

Step Two - Selecting an Essay Topic

Having completed step one, you should now have a rough idea of the elements you wish to include in your essay, including your goals, important life experiences, research experience, diversifying features, spectacular nonacademic accomplishments, etc. You should also now have an idea of what impression you want to make on the admissions officers.

You must now confront the underlying problem of the admissions essay. You must now consider topics that will allow you to synthesize your important personal characteristics and experiences into a coherent whole while simultaneously addressing your desire to attend a specific institution. While most admissions essays allow great latitude in topic selection, you must also be sure to answer the questions that were asked of you. Leaving a lasting impression on someone who reads 50-100 essays a day will not be easy, but we have compiled some guidelines to help you get started. With any luck, one or two topics, with small changes, will allow you to answer application questions for 5-7 different colleges, although admissions officers do appreciate essays that provide convincing evidence of how an applicant will fit into a particular academic environment. You should at least have read the college's webpage, admissions catalog, and have an understanding of the institution's strengths.

Consider the following questions before proceeding:

1. Have you selected a topic that describes something of personal importance in your life, with which you can use vivid personal experiences as supporting details?
2. Is your topic a gimmick? That is, do you plan to write your essay in iambic pentameter or make it funny. You should be very, very careful if you are planning to do this. We recommend strongly that you do not do this. Almost always, this is done poorly and is not appreciated by the admissions committee. Nothing is worse than not laughing or not being amused at something that was written to be funny or amusing.
3. Will your topic only repeat information listed elsewhere on your application? If so, pick a new topic. Don't mention GPAs or standardized test scores in your essay.
4. Can you offer vivid supporting paragraphs to your essay topic? If you cannot easily think of supporting paragraphs with concrete examples, you should probably choose a different essay topic.
5. Can you fully answer the question asked of you? Can you address and elaborate on all points within the specified word limit, or will you end up writing a poor summary of something that might be interesting as a report or research paper? If you plan on writing something technical for college admissions, make sure you truly can back up your interest in a topic and are not merely throwing around big scientific words. Unless you convince the reader that you actually have the life experiences to back up your interest in neurobiology, the reader will assume you

- are trying to impress him/her with shallow tactics. Also, be sure you can write to admissions officers and that you are not writing over their heads.
6. Can you keep the reader's interest from the first word. The entire essay must be interesting, considering admissions officers will probably only spend a few minutes reading each essay.
 7. Is your topic overdone? To ascertain this, peruse through old essays. However, most topics are overdone, and this is not a bad thing. A unique or convincing answer to a classic topic can pay off big.
 8. Will your topic alienate a large number of people? If you write on how everyone should worship your God, how wrong or right abortion is, or how you think the Republican or Democratic Party is evil, you will not get into the college of your choice. The only thing worse than not writing a memorable essay is writing an essay that will be remembered negatively. Stay away from specific religions, political doctrines, or controversial opinions. You can still write an essay about Nietzsche's influence on your life, but express understanding that not all intelligent people will agree with Nietzsche's claims. Emphasize instead Nietzsche's influence on your life, and not why you think he was wrong or right in his claims.
 9. In this vein, if you are presenting a topic that is controversial, you must acknowledge counter arguments without sounding arrogant.
 10. Will an admissions officer remember your topic after a day of reading hundreds of essays? What will the officer remember about your topic? What will the officer remember about you? What will your lasting impression be?

After evaluating your essay topics with the above criteria and asking for the free opinions of your teachers or colleagues, and of your friends, you should have at least 1-2 interesting essay topics. Consider the following guidelines below.

1. If you are planning on writing an essay on how you survived poverty in Russia, your mother's suicide, your father's kidnapping, or your immigration to America from Asia, you should be careful that your main goal is to address your own personal qualities. Just because something sad or horrible has happened to you does not mean that you will be a good college or graduate school student. You don't want to be remembered as the pathetic applicant. You want to be remembered as the applicant who showed impressive qualities under difficult circumstances. It is for this reason that essays relating to this topic are considered among the best. Unless you only use the horrible experience as a lens with which to magnify your own personal characteristics, you will not write a good essay. Graduate and professional school applicants should generally steer clear of this topic altogether unless you can argue that your experience will make you a better businessman, doctor, lawyer, or scholar.

2. Essays should fit in well with the rest of a candidate's application, explaining the unexplained and steering clear of that which is already obvious. For example, if you have a 4.0 GPA and a 1500 SAT, no one doubts your ability to do the academic work and addressing this topic would be ridiculous. However, if you have an 850 SAT and a 3.9 GPA or a 1450 SAT and a 2.5 GPA, you would be wise to incorporate in your essay an

explanation for the apparent contradiction. For example, perhaps you were hospitalized or family concerns prevented your dedication to academics; you would want to mention this in your essay. However, do not make your essay one giant excuse. Simply give a quick, convincing explanation within the framework of your larger essay.

3. "Diversity" is the biggest buzzword of the 1990's. Every college, professional school, or graduate school wants to increase diversity. For this reason, so many applicants are tempted to declare what makes them diverse. However, simply saying you are a black, lesbian female will not impress admissions officers in the least. While an essay incorporating this information would probably be your best topic idea, you must finesse the issue by addressing your own personal qualities and how you overcame stigma, dealt with social ostracism, etc. If you are a rich student from Beverly Hills whose father is an engineer and whose mother is a lawyer, but you happen to be a minority, an essay about how you dealt with adversity would be unwise. You must demonstrate vividly your personal qualities, interests, motivations, etc. Address specifically how your diversity will contribute to the realm of campus opinion, the academic environment, and social life.

4. Don't mention weaknesses unless you absolutely need to explain them away. You want to make a positive first impression, and telling an admissions officer anything about drinking, drugs, partying, etc. undermines your goal. Why admit to weakness when you can instead showcase your strengths?

5. Be honest, but not for honesty's sake. Unless you are a truly excellent writer, your best, most passionate writing will be about events that actually occurred. While you might be tempted to invent hardship, it is completely unnecessary. Write an essay about your life that demonstrates your personality.