



COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY TIPS

THE ROADMAP TO A GREAT ESSAY



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Helping a student edit the college application is an honor and hard work. This person is trusting you to assist them during a challenging task and time in their life. You might find yourself walking the fine line between encouraging the student and pushing the student to work more. Let the student know that you are there to provide whatever support they need, whether it is brainstorming, drafting or editing.

Here are some overarching points to remember during this process. The college essay is a difficult one to write for a number of reasons. Students believe they need to have a perfect essay with the perfect topic right from the start. Instead topics take time to develop and essays need to be worked through many drafts to find the student's voice and story. Another challenge to students is that they have spent many years being taught how to write critical essays or comparative essays. However, this essay is very different since it is a personal essay. It is important that the essay focuses on the student, not the parents or grandparents. Finally the essay is an opportunity to tell a story about themselves which is not told in any other part of the application.

Step 1 - Establish Trust

When first meeting with a student, try to find a connection to establish trust. You might already have that because the student knows you. If not, maybe even the place you are meeting is enough in common that you can use that, such as a school building or youth center.

Step 2 - Determine what the student needs and wants

Ask the student where they are in the application process. If they are using the common app, which essay prompt are they answering?

- Do they have a draft of the essay?
- Do they need to brainstorm ideas, topics and themes?
- Have they worked the essay a lot and want to have it proofread?

Any stage is good, but you need to be clear what the student wants in order to provide the right level of assistance.

Step 3 - How to brainstorm with a student

If the student needs to brainstorm ideas, then asking questions and taking notes is a great starting point.

- What is the student interested in?
- What challenges the student?
- What motivates the student?
- What does the student like to do outside of school or in free time?
- Is there something about the student that they would like to highlight that is not already in the application?

- What is something about them that not many people know?
- Does the student have an incident or memory that was important to them which highlights something particular about themselves?

Remember the essay's purpose is to provide a space for the student to tell a narrative about themselves which is not already in the application.

Very common topics/cliché topics:

- Sports challenge/accomplishment.
- Failure in grades or in school.
- Coming to the US.

If the student wants to write about these topics, the student needs to have some part that is unique and stands out from other students writing on the same topic.

Topics to avoid:

- Illegal activity;
- Controversial political opinions that are highly sensitive and polarizing which would distract a reader from the student's message and focus on a personal belief;

Step 4 - Checking to see if the topic works

If the student has brought a draft but thinks it still needs work, then read over the essay. Try to figure out what theme the student is talking about.

- What are you learning about the student from reading this essay?
- Is the essay about the student?
- Who is the focus of the essay?
- Has the student answered the essay question or prompt?

After reading over the essay, talk with the student about what the student believes is being conveyed in the essay. Make sure you are both in agreement. If not, how can the essay be changed to reflect what the student wants to convey? Always remember this is the student's essay and needs to be the student's voice and work.

Often with essays, there is a part that jumps out at you and makes you think, "I want to know more about that". Talk with the student about that part and find out more to see if that something that can be further developed and strengthened to make an essay. Encourage the student to write without concern of word count in order to get all the ideas down on paper. The words can be cut later in the editing process.

Step 5 - Editing and refining your essay

Once the student has a draft with a good topic, then start to work on the flow of the essay.

- Does the first paragraph catch your attention and make you want to read further?
- Is there a theme and does it carry throughout the essay?
- Does each paragraph flow into the next?
- Does the student provide examples for what they are talking about?
- Is the essay in the active voice?
- If there are clear grammatical errors, point those out. If possible, explain why they are errors.

Step 6 - Submission

Throughout this process you have been cheerleader for the student. One final piece of advice to give the student is that an essay is never perfect, but it does need to be submitted. It is helpful to encourage students to set a timeline for themselves and not to be submitting at the last possible minute. Congratulate the student for all the hard work and congratulate yourself for the process as well.



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