

# 9 essay writing tips to ‘wow’ college admissions officers

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You’ve taken the tests, requested the recommendations, completed the common app, and now it’s finally time to refocus on what you’ve been putting off: the essay.

While most students spend days, sometimes weeks, perfecting their personal statements, admissions officers only spend about three to five minutes actually reading them, according to Jim Rawlins, director of admissions at the University of Oregon. High school seniors are faced with the challenge of summarizing the last 17 years into 600 words, all while showcasing their “unique” personality against thousands of other candidates. “It’s hard to find a balance between sounding professional and smart without using all of those long words,” says Lily Klass, a senior at Milford High School in Milford, Mass. “I’m having trouble reflect myself without sounding arrogant or rude or anything like that.”

The following tips will help applicants make the leap from ‘average’ to ‘accepted’:

## 1. Open with an anecdote.

Since the admissions officers only spend a brief amount of time reviewing stories, it’s pivotal that you engage them from the very beginning. “Instead of trying to come up with gimmicky, catchy first lines, start by sharing a moment,” says Janine Robinson, writing coach and founder of Essay Hell. “These mini stories naturally grab the reader ... it’s the best way to really involve them in the story.” Let the moment you choose be revealing of your personality and character. Describe how it shaped who you are today and who you will be tomorrow.

## 2. Put yourself in the school’s position.

At the end of the day, colleges want to accept someone who is going to graduate, be successful in the world and have the university associated with that success. In your essay, it is vital that you present yourself as someone who loves to learn, can think critically and has a passion for things—anything. “Colleges always say to show your intellectual vitality and curiosity,” Robinson says. “They want kids who are going to hit the ground running—zoom to class and straight out into the world. They want them hungry and self-aware.

## 3. Stop trying so hard.

“One of the biggest mistakes students make is trying too hard to impress,” Robinson says. “Trust that it is those every day, specific subjects that are much more interesting to read about.” Colleges are tired of reading about that time you had a come-from-behind- win in the state championship game or the time you built houses in Ecuador, according to Robinson. Get creative! Furthermore, your writing doesn’t have to sound like Shakespeare. “These essays should read like smart, interesting 17-year-olds wrote them,” says Lacy Crawford, former independent college application counselor and author of *Early Decision*. “A sense of perspective and self-awareness is what’s interesting.

## 4. Ditch the thesaurus. Swap sophistication for self-awareness

There is a designated portion of the application section designated to show off your repertoire of words. Leave it there. On the personal essay, write how you would speak. Using “SAT words” in your personal statement sounds unnatural and distances the reader from you. “I think most students are torn between a pathway dividing a diary entry and a press release. It’s supposed to be marketing document of the self,” Crawford says.

### **5. Write about what matters to you, not what matters to them**

Crawford recommends students begin by answering the question, “if you had 10 minutes to talk to them in person, what would you say?” The admissions teams are looking for authenticity and quality of thinking. “Theoretically, I think anything could be ‘the perfect topic, as long as you demonstrate how well you think, your logic and ability to hold readers’ attention,” Crawford says.

### **6. Read the success stories.**

“The best advice is to read essays that have worked,” Robinson says. “You’ll be surprised to see that they’re not winning Pulitzers; they are pieces of someone. You want your story to be the one she doesn’t put down.” Once you find a topic you like, sit down and write for an hour or so. It shouldn’t take longer than that. When you write from your heart, words should come easily. Rawlins recommends showing the essay to a family member or friend and ask if it sounds like the student. “Take a few days and come back to it. But only do that once,” Rawlins says. “Reading it over and over again will only drive you nuts.”

### **7. Don’t pretend to be someone you’re not.**

While colleges tend to nod to disadvantaged students, roughing up your background won’t help your cause. “It’s less about the topic and more about how you frame it and what you have to say about it, Robinson says. “The better essay has the most interesting thing to say, regardless of a topic that involves a crisis or the mundane.” The essays serve as a glimpse into how your mind works, how you view the world and provides perspective. If you have never had some earth shattering experience that rocked your world, don’t pretend you did. Your insights will be forced and disingenuous.

### **8. Follow the instructions.**

While the directions on the applications may sound generic, and even repetitive after applying to a variety of schools, Rawlins points out that every rhyme has a reason. “They have to know that college put a lot of thought into the instructions we give them—so please follow them!” he says. “We’ve given a lot of thought to the words we use. We want what we ask for.”

### **9. Use this space to tell them what your application can’t.**

Most colleges don’t have the time or bandwidth to research each individual applicant. They only know what you put in front of them. “If they don’t tell us something, we can’t connect the dots,” Rawlins says. “We’re just another person reading their material.” Like Crawford, he recommends students imagining they are sitting next to him in his office and responding to the question, “What else do I need to know?” And their essays should reflect how they would respond. At the end of the day, however, Rawlins wants students to know that the personal essay is just another piece of the larger puzzle. “They prescribe way too much importance to the essay,” Rawlins says. “It makes a massive difference—good or bad—to very few out there, so keep it in context.”