

## Writing the college application essay

Phil Trout  
College Counselor  
Minnetonka High School  
collegeguy@minnetonka.k12.mn.us

This is a sampling of essay questions from college applications:

1. Some students have a background or story that is so central to their identity that they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
4. Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there and why is it meaningful to you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.
6. Tell us how you became interested in \_\_\_\_\_ and what you find most appealing about the school.
7. Write an essay that conveys to the reader a sense of who you are.
8. Recall a moment of laughter or humor in your life. What was so funny? What lesson can you draw from this experience?
9. You have written your autobiography. Please include the contents from page 78.
10. This page contains a box. Use it constructively and creatively to tell us something important about you.
11. In the spirit of adventurous inquiry, pose an untraditional or uncommon question of your own. The answer to your question should display your best qualities as a writer, thinker, visionary, social critic, sage, sensible woman or man, citizen of the world, or future citizen of this college.
12. The core mission of this university is to promote learning in the Jesuit Catholic tradition so that students acquire the knowledge, skills, values and sensitivities they need to find success as persons, professionals and architects of a more humane and just world. Compose a one-page essay about yourself that tells us how you will help the university to carry out its mission.

## Tips for College Essays from the Pros

(Compiled from comments of college counselors and college admissions officers from around the world)

- Write about something you care about – and above all, be yourself!
- Proofread! Proofread! Proofread!
- Your essay can be about the most mundane subject, but I want to see your reflection in it.
- If you are writing about an influential person, use the essay as an opportunity to see your personality reflected through the prism of that person. Why are you different than you would be if you hadn't known the person?
- Tell about yourself through a story or anecdote.
- Allow plenty of time to write a first draft, proof and edit multiple times and finalize the essay. (Don't even think about waiting until the night before the deadline.)
- Don't write on a topic that sounds impressive.
- Write in a style that reflects who you are.
- Make sure you are the only one who could write your essay. You must present a personal perspective that allows colleges to view an aspect of you that is not reflected elsewhere in your application.
- "Grab" the reader with your opening sentence. An imaginative opening will get the reader's attention.
- Be sure to focus on the "why" of an experience, not the "what."
- Essays that reveal an intellectual epiphany are rare – but impressive. Those who find their intellectual passion while in high school and somehow tie it to their college goals will impress any sound admissions counselor.
- Good writing is lean, progressive, imaginative, grounded in specifics, energized by apt verbs and respectful of the reader's intelligence.
- Strive for depth rather than breadth. Answer the question. Write about something you care about. Use the essay to explain a problem. Be sincere. Be interesting.
- Don't write a glorified list or travelogue or blame others for your situation.
- Focus on a specific idea, not a generality (like focusing on one specific part of a photograph).
- Be clear, concise and insightful. Own the essay. Like it. Keep it short. Make one point well. Do not use a thesaurus.
- Share the essay with someone, preferably an English teacher, to catch minor syntax problems that you didn't see yourself because you know what you meant to say.
- Be yourself, write your own essay, use your own voice and have fun with it. This is not a book report. Remember that someone will read your essay along with 10 to 100 other essays that day and everyday for the next 12 weeks.