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*Transfer Guide:*  
**The College  
Admissions Essay**

# Writing a Winning College Application Essay

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The college essay is typically the most time consuming part of the college application process. It is your opportunity to speak one-on-one with the admissions committee and demonstrate to them that you are more than grades on a transcript, or activities listed on a résumé. You can't go back in time and join more clubs or do better in your classes, so your essay is the one part of your college application that you have total control over in the present. For that reason, you should invest time and energy to produce your best work. Don't expect to have a final draft completed in one sitting. It is a process that takes time and effort.

## What Admissions Committees are looking for

Admission officers use the essay to discover more about you, including:

- your ability to write clearly, concisely, and at a college level
- new information about you that is not readily apparent elsewhere in your application
- your level of self-awareness and unique attributes
- interests and future goals

The best essays are those that allow the admissions committee to envision who you are and what's important to you, without having ever met you. This can be challenging to do in 500 or so words, but a successful essay should provide a glimpse into who you are.

## Brainstorming and Generating Ideas

Getting started can be the hardest part! Though a college may ask you to write about various topics, the starting points below are a good place to start to help get the creative juices flowing, regardless of the prompt. Brainstorm, free write, and/or mind map on each of the following topics:

- *Strengths:* In what areas do you excel? What words best describe you?
- *Passions:* What excites you?
- *Turn-around experiences:* Have you had an experience that turned your life around?
- *Highlight special skills or unique attributes:* What are you really good at? What makes you stand out?
- *Key point:* If you could only tell the college ONE thing about yourself, what would it be?
- *You as a learner:* Discuss your strengths, challenges, and strategies.

Does a theme emerge? What is the theme? What is the best way to distinguish yourself as an applicant? Consider telling a story about yourself that demonstrates this theme. For instance, if your theme is that when you are excited about something you throw yourself fully into it, perhaps you share a story about the month you became obsessed with sharks and spent way too much time learning all there is to know about them. Sharing a story allows you to “show” an admissions committee this personality trait without coming out and “telling” them about it.

## **Addressing Previous Academic Issues or an “Academic Turnaround”**

If you have had previous struggles academically that have negatively impacted your grades—particularly in college—you should address this somewhere in your college application, and the essay is one place where you can do that. Here is an example outline for such an essay:

- *The Past:* Discuss your past briefly. Colleges will have your transcripts, so talk about what lay behind the record. Be honest, but don't dwell on your past or your learning differences.
- *The Present:* Tell a story or focus on a personal strength. Discuss 1-3 ways you have changed since your academic struggles. Be specific about what strategies and skills you have gained.
- *The Future:* Why are you ready to move on? Why are you ready for this particular college program? How does this program specifically meet your goals and needs?

The Common Application also allows you to address this in the “additional information” section if you would like to write your essay about something else. Just make sure you do address these challenges somewhere from your perspective.

## **Sample Essay Questions**

There are several different types of essay questions that you may be asked, such as:

- "Tell us about yourself."
- "Why do you want to attend our college?"
- "Creative: We want to hear what you have to say" about a particular topic question.
- "Why are you transferring and what do you hope to achieve?" (found on the Common Application).

**Below are some ideas on how to approach each of these questions.**

### *The "Tell us about yourself" question.*

- What are some words you would use to describe yourself? Can you think of a story/example about yourself that illustrates one of these characteristics?
- Describe the most interesting experience you have had in your life.
- What is the most difficult decision you have had to make in your life and how has it affected you?

### *The "Why do you want to attend our college" question.*

- What are your reasons for choosing to apply to that college?
- Why do you think you would be a good fit for that college?
- What are your career goals and how do you think the college you are applying to will help you achieve those goals?
- Don't just tell the admissions committee what you think they want to hear. Do your research and be genuine. This question is often easier to answer after you have visited the college's campus so try to visit if possible.

*The "Creative: We Want to Hear What You Have to Say" about a particular topic question.*

- These type of questions can really be anything such as:
  - "Our Office of Admission keeps a running reading list. What book would you contribute to the list and why?"
  - "If you had to be raised by robots, aliens, or dinosaurs which would you choose and why?"
- The admissions committee is trying to get a sense of how you think so, be true to yourself and don't be afraid to get creative. There is no right or wrong answer!

*The Common Application question for transfer applicants: "Why Are You Transferring and What Do You Hope to Achieve?"*

- The answer to this question is often straightforward: you're graduating, Landmark doesn't offer your intended major, you're ready to move on. Stating the obvious, however, will make for a very short essay! So while you can state the obvious, you should not neglect this opportunity to speak directly with the admissions committee and share with them what you feel they need to know about you.
- Because your reasons for transferring may be straightforward, you may want to address why you are *ready* to transfer. In addressing this question, you can discuss the skills you have gained at Landmark that will ensure your success at your next college. Be specific here—discuss the strategies you have learned and how you hope to use them in the future. Your next college wants to be reassured that you are ready to transfer.
- For the Common Application Essay, it is okay to stray from the prompt if you have something more interesting to write about. As long as you write a compelling essay, admissions committees won't mind that you didn't follow the prompt exactly. You can share why you are transferring in the "additional information" section if it can be summed up in a sentence or two.

### Proofreading and Revisions

Your essay should go through several revisions before it is submitted. Below are some important questions to ask yourself about your draft.

Does your draft:

- Have a beginning that will catch the reader's attention?
- Focus on a theme that is developed throughout the essay?
- Give the reader a sense of who you are?
- Address the prompt provided by the college (see list above)?
- Have a personal tone and simple language?
- Has transitions between thoughts and ideas so the essay flows smoothly?
- Have 250 - 600 words?

Once you are happy with the content and organization of your draft, be sure to proofread it AND have someone else proofread it. This can be your Career Connections counselor, someone at DCAS, a parent, or a friend with strong editing skills. Remember to use the spell check and grammar check on your computer. Read your draft out loud or have text to speech software read it back to you (e.g. Kurzweil).

You may want to read one sentence at a time, starting with the last sentence of the paper (to avoid focusing on ideas rather than grammar, spelling, etc).

In general, a good essay needs:

- Main idea
- Evidence to back up the main idea
- Organization
- Coherence—in other words, easy to read
- Correctness—no grammatical errors, spelling errors, or typos

### Tips for essay writing

- There are no right or wrong answers to a college essay. Don't get preoccupied with saying what you think the admissions committee might want to hear.
- If you spend time really *thinking* about your essay before you sit down to write it, the words will flow easier! Think about it walking to class, in the shower, over lunch—whenever you have a few moments to yourself, start to toss around ideas in your head.
- Using words you don't know is a dangerous game. Using words incorrectly is a dead giveaway that you used the thesaurus on your computer.
- When writing your essay, ask yourself: "Who will be reading my essay, and have I said anything that could seem offensive to that person?"
- Unless you are asked to write about a specific political topic, keep your politics, religion, and business affairs out of your essay.
- You will often be given a limit to how long your essay can be. Do not allow your essay to go longer than the stated limit. The Common Application actually will cut-off any words after the 600 word limit so your essay could end mid-sentence!
- As you write your essay, ask yourself "Could anyone else have written this essay?" If the answer is "yes," you may want to think about what you can do to make your essay represent your unique self. Be authentic.
- Show, don't tell. In other words, try to find ways to describe or "show" a situation, rather than just telling your audience "here's what happened."
- Be sure to go beyond a presentation of your learning style, or learning issues. Weave these into your presentation of yourself. Do not make them the only things you discuss.
- Transfer, Career, and Internship Services has a number of books on writing college essays in their resource library. You are welcome to come in and review these at any time.
- **Don't be afraid to start! The essay is the piece of the application process that takes the longest, and can often bring things to a screeching halt. Do your best to get your "crappy first draft" out of the way—that is, most first drafts aren't great, but they are a great starting point! Getting something down on paper is often half the battle.**

Notes, Brainstorming, Essay Outline: