

Choosing a College Essay Topic

What You Write About Says Something About You:

Underlying all essay questions is choice. The essay question may be direct and ask you to choose something about yourself to discuss, or it may be indirect and require you to write about something such as an event, book, or quotation.

Why Your Choice of Essay Matters

The college regards your choices as a way to evaluate your preferences, values, mental processes, creativity, sense of humor, and depth of knowledge. Your writing reflects your power of persuasion, organizational abilities, style, and mastery of standard written English. Your essay topic reveals your preferences.

Here is what colleges look for:

Your Preferences: Your essay topic reveals your preferences. Are you an arts person or a hard-facts science type? Certainly, there is a difference between the person who'd like to talk about the Cold War with Machiavelli and someone who'd like to get painting tips from Jackson Pollock.

Your Values: Choice also reflects values. The person who drives a beat-up, rusty, 1971 Volkswagen is making a statement about how she wants to spend her money and what she cares about. We say, "That dress isn't me" or "I'm not a cat person." In choosing, you indicate what matters to you and how you perceive yourself.

Your Thought Process: Choosing shows how you think. Are you whimsical, a person who chooses on impulse? Or are you methodical and careful, a person who gathers background information before choosing? Questions about you and about career and college reflect these choosing patterns. Even a question about a national issue can show your particular thinking style, level of intelligence, and insight.

Think About Topics:

The topic you select for your essay can also reveal much about who you are. Yale's application instructs: "In the past, candidates have used this space in great variety of ways.... There is no 'correct' way to respond to this essay request...." No answer is wrong, but sloppy, general, insincere, or tasteless responses can hurt your cause.

Some of the best essays—the memorable and unusual ones—are about very similar, just more focused, topics. Essays about your family, football team, trip to France, parents' divorce, or twin can be effective as long as they're focused and specific: a single Christmas Eve church service, a meal of boiled tongue in Grenoble, or dipping ice cream on a summer job. Personal Essay Getting Started

How to get started.

Step 1: Think about yourself.

What are your strengths and weaknesses? _____

What are your best qualities? Are you an athlete? An intellectual? A creative type? Curious? Passionate? Determined? _____

Step 2: Choose a positive quality you'd like to convey to the admissions committee. Don't pick an event or something you've done. President of the Nuclear Awareness Club is not a personal quality. Focus on a quality of your mind or of your character. Complete this sentence: "I am a very _____ person."

Step 3: Tell a story.

Set a timer for 20 minutes. Pretend you're taking an exam at high school and responding to, "Tell a story about an experience or time when you showed you were a very _____ person." Use the characteristic you identified in Step 2. Write or type non-stop for 20 minutes; force yourself to keep telling the story and what it reveals until the timer goes off.

Step 4: Editing.

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- Let It Cool: Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?
- Feedback Time: Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?
- Edit Down: Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").
- Proofread Two More Times: Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.