

# 5 TIPS FOR WRITING YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY

Few things make students nervous about applying to college like the essay. But think about it – you’ve been writing essays for years so you’ve had lots of practice. Plus, the subject is one you know better than anything and anyone ... YOU! No research is necessary, just some thinking and reflection. Here are some tips to get you started.

## #1 The subject of the essay is YOU!

Think of the essay questions on a college application as *prompts* to get you started, not necessarily as questions you have to answer literally. Regardless of the question, an admission committee cares most about getting to know you and learning how you will fit in on our campus academically and socially. Whatever topic you choose, use it as a way to organize your thoughts as you write about your character, your aspirations, and what is important to you. Perhaps you will tell us about the influence your mom or dad has had on you, but keep the focus on you. Remember, your mom or dad isn’t applying to college – you are.

## two Remember your English Comp class.

You’ve learned a lot about writing in school; now you get a chance to use it to show the admission committee what you know. Start with a thesis – what do you want to say about yourself? Outline your thoughts. It will keep your essay organized and easy to follow. Write a draft and set it aside for a day. When you come back to

read it, you’ll have a fresh mind. Have someone else read it, but don’t let them change it too much. Before you finish, proofread very carefully because grammar and spelling count. And please make sure that if you use the name of the college you’re applying to in your essay that you send the right essay to the right college.

Well-organized paragraphs and a variety of sentence structures are signs of a good writer.

## 3. Talk to us.

The essay is your opportunity to talk directly to the admission committee. You can help us get to know you by sharing *your* story in *your* voice. Don’t try to be too formal or sound smart (and don’t get caught in the thesaurus trap – use your words, not those that you had to look up). Be yourself. You can even write in the first-person (e.g., “I” or “me”). Tell us something that only you can tell us, and write with the same excitement and passion as if you were talking with a group of friends. This is an essay about you, so it’s really OK to sound like you’re bragging – just don’t be arrogant. Your parents or counselor may be able to help you think of ideas ... but don’t let them write it for you. We know pretty quickly if an essay is written by an adult trying to be a high school student!

### Pro Tip:

Answering the question, “Why did you choose SMU?”

We know you love SMU – we think it’s pretty awesome, too! It’s got a beautiful campus full of tree-lined paths, it’s convenient to one of the nation’s top cities, the faculty is invested in your success and your peers are ambitious and motivated. But, what does that mean for you?

We’ve read our own brochures, so please don’t reword them to answer this prompt! We know our school inside and out, as do all admission counselors. Take the time to dig deeper and get specific.

Talk about how your personal experiences with the University (like an inspirational professor or student ambassador who you met on your campus visit) influenced your college decision and how SMU will help you to achieve your goals.

# 4

## Understand your audience.

Who is really going to be reading this? Well, it will likely be several people, most of whom you don't know.

So consider your audience and what we're looking for. The committees for admission, scholarships, or even honors programs, can be made up of recent college graduates, nearly retired faculty and every age in between with a variety of interests and opinions. Keep in mind, we aren't looking for students who are like us, but you shouldn't insult someone who is not like you.

We read thousands of college essays every year. The opening paragraph of your essay should grab our attention and help us to know what to expect. We read pretty fast, so keep your story organized and concise to help get your point across.

The one thing we all have in common is that we love our school. We want to admit ambitious students who will take advantage of the many academic and social opportunities on our campus. We must feel confident in your ability to contribute positively to our community.

## No.5 Now, get started ...

Give some careful thought to what you want to say about yourself. Is it something that you haven't been able to say in the rest of your application? Or is it something you want to highlight with more detail? As soon as you know you want to apply to a particular school, read the essay requirements – even before you fill out the application form, if possible. Consider all of the essay prompts, and write down two or three

possible topics for each one. Pick several you like best, and think how you might write about each one. In fact, make a short outline for your top three. When you're done, you'll have a good feeling for which one gives you the best opportunity to showcase what you will bring to a college campus.

*Start a list of essay topics on your phone. Great ideas can come at any time, and you don't want to forget them!*

## Questions?

Great! We've got answers. Your Admission Counselor will be your personal guide through the application process and will be your advocate when it comes time to present your application to the Admission Committee. Get to know yours at [smu.edu/counselor](http://smu.edu/counselor). And don't forget, your high school counselor is also a wealth of knowledge and is there to help guide you and answer your questions. All you have to do is ask!

Find more helpful information for your college search at [smu.edu/5tips](http://smu.edu/5tips).

## Tips on Topics: What to avoid

If you can think of someone else in your school who can tell us the same story as you, it's likely there are thousands of other high school seniors who can as well.

Here are the top 10 over-used or just inappropriate topics that we suggest avoiding:

1. What I learned doing community service
2. Why a poor grade was the teacher's fault
3. A devastating breakup with my boyfriend/girlfriend
4. "Hard work always pays off," and other life lessons learned while playing sports
5. How my trip to another country broadened my horizons
6. How I overcame a life challenge (that wasn't really all that challenging)
7. Politically, religiously, or socially insensitive or embarrassing material
8. Adolescent humor and crude jokes
9. Relieving your conscience or delving into unresolved issues
10. Anything that will make readers cry, "Too much information!"

These aren't necessarily bad topics, just ones where it will be very difficult to be distinctive. So, if you're going to use one, make sure that it is unique, meaningful and provides a fresh perspective for your audience.

