

## Step One: Brainstorming College Essay Ideas

Before you can write a college application essay you first have to come up with a topic to write about. The first stage in coming up with a topic is to brainstorm: to come up with lots of possible topics, a whole pool of topics from which you can then pick and choose the topic that you think is both the most interesting and which will best highlight your unique qualities.

You should spend at least a few weeks brainstorming ideas before you pick any topic and start writing your essays. By giving the topics time to grow and evolve in your mind you may come up with richer and more interesting spins on the topics you want to write about.

To help you generate ideas for topics, here are a number of questions to consider:

1. What are your major accomplishments, and why do you consider them accomplishments? Do not limit yourself to accomplishments you have been formally recognized for since the most interesting essays often are based on accomplishments that may have been trite at the time but become crucial when placed in the context of your life.
2. Does any attribute, quality, or skill distinguish you from everyone else? How did you develop this attribute?  
Consider your favorite books, movies, works of art, etc. Have these influenced your life in a meaningful way? Why are they your favorites?
3. What was the most difficult time in your life, and why? How did your perspective on life change as a result of the difficulty?
4. Have you ever struggled mightily for something and succeeded? What made you successful?
5. Have you ever struggled mightily for something and failed? How did you respond?
6. Of everything in the world, what would you most like to be doing right now? Where would you most like to be? Who, of everyone living and dead, would you most like to be with? These questions should help you realize what you love most.
7. Have you experienced a moment of epiphany, as if your eyes were opened to something you were previously blind to?
8. What is your strongest, most unwavering personality trait? Do you maintain strong beliefs or adhere to a philosophy?
9. How would your friends characterize you? What would they write about if they were writing your admissions essay for you?
10. What have you done outside of the classroom that demonstrates qualities sought after by universities? Of these, which means the most to you?
11. What are your most important extracurricular or community activities? What made you join these activities? What made you continue to contribute to them?
12. What are your dreams of the future? When you look back on your life in thirty years, what would it take for you to consider your life successful? What people, things, and accomplishments do you need? How does this particular university fit into your plans for the future?

As you think over these many categories, jot down ideas and possibly essay topics and let them percolate and grow in your mind. After a few weeks of brainstorming, start to whittle down your list toward the few topics that you would most like to write about.

If these questions cannot cure your writer's block, consider the following exercises:

### **1 - Ask for help from Parents, Friends or Colleagues**

If you cannot characterize yourself and your personality traits do not automatically leap to mind, ask your friends to write a list of your five most salient personality traits. Ask your friends why they chose the ones they did. If an image of your personality begins to emerge, consider life experiences that could illustrate the particular traits.

### **2 - Consider your childhood**

While admissions officers are not interested in reading about your childhood and are more interested in the last 2-4 years of your life, you might consider events of your childhood that inspired the interests you have today. Interests that began in childhood may be the most defining parts of your life, even if you recently lost interest. For instance, if you were interested in math since an early age and now want to study medicine, you might incorporate this into your medical school admissions essay. Analyze the reasons for your interests and how they were shaped from your upbringing.

### **3 - Consider your role models**

Many applicants do not have role models and were never greatly influenced by just one or two people. However, for those of you who have role models and actually aspire to become like certain people, you may want to incorporate a discussion of that person and the traits you admired into your application essay.

### **4 - Read Sample Admission Essays**

Before you sat down to write a poem, you would certainly read past poets. Before writing a book of philosophy, you would consider past philosophers. In the same way, we recommend reading sample admissions essays to understand what topics other applicants chose.

### **5 - Goal determination**

Life is short. Why do you want spend 2-6 years of your life at a particular college, graduate school, or professional school? How is the degree necessary to the fulfillment of your goals? When considering goals, think broadly. Few people would be satisfied with just a career. How else will your education fit your needs and lead you to a fulfilling life?

If after reading this entire page you do not have an idea for your essay, do not be surprised. Coming up with an idea is difficult and requires time. Actually consider the questions and exercises above. Without a topic you feel passionate about, without one that brings out the defining aspects of you personality, you risk falling into the trap of sounding like the 90 percent of applicants who will write boring admissions essays. The only way to write a unique essay is to have experiences that support whatever topic you come up with. Whatever you do, don't let the essay stress you out. Have fun with the brainstorming process. You might discover something about yourself you never consciously realized.