate communities. I used the blog as a stage to challenge others and myself to discuss issues within the black community, especially my unusual position as a low-income black student attending a predominately upper middle class, suburban white high school. Building from novels such as Toni Morrison’s *The Bluest Eye* and blogs such as Racialicious, which discusses the connections between race and pop culture, I created a blog pairing my reading and research with my experiences.

Inspired, I found myself wanting to know more about race and identity, and the role they play in shaping our political culture. I became a better listener as I tried to understand the different perspectives I heard. I became a stronger writer, able to build on not only my own experiences, but also the outlooks of other scholars and students much like myself.

As I navigate two separate worlds, I am in a position where I am both an insider and an outsider. As the insider, I have learned what it takes to succeed. I go to a great school and have been blessed with immeasurable resources. But the outsider in me feels excluded from the black community that I feel is my birthright. In other ways, I feel like my insider-outsider status is reversed. At school, I become the outsider of the white community, and the insider of the black community.

My blog animated my passion for talking about race in America and motivated me to reflect on my own stance as an African-American woman straddling White and Black America and their corresponding cultures.

STANFORD ESSAY – INTELLECTUAL QUALITY – EARLIER DRAFT

“For a moment, all is quiet, and I take in this unsettling peace, the thought that I may have runaway from yet another fight. The end is yet to come, and at this point, I am still losing this race. The outside of me shines like the moon, but still my soul continues to fight, trying to emerge. But there is no spotlight.”

At the beginning of tenth grade, I began writing a blog titled “On Being African-American,” in which I chronicled my experiences as a black woman at a predominantly white school. While exploring some of the issues that plague the Black community, I searched for a better understanding of my feeling socially excluded from the Black community, something that I sometimes feel is my birthright.

When I was growing up, I went to an elementary school that was predominantly Black, but I didn’t think anything of it. When I got to middle school, however, there was a role reversal. For the first time in my life, I noticed I was in the minority. But still, it was not something that I put much thought into. Writing my blog served as a catalyst for my interest in establishing a sense of community for myself within the black community. As I straddle White America and Black America, and their corresponding cultures, I find myself not only struggling to feel accepted, but questioning whether I need to validate my blackness, or forever be an outsider.

EXAMPLE OF EMAIL TO INTERVIEWER

I wanted to take a minute to thank you for making time for an interview with me on Tuesday. I was really looking forward to the interview, and it went very well according to my standards.

I enjoyed sharing some of our knowledge about Arlington's school system, as well as giving you a bit of insight about the several activities and people that drive my busy life. Additionally, I thought that many of the questions and answers we exchanged inspired me to think more deeply about how I balance myself, the nature of my competitive drive, and the vision that I have for myself once I go to college. I hope you got as much from the interview as I did!

Sincerely,

Makshya Tolbert

P.S I think Bruegger's Bagels was an excellent choice.

EXAMPLES OF "DEAR ROOMMATE" COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS

EXAMPLE #1

Dear Roommate:

Here are few things you should know about me. I am very organized, but I don't mind someone else letting her stuff pile up. Sometimes my busy schedule gets the best of me, but then I have an organizational frenzy where I alphabetize my bookshelf and organize my closet by garment type and color.

Music is very important to me, as you will be able to tell by the numerous posters covering my walls and the French, Spanish, and Greek music I occasionally blast and sing along with. I have headphones, so you needn't worry that I'll interrupt your studying or wake you up early. I also play piano, guitar and drums, but don't worry; the loud instruments won't fit in our room. I love to stay up late reading a good book. If you don't stay up as late as I do, I'll find a book light.

I've been around a lot of doctors and interned in a neurologist's office, so I worry a lot about my friends getting sick. If you do get sick, I'll be the first person to take care of you.

I have kept the same stuffed bear on my bed for 15 years.

My sister is the most important person to me, so I will most likely call, video chat or face time her multiple times a day. I frequently use Rosetta Stone on my computer to try to learn Greek because a large portion of my family speaks Greek.

A hobby of mine is buying people gifts, so expect some randomly. To release my pent up energy, I like to go on midnight runs. I like to drum on different surfaces. I play Sudoku every morning. My friends and I like to bake. Once I won the local pie contest for the pumpkin pie recipe I created. I like to help my friends with any problems that they want to share. Taking care of people is extremely important to me. I can't wait to meet you.

Sincerely,
Madison

EXAMPLE #2

Dear Roommate:

For a majority of my life, I have shared the same room with my two younger brothers, so I am confident you will become family in no time. Based on my expertise, I have developed following guidelines to get us off to a smooth and sound freshmen year:

1. All non-Dodgers posters will be removed at your expense, and Giants posters will be burned on your bed.
2. The use of anyone else's toothbrush is frowned upon.
3. If you need to borrow my laptop, ask- don't just take it.
4. If you need to borrow my underwear, don't ask- just take it.

My fifth and most important recommendation is play whatever music you want.

Rock, religious, renaissance romantic, rap- whatever, I'll listen to it. In fact my friend from back home and I arrange rock and rap into mashups, so I can handle both. Even if the song you decide to play is just good, I know it can be great. Maybe we'll drop a beat, add some power chords, or back it up with a Disney soundtrack. Don't worry if our songs are completely different genres- the more diverse the tracks, the better the mashup. If you have an idea for something new, we can compose and perform it together.

I guarantee I will think that whatever you do with your time is awesome. If you're part of a book club and I'm part of an a cappella group, we'll sing stories. If I'm broadcasting on KZSU 90.1 and you're a member of the Chinese Dance club, I'll do play-by-play of your moves.

I would love to visit you wherever you live, and you're welcome to visit me. I have lived in New York, Connecticut, Poland, Connecticut again, and Los Angeles, and I have visited over thirty countries. That is, unless you fail to follow rule number one.

EXAMPLE #3

Dear Roommate,

I am looking forward to share so many Cardinal experiences with you. But before we actually meet, there are some things I want to let you know. Like everybody I have my weaknesses though none of them are too serious.

- A. The main one is that I am a romantic. I am terribly in love! The lucky man Fernando Colunga--the most amazing Mexican actor. You will see how my admiration for him is reasonable and no worries I am not an obsessed fan with posters all over the wall.
- B. I enjoy reading books especially Victorian novels and novels about other cultures. If you ever see me stress out you will notice that I turn to my favorite book "Jane Eyre." There is this passage I know by heart since a little girl and reading it soothes me and serves as a source of inspiration.
- C. I love food and you will find that very often I will not hesitate to offer you my famous guacamole. I love to cook and I enjoy preparing exotic dishes. I hope that we go out and take advantage of the diversity Stanford offers us.

I am looking forward to meet you and be able to learn more about you. I am sure we can embrace each other's interest and have fun at our dorm.

EXAMPLE #4

Dear Roommate,

I love making lists. A series of lists serve as decorations of my walls, lockers and notebooks—speckles of organization in a lifestyle characterized by organized chaos.

One of my most recent list-making tasks began at two in the morning, with my trying to write about some part of my personality that I wanted to share. I began listing small things about myself, and found myself inspired to create a large list of tiny things that define many parts of who I am.

The first one on the list goes without saying.

I have problems falling asleep.

The pronunciation and spelling of my names serves a conversation starter wherever I go.

I move my lips when I anticipate other people talking.

I have the ability to create and develop different fonts in my handwriting.

The first things I look for in someone's room are the books they keep.

I've been sleeping with a 2-foot stuffed bear for nine years.

All I want is to be able to buy a keychain with my name already on it.

I've been told that I have a silly sense of humor.

I have enough journals to fill an entire bookshelf.

I love documentaries.

One of my favorite words is "ubuntu," which means humanity in Xhosa.

When I was thirteen, I tried writing an autobiography comprised of poems.

I am most compatible with people who I think are most like me.

I feel like a four-star chef when I make salads.

I'm an ENTJ.

My favorite colors are coral and cerulean.

If I could have any superpower, I would have the ability to be in two places at once.

I eat ice cream with a fork.

I'm obsessed with the game Bananagrams™.

I drink orange juice right after I brush my teeth—just for the sour taste.

Scary movies are the worst.