

PERSONAL STORY:

*Writing about yourself for the
college application essay*

Name: _____

College Essay Writing Tips



Ten Do's and Don'ts for Your College Admissions Essay

The Do's

1. Unite your essay and give it direction with a theme or thesis. The thesis is the main point you want to communicate.
2. Before you begin writing, choose what you want to discuss and the order in which you want to discuss it.
3. Use concrete examples from your life experience to support your thesis and distinguish yourself from other applicants.
4. Write about what interests you, excites you. That's what the admissions staff wants to read.
5. Start your essay with an attention-grabbing lead--an anecdote, quote, question, or engaging description of a scene.
6. End your essay with a conclusion that refers back to the lead and restates your thesis.
7. Revise your essay at least three times.
8. In addition to your editing, ask someone else to critique your essay for you.
9. Proofread your essay by reading it out loud or reading it into a tape recorder and playing back the tape.
10. Write clearly, succinctly.

The Don'ts

1. Don't include information that doesn't support your thesis.
2. Don't start your essay with "I was born in..." or "My parents came from..."
3. Don't write an autobiography, itinerary, or resume in prose.
4. Don't try to be a clown (but gentle humor is OK).
5. Don't be afraid to start over if the essay just isn't working or doesn't answer the essay question.
6. Don't try to impress your reader with your vocabulary.
7. Don't rely exclusively on your computer to check your spelling.
8. Don't provide a collection of generic statements and platitudes.
9. Don't give mealy-mouthed, weak excuses for your GPA or SAT scores.
10. Don't make things up.

Life is Like a Chipotle Burrito

By [mellystone](#), Hinsdale, IL



Tortilla.

God is the tortilla of my life. Call Him whatever you want - Savior, Shepherd, Father - but I'll just stick with tortilla. He's the thin skin that protects me and holds me. If I screw up, I know that my tortilla will be there for me, no matter what.

Rice.

You can reach me by mail, just address the letter straight to Hinsdale, IL. This sheltered bubble is the place I call "home". It's where I brush my teeth and paint my nails. It's where I munch on black bean salsa from Kramer's and create spontaneous YouTube videos. Feel like watching shiny Mercedes sports cars pull into long driveways? Care for a fine wine tasting party at the Laney's? Come on down to the lovely 60521. It's the classiest rice around.

Beans.

Upon entering through the double doors of my high school on my very first day, I saw the masses of students, threatening to re-create the stampede scene from *The Lion King*. Oh, geez, I thought to myself. And, 952 days later, I still say that same thing each time I walk into school. I'm just one of the thousands of students. I'm just another bean. A bean with flavor extraordinaire.

Chicken.

Greenish-blue eyes. Chocolate brown hair. 5 feet, 7-and-a-half inches. Yep, that's me. I can't touch my tongue to my nose, but I can stretch my toes to unbelievable distances. Sports aren't exactly my thing, so I lack bicep muscles. Could that be why I've never been able to pass the pull-up test? I guess from the outside, I'm just an average piece of chicken. But don't worry: I've got wings, and someday, I'll be the first chicken to fly.

Mild Salsa.

The girl who does my hair at Zazu told me that I'm pleasant. Pleasant!? I thought to myself, suddenly the victim of a complete and utter mental meltdown. I clung to the sides of the black vinyl chair, trying to wrap my head around the dullness of her diction. Sure, I'm nice and all, but couldn't she have chosen, uh, well, a spicier word? Like brilliant. Or dazzling. I would have been happy with that. Oh, well. I guess a mild salsa personality isn't so bad.

Cheese.

"Melanie, would you mind reading your paper aloud to the class?" Ever since my second grade teacher told me that I had a knack for writing, I've devoted my time to words. My friends practiced cheerleading and painted pictures; I wrote stories. Every time I open a blank Microsoft Word document, I swear I can hear angels singing the Hallelujah chorus. Cheese is the glue that holds my ideas together.

Lettuce.

Every year on January 1st, I sit down in front of my iMac and come up with 10 New Year's Resolutions. No more, no less. From trivial to incredibly meaningful, my goals reflect who I am and who I'd like to be. #10 on the list? Get into Northwestern. If my dreams are lettuce, then Northwestern is the greenest leaf.

So what makes up a good personal story?

My thoughts (good or bad):

1. How do the authors of the two previous essays start out their essay?
2. How does the intro give away the major theme (thesis) of the essay?
3. What kind of language did the authors of the college essays use?
4. How does the last paragraph sound? How is that effect created?
5. What kind of connection is made from the introduction to the conclusion?



6. Any ideas about what you could write about? Start the brainstorming session here.

THE ASSIGNMENT:



You are to write a personal story based on a unified theme about yourself. The idea is that your story can be used to apply to college, or be used for scholarships, work applications, etc. See the stories that we have read to help you.

You may write your story based on a topic from a college you have researched. You may also feel free to browse the internet for personal story topics. The bottom line is that you must have writing to show for your work. Below I have given you four possible options to help you focus, but you don't have to follow them.

Option 1:

Undoubtedly you have had experiences that influenced your opinions and attitudes. Please select such an experience and give an account of it, describing its effects.

Option 2:

If you were given the opportunity to spend an evening with one person, living, deceased, or fictional, whom would you choose and why?

Option 3:

What is your greatest fear or biggest embarrassment?

Option 4:

Pick a monumental moment from your childhood and write it as a story. Consider only reporting the event as an author of a story, but use your memories, senses, and feelings to bring your character (your childhood self) to life. Consider using dialogue appropriately.

Guidelines for the Writing Assignment:

- **Write several paragraphs.**
- **Create a clear theme that will run through your essay. Connections must be drawn from the beginning to the end of the story.**
- **Utilize varied sentence structure and word choice.**
- **Revise and edit heavily for conventional errors.**
- **Type the final copy following MLA guidelines.**

Where to start???



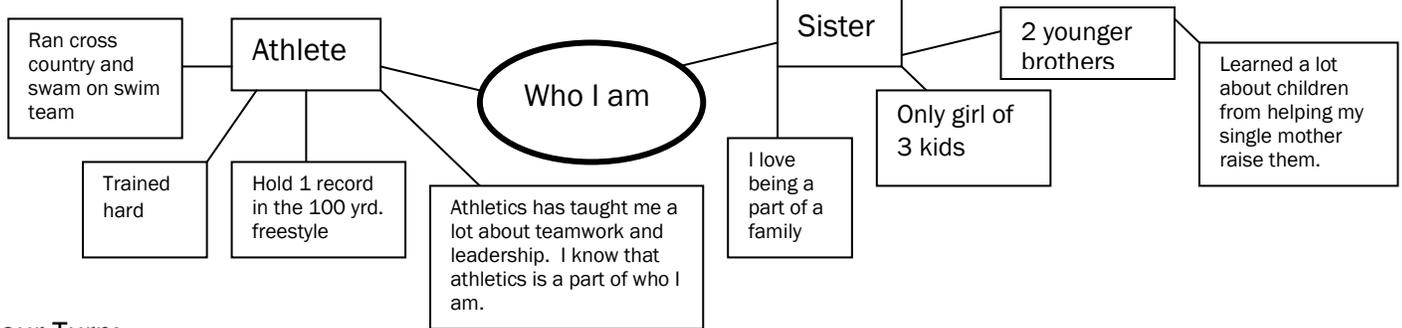
Prewrite #1: The Web

Directions:

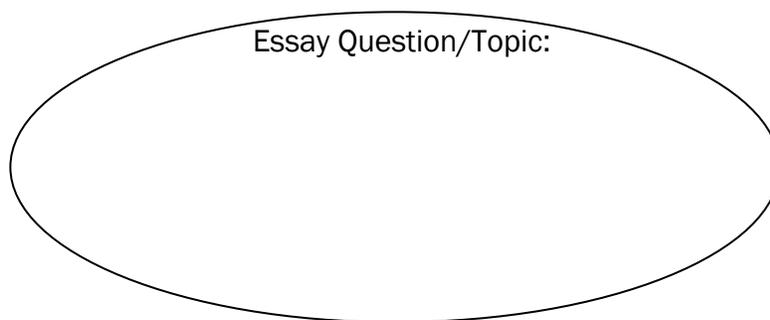
Step 1: In the circle below, write the essay question you are to tackle.

Step 2: The teacher will put 45 seconds on the clock. For 45 seconds you are to not write anything, just think. Eyes open or closed, just think.

Step 2: When 45 seconds are up, start webbing some ideas. When you are done you will have something that resembles a spider's web. The process is simple: Draw a line out from the center circle with a bubble. In the bubble write an idea (good or bad, right or wrong...just write something). Do not hold back. If an idea for that idea springs up, add from that bubble. If you run out of ideas, start a new "leg" for the web. Look at the following example:



Your Turn:





Prewrite: Student Outline

Make a basic list of the content you will cover in each paragraph. Don't make this difficult on yourself; just give some ideas in a list. Start with creating a theme and hook.

Theme:

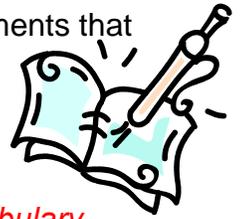
Hook:

Paragraph 1:

Paragraph 2:

Paragraph 3:

Complex Sentences and Word Choice: The sentences that follow have their positives and negatives. Determine the elements of each sentence that are done well, and the elements that need more work.



My dad taught me a lot.

Example: The sentence itself is not bad, but doesn't fully reflect a higher level of vocabulary sophistication and explanation. The best suggestion for this sentence is to consider working on specifics of what dad taught, and write a better predicate to the sentence than "me a lot."

I learned a lot from my dad who died last year.

I learned a lot from my deceased father.

The lessons my father taught me before he died were important to my childhood.

The lessons my father taught me before he died were significant and valuable to my upbringing.

My growth as an individual was largely a result of the lessons my father taught me before he died.

My growth as an individual was largely a result of the lessons imparted by my father, who instilled the values and morals I uphold today.

Questions to consider when reviewing the above sentences:

- What word choice sounds better and is clearer than the sentence above it? Are the words that changes verbs or adjectives?
- What parts of the sentence above the one you're working on are reused? Changed? Is the sentence better, worse, or the same?
- How has the sentence grown from the sentences above it? What is different about the sentence beginnings? The endings?
- Which sentences sound more sophisticated?
- What techniques can you utilize in your own personal story from above?

PEER REVIEW:

Name on paper: _____

Evaluative Questions	Yes	Sort of	No	Explanation
1. Is the title informative and interesting? (College essay only)				
2. Does the introductory paragraph engage the reader? Does it include a hint at the theme?				
3. Is the paragraphing effective? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - topic sentence - details support topic sentence - details support theme - paragraph information is interesting - paragraphs connected logically - paragraphs reflect the diamond shape 				
4. Does the writer use clear, interesting word choice and sentence variety? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - interesting descriptive words - clear images with story-like language - does not overuse "I" or "You", or switch between perspectives at random - sentences have a mixture of long and short structures - varying sentences for a nice sound when read through 				
5. Writing is free of grammatical errors.				
6. The conclusion wraps up the essay effectively and <u>uniquely</u> . The theme is hit on, even rounded out.				
7. Overall, the essay really gives the reader a clear image of the writer. It has an interesting appeal.				

COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY/PERSONAL STORY GRADING RUBRIC:

Note to student and grader: The final score of this paper will not necessarily be each score added together. The essay/story will be graded on a holistic scale based on the suggested scores for each section listed below.

Scale:

1 – In-effective ; 2 – Weak; 3 – Developing; 4 – Emerging; 5 – Effective; 6 – Strong

1. Introductory paragraph: The student has clearly identified the theme that will follow throughout the personal story, creatively hooking the reader through a story opener technique.
1 2 3 4 5 6

2. Body paragraphs: The student has given the details of the story in chronological order, entertaining the reader in a way that continually draws the reader back to the main theme. Particular elements of story writing are clear, such as foreshadow, point of view, plot structure, etc.
1 2 3 4 5 6

3. Conclusion: The student has successfully wrapped up the story, making connections back to the introduction and paragraphs. The conclusion reflects on theme, giving the reader a clearer understanding of the theme and finishing the picture the reader is supposed to create of the author in his/her mind.
1 2 3 4 5 6

4. Sentence structure and word choice: The student has effectively utilized varying sentence structures to create flow in the story. The student has also effectively utilized clear, specific and story-like word choice that is well-chosen and maintains the message the author is trying to send. Choices made in sentence structure and word choice are sophisticated and demonstrate a higher level of writing.
1 2 3 4 5 6

5. Conventions: The student has taken the time to accurately revise and edit the writing to meet the standards of well-written English.
1 2 3 4 5 6

6. Meaning: Overall, the story gives the reader a clear image of the writer and meets the requirements of the assignment. Not only is the story interesting and appealing to the reader, but the reader has been given a the reader an accurate sense of who the author is as a person.
1 2 3 4 5 6

Grader's Notes:

Final Grade: