From the Mouths of Experts:  
Some Perspective on the Essay’s Place in the Process, What Readers Are Looking for, and Topics that Often Fail
What is the role of an essay in the college application process?

- According to Mark Alan Stewart and Cynthia Muchnick, co-authors of *Best College Admissions Essays*, the closer you are to the borderline of what a college is looking for, the more your essay matters (5).

- College essays are, in short, one of the only ways in which YOU can control the application process. By this time, you will not be able to change your GPA, SAT scores, or class rank. You can make take the reins and present yourself in a way that you control through this essay or personal statement.
Some words on essays from admissions representatives...

- “We want to see a slice of your life that is the most meaningful to you.” — Lloyd Peterson, Yale

- “Because writing itself is a way of demonstrating the ability to think, we get a good idea of how the student thinks through the essay.” — Elizabeth Moser, Bryn Mawr

- “While the essay is part of the overall package, and we do look carefully at everything, it does offer students the best chance for reflection.”

-- Gail Sweezey, Gettysburg College
Characteristics of a Successful Essay

- “Serious thinking and reflection.” – Peter Osgood
- “Contrary to popular belief, we do not want to be entertained.” – Peter Osgood
- “We need to hear your voice.” – William Conley
- “If you’re not funny, now is not the time to experiment.” – Michael Thorp
- “Understand what the question is asking.” – Lloyd Peterson
- “One mistake is not being original enough.” – Elizabeth Mosier
My Sources Tell Me…

- Slides 3 & 4 contain quoted opinions of admissions representatives gathered in the following source, which is available in the library (LB 2351.52.U6 T35x 2005). This is also the source for the next slide:

Topics to Avoid

- Sex
- Drugs or drunkenness
- Bad grades (focus on what kept you busy or motivated instead of highlighting your weaknesses)
- Crimes
- A mere description of why the school is “perfect for you”
- A news story or disaster that has no direct effect on you
- World peace
- The “big game”/ sports triumph
- Deep confessions
Getting Started: Three Considerations

1. When writing a personal statement, a memorable event or experience, write as if you are, as UPENN once asked its applicants, on page 217 of a 300 page autobiography.

2. Don’t buy your paper or ask someone to do it for you. According to Sarah Myers McGinty, author of The College Application Essay, admissions representatives share a lingo and mark such essays accordingly: DDI (for “Daddy did it.”).

3. SHOW, DON’T TELL. Don’t just say you love math, prove/demonstrate it throughout the body of the essay.
Essay Topics That Are Often Doomed
Courtesy of Author Harry Bauld

- The Trip or Vacation: if you select this, use details over banalities like, “It was a whole new world.” Again, SHOW, don’t TELL.
- My Favorite Things: this is more a list for a Facebook note or one of its “PICK 5” applications and turns an essay into chaos.
- Big Issue Topics: gun control, war, and apartheid can sound like “small town editorials” with tendencies toward the “plagiarized” and “generic.”
- Do not, whatever you do, start your essay with the words, “Hello. My name is…” It will be moved to what the publishing world calls the slush pile.
More Promising Topics to Consider

- The following ideas come from Stewart and Muchinick’s Best College Admissions Essays:
  
a. **YOU, after all, by now you’re an expert on being yourself**
  
b. **An often overlooked song, poem, novel, or artistic work that made an impact on how you see the world**
  
c. **An unexpected “gift”**
  
d. **A contribution or accomplishment not motivated by reward**
  
e. **A moral dilemma**
  
f. **Those times someone unlikely let their guard down around you as if you were a peer: a parent, a teacher, an elder**
Strategies You Can (and Should) Use
Prompting Yourself to Get Started

Consider trying one of the following approaches to work your way toward a topic:

a. 200 questions- ask yourself any 200 questions. The process will take over an hour, but by question 150, you get beyond, “Why is the sky blue” and get to something interesting about your world, or the world as you see it.

b. Interview the people who know you best so that you can see yourself from someone else’s point of view—just the way the admissions folks will be seeing you.
More Strategies to Start

c. Give yourself a few days (2-3) to make a list of the 20 topics, places, ideas, or objects you’re the most interested. Now choose TWO and think of how one relates to the other. Don’t force this one; if it’s not working, it’s not working, but unlikely comparison is the way that artists and writers often express the world around them.

d. Ask yourself, “What have been the ten biggest challenges in your life? Why? How have you
Questions to Ask Yourself
While Brainstorming

1. Is this a topic leading toward an essay that only I could write?
2. Is this something I feel strongly about?
3. Does this experience or idea include other people? It’s a good thing if it does.
4. Did you come up with this idea? Your parents have had their shot; write your own essay. This is an opportunity, not a punishment.
5. Is this my first (or tenth idea)? If it is, someone else has written it.
Questions to Ask Yourself When Selecting a Topic

1. Would you want to read an essay about this topic? Think of an admissions person’s day: they may have just had a terrible lunch, woken up to the sound of an obtrusive alarm, or had a frustrating phone call. Don’t disgust, inundate, or frustrate further.

2. Is this original? How many essays on this topic will someone in admissions have to read?

3. Are you the only one who could have written this essay, or could the specific names be covered and it still ring true many times over? If so, pick another topic.

4. Can your idea be expressed within the word limits for this essay?
PART THREE: Writing

How to WOW Your Readers
Keep these things in mind as you write

- Be you.
- Be original.
- Reveal something about yourself.
- Have a point.
- This occasion calls for equal parts thinking and writing.
- Highlight growth.
- Demand 100% of every word and sentence, not just every paragraph.
- Use original language, but don’t over-rely on the thesaurus.

Source: Accepted! 3rd Edition: 50 Successful College Admission Essays by Gen and Kelly Tanabe. *

*Available for use in the RWC (CG 409)
A few tips to help you along

- Before you start writing, read a few essays and write down what you find memorable, entertaining, or unique about them.

- Take a look at Fiske’s Real College Essays That Work. That book reproduces the first few sentences of over a hundred successful essays. These demonstrate how to build suspense or mystery, how to start a good story, or how to focus an essay from the start. I particularly like a couple of these samples:
“The rusted ball rests in my hand. My sandals shift in the gravel. My right arm lies loosely at my side swinging gently. I’m crouched near the ground, concentrating on a little wooden ball ten yards away.”

Here’s a great example of showing, not telling. We get these details in an almost filmic way. It’s all very vivid.

“Growing up in a small, conservative community, it’s easy to be shoved into your own category if you don’t look or act like everyone else. My hair and eyes, instead of being blonde and blue like all of my Czech classmates, were chocolate and espresso. My name had a ‘z’ in it, and my grandmother called me ‘mija’.”

Here’s an example of someone who lets each word pull its weight. I particularly like the choices of “shoved,” “espresso,” and “mija” because they are specific and deliberate.
Questions for Editing

The following questions come from One Hour College Application Essay by Jan Melnik (JIST Press):

☐ What message do I convey?

☐ What is the tone? Is it appropriate?

☐ If I knew nothing of the subject matter, would the essay make sense to me?

☐ Are any of the sentences confusing or awkward sounding?

☐ Is it interesting?

☐ Does it sound natural?
Tips for Editing

- Read the essay out loud with a pencil in hand. This is our tutoring method because it allows you to find and fix your mistakes readily.
- Have a friend read the essay to you while you look on a second copy.
- Fix any awkward sentences, or add transitions when one thought does not flow into the next.
- Once you’ve read for content clarity, consider syntax and sound. Eliminate clichés and delete sentences that are redundant.

NOTE: SPELL CHECK is really just a starting place, and it won’t catch many errors. Please keep in mind these editing options when editing something as important as a college essay.
Tips for Editing from the Fiske Guide for Real College Essays that Work

Look for these no no's:
- Lack of a main idea
- Weak verbs
- Passive voice
- Failure to use I
- Too many simple sentences
- Wordiness (don't say in 10 words what you can say in 3)
- Mixed tenses

Word Commonly Misspelled:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Wrong</th>
<th>Right</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>calculas</td>
<td>calculus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collage</td>
<td>college</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>councilor</td>
<td>counselor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>financial aide</td>
<td>financial aid</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>honor role</td>
<td>honor roll</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>perspective student</td>
<td>prospective student</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>preparatory</td>
<td>preparatory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>psychology</td>
<td>psychology</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Get Feedback

- Before sending your essay out into the world, get feedback from a friend, a professor you trust (during office hours if you’ve asked ahead of time), or the Reading and Writing Center. Our tutors are prepared and trained to help with these documents!

- Ask your reader to review the question to be sure your essay covers the necessary ground.
Recycling Essays

- While you want to get the most mileage out of a good essay, not all questions are the same. Be sure that you consider each school’s question in its entirety. This might mean you need to replace specific details about one school for those of another. Be sure you send an essay to its intended school!

The COMMON APPLICATION might be your best bet for recycling. If you haven’t heard of the common application, go to [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) and check it out!
That’s all folks!

- Don’t forget to come in with these essays a few weeks before you want to send them out. That way you can sit with a tutor multiple times as you work through the writing and revision process!

Good luck on your transferring endeavors from the Reading and Writing Center!