

# TOP 6 COMMON APPLICATION ESSAY TIPS



Parents and students often ask us for our most valuable Common Application essay tips, so our savvy team of advisors compiled a list of simple, effective tricks to use as guidelines while you navigate the tricky waters of college essay writing. Try to use them for good and not for evil.

**1. Think small:** When writing the Common Application essay, too many students feel compelled to try and squeeze their entire life story into 650 words. This, friends, is impossible. It is almost always better to think small first. Find a story or event in your life that really meant something to you. Did you win a competition at the last second? Was your family stranded on vacation with no power for five days? Have you read something recently that blew your mind? Now ask yourself- are any of these stories representative of my larger, most valuable qualities? The perfect essay topic showcases your personality, passions and/or ambitions without trying to do too much at once. Talking about your family's adoption of a three-legged dog and how your pet's perseverance and quirky attitude influenced the way you live your life, will make a better essay than a super general diatribe on why you like dogs, for example. If you find yourself getting lost while writing, ask: what am I trying to say about myself, and am I using a specific, compelling example to tell my story?

**2. Write first, edit later:** When it comes to writing, we are almost always our own worst critics. So many students want and expect themselves to produce pure, uninhibited brilliance the first time their fingers hit the keys, but that is almost never the way good essay writing works. Writing a compelling essay is a process, and the best writing can often be plucked from our stream-of-consciousness efforts. Don't edit yourself before you allow your creativity to warm up and pour onto the page. Never judge your writing until you have a few paragraphs written down first. You can always cut what doesn't work and it is much easier to work with an overabundance of words and ideas than nothing at all.

**3. Kill those clichés:** We're not going to *beat around the bush* here: clichés really *get our goats*. When you take that *trip down memory lane*, telling us about the time you were a *mover and a shaker* putting your *nose to the grindstone* it makes our *blood boil*. We're content and grammar snobs, so we find clichés to be extra unappealing, but we also have enough confidence in your creativity to know that you can do better. Admissions essay readers know it too, and expect you to *think out of the box* without using phrases like "think out of the box." So strike those tired sentences from your essay and do it now. *Never put off tomorrow what you can do today*. It actually hurt us to write that.

**4. It's all in the details:** What is the difference between these two sentences? 1. My favorite activities included fishing and cooking my daily catch. 2. My friends and I woke up early every morning to catch bass on Lake Michigan, cooking our spoils with herbs picked from a local farm. In the first sentence, we understand that you enjoyed certain activities. In the second, yes, we know you like fishing but we also understand your commitment to an activity you engaged in every day and recognize that your fishing trips are a social effort. There is a sense of time and place- we can see the setting, smell the herbs. With a few extra words, sentence two tells us much more about your fishing experience. Many students have a tendency to skew generic in the telling of their personal stories. What makes an essay memorable is often the sum of the little things. If you can paint a clear picture for your reader by providing details, you are much more likely to lodge a marker in their memories.

**5. If Nothing Else, Entertain:** Imagine you're a college essay reader at an upstanding academic institution and it is your job to read dozens of essays a day, every day, for weeks on end. Ninety percent of the essays that pass your desk are stone-cold boring, and maybe ten percent break through the fuzz and force you to pay attention. As an applicant, you want your essay to shine a bright light in the face of that oft-bored reader. No matter what your subject, serious, uplifting, sentimental or pithy, your essay should aim to entertain. This will require many elements working together in harmony. You will need a compelling subject, a direct and powerful narrative, impeccable grammar and a memorable style. A little laughter never hurts either. It is often hard to know whether an essay is truly entertaining until the end stages of writing, but when you are reading over your drafts, the question should always be in the back of your mind: Is this essay fun to read? Some students achieve entertainment value by being controversial. Others load their pieces with comic relief. Some are able to describe events in such detail that a reader simply must get to the end of the essay. No matter what tactics you end up using, your goal should be effortless and compelling readability.

**6. Brand yourself:** In order for your essay to be truly effective, a reader should be able to summarize your subject in a simple sentence. You accomplish this self-branding by choosing a creative topic (or a creative twist on a common topic), and writing about it with enough detail to burn an image of yourself in the reader's brain. When it comes down to you and another similarly qualified candidate, you want an admissions officer to be able to stand up with your application in his/her hand and say, "I like the girl who performed trapeze in the circus," or "How about the girl who saved her grandfather's life?" It will be much harder to remember "the girl who practiced the trapeze, and was also good at riding bikes, and who got an A on every test and who generally worked very hard," or "the girl who really loved her late grandfather and who feels like she embodies a lot of his core characteristics." Focus your story. When you finish writing your first draft, do a branding test- try to label yourself based on your essay and see what you come up with. If you can't easily narrow it down to a punchy description, you probably need to alter or simplify your essay.

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