



WRITING A COLLEGE ESSAY

Office of Undergraduate Admissions

[Admissions.umd.edu](https://admissions.umd.edu)

applymaryland@umd.edu

301-314-TERP (8377)

AN INSIDER'S VIEW

1. How to pick an essay topic
2. Do's & Don'ts
3. How important is an essay?
4. Sample
5. Q&A

DISCLAIMER





PICKING AN ESSAY TOPIC

- **Essay Topics (Coalition):**
 - Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
 - **Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.**
 - Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
 - **What is the hardest part of being a teenager now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?**
 - Submit an essay on a topic of your choice



PICKING AN ESSAY TOPIC

- Travel experiences
- A meaningful event
- Academic experiences
- Activities/sports/organizations
- Future plans and goals
- Reasons you're applying to the institution; why you would be a good fit as a student there (school specific)
- Personal information that will help the admissions committee review for your file (family situation, learning difference, etc.)
 - Additional comments

PICKING AN ESSAY TOPIC

- Choose a topic you can relate to or that is personal to you
 - Based on your experience
- Content is key—be specific!
 - Remember that your audience knows almost nothing about you
 - YOU are the topic ... not your grandma... not your pet goldfish
- Remember your audience
 - What is the school looking for in an applicant?
- Brainstorm, write, revise (x2)

YOU!

Major? Location?
Special
Qualities?

DO'S



- **Make sure that you and someone else reads your college essay**
 - Never submit without revisions
- **Read your essay out loud to catch grammar mistakes and to see if you've explained everything you wanted to**
- Catch the reader's attention in the first or second sentence
- **Show don't tell!**
 - Describe the setting, use emotions, etc.
- **Stay organized**
- Be original
- **Focus on one or two topics/thoughts**

DON'TS

- **Make grammar mistakes**
 - Homophones
 - Two, too, to; their, they're, there
- **Talk about another school other than the one you are applying to**
- Exceed word count (500-550)
- **Format (varies)**
- Use a thesaurus for every other word
- **Plagiarize**
- Let someone else write your essay
- **Last minute**



HOW IMPORTANT IS IT REALLY?

- **No rubric**
- Fine distinctions
 - Not only for admissions, but also special programs
- **Gives us a chance to hear more about you outside of the classroom**
- You can explain any extenuating circumstances or events that may have affected your high school performance
- **You're in control**
 - Opportunity to enhance your application



SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Did the writer grab your attention in the first few sentences?
2. Did this student's essay show rather than tell?
3. Did you learn something personal about the student that you wouldn't find elsewhere in their application?
4. Can you determine the topic or theme without knowing what it was?
 1. Was there one or two solid thoughts? Or multiple?

SAMPLE I



From the time I was able to realize what a university was, all I heard from my mother's side of the family was about the University of Michigan and the great heritage it has. Many a Saturday afternoon my grandfather would devote to me, by sitting me down in front of the television and reminiscing about the University of Michigan while halftime occurred during a Michigan Wolverines football game. Later, as I grew older and universities took on greater meaning, my mother and uncle, both alumni of the University of Michigan, took me to see their old stamping grounds.



SAMPLE I

From first sight, the university looked frightening because of its size, but with such a large school comes diversity of people and of academic and non-academic events.

In Springfield High School, non-academic clubs such as the Future Physicians and the Pylon, both of which I have belonged to for two years, give me an opportunity to see both the business world and the medical world. These two clubs have given me a greater sense of what these careers may be like. In Future Physicians, I participated in field trips to children's hospitals and also participated in two blood banks.



SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Did the writer grab your attention in the first few sentences? Did they make you want to keep reading?
2. Did this essay show rather than tell?
3. Did you learn something personal about the student that you wouldn't find elsewhere in their application?
4. Can you determine the topic or theme without knowing what it was?
 1. Was there one or two solid thoughts? Or multiple?

SAMPLE 2



It is barely dawn and a fleet of nurses burst into the patient's room. One grabs the child's arm, while another sticks a needle and begins drawing a blood sample. Completing the morning routine, another member of the team continuously presses buttons on a machine to check the vitals. A tray of pills is placed in front of a groggy child, who stirs when offered a glass of water. This is just another typical day in the life of a sick youngster: constrained to a hospital bed, restricted from outside play and tethered to IV poles. Now imagine this child who is enduring a battle with cancer, being able to power through because a powerful surprise appears on the horizon.

SAMPLE 2



Making “Walk for Wishes” a passionate priority, I am so grateful I was given the opportunity to participate in fundraising for the Make-a-Wish Foundation. Many children with severe illnesses could either be transported to Disney World or meet their favorite professional athlete. My heart never fails to melt when my team of classmates and I reach a milestone fundraising goal. I know that we will keep hope alive for youth who deal with frightening diagnoses.



SAMPLE QUESTIONS

1. Did the writer grab your attention in the first few sentences?
2. Did this student's essay show rather than tell?
3. Did you learn something personal about the student that you wouldn't find elsewhere in their application?
4. Can you determine the topic or theme without knowing what it was?
 1. Was there one or two solid thoughts? Or multiple?

SAMPLE 3



My blond hair, blue eyed friends were the consummate stereotype of wealthy white kids and they sometimes made me feel inferior, asking me if I spoke “Mexican” or “why are you brown?” I remember being with my dad in public and people asking him if I was adopted, or seeing the puzzled look on people’s faces when he accompanied me to school events. I often felt excluded and self-consciousness to the point where I sometimes put a yellow t-shirt on my head and ran around the house pretending I had blond hair.

SAMPLE 3



My experiences with my ethnicity have shaped who I am and I now appreciate the fact that I look like the woman I admire the most. My mother has not only overcome the prejudice of being the only Latina woman in our neighborhood, she has also persevered and worked her way up to an Executive level position in the white, predominantly male world of Finance. She is one of the few working mothers in our neighborhood and has earned respect of our community for being so accomplished. I have learned from her that being a 1.19% in a community of 95.2% is a blessing and ultimately, it is character and not color that will ensure my success in life.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS



1. Did the writer grab your attention in the first few sentences?
2. Did this student's essay show rather than tell?
3. Did you learn something personal about the student that you wouldn't find elsewhere in their application?
4. Can you determine the topic or theme without knowing what it was?
 1. Was there one or two solid thoughts? Or multiple?

TRUE OR FALSE

- Your essay must meet the word count **False! Depends on the school**
- Your essay should always be formatted in size 12 font, 1" margin, double spaced, and no more than 2 pages **False! Depends on the school**
- It is okay to plagiarize as long as you use quotation marks **False! NEVER OKAY!**
- Write based on your own experience **True!**
- Your essay is your only chance to explain to the reader who you are as a person outside of academics **False! Resume/Additional Comments**
- Your essay should include a thesis **False!**

QUESTIONS?

