

Presenting Your Best Self #3: Writing Strategies and Tips

When it comes to writing your college essays, one thing is for certain and that is that nothing is ever quite certain. Nevertheless, following these strategies and tips will provide focus and organization to your work as well as assure that your finished essays are the best they can be.

1. Get Organized from the Outset

Assemble a complete list of schools to which you'll be applying, along with their submission deadlines, major essay required (Common Application, Coalition Application, or other), and any shorter essays required (supplementary prompts.)

Next, open up your Common Application or Coalition Application account, or both in case your list of schools includes both applications.

Then check with each of your schools to determine whether you need to open a personal admissions account.

Now you are ready to begin writing.

2. Start Thinking About the Personal Statement

At its core, the Common Application or Coalition Application essay—also known as the personal statement—is about *reflection*. It is as much a thinking task as it is a writing task. It is something that's meaningful about you and also directly answers the prompt. Two questions dominate the personal statement: *What happened?* and *Why does it matter?*

Your personal statement is a huge value-added tool that can set you apart from other students in a competitive environment. Admissions readers look at personal statements to learn about a slice of life that reveals the student in a small way. It typically helps more than it hurts, but it can hurt at smaller liberal arts colleges where writing is really scrutinized.

Consider a mundane moment that can reveal more about yourself than a “big deal” topic. Keep your personal statement *micro* rather than *macro*. *Interesting* does not mean *big*.

Ideally, a great personal statement has a) an uncommon topic, b) uncommon connections, and c) uncommon language. Of these, the most important is uncommon connections.

3. Four Widespread Myths and the Actual Facts

Myth #1: “A college essay has to be written about an impressive topic.”

Fact: You are impressive, not the topic. The story, not the experience, is most important. Colleges want to know what you’ve learned rather than what you did.

Myth #2: “A college essay should sound sophisticated, like *The Great Gatsby* or a professor.”

Fact: You should sound like a high school student, not a professor or a famous writer—and not like your mom, dad, teacher, or older siblings. Aim for clarity and simplicity which will, in turn, reveal your authentic writer’s voice.

Myth #3: “Admissions officers will never know if anyone helped too much with a college essay. They won’t know if you plagiarized, either.”

Fact: There is a fine line between getting help and getting someone else to write it for you. Admissions officers know when someone other than a student writes a story; they don’t like it, and it can and will likely hurt you.

Myth #4: “There is a right way and a wrong way to write a college essay.”

Fact: Your best story will grow out of the process of writing your college essay. There are no tricks and no shortcuts. But the college essay does not need to be so daunting: tell a genuine story, answer the prompt, and show reflection.

4. Five Writing and Editing Tips

- *First personal pronouns:* By all means use *I* and *me*, but just don’t overuse them. When you have finished your first draft, go through it sentence by sentence in order to reduce first person pronouns by 1/3 or more.
- *Paragraph structure:* Your decision on paragraphing is crucial for organizational clarity. New paragraphs provide important visual cues for admissions readers. Consider a new paragraph every 100 to 150 words.
- *Sentence length and structures:* Some students are “lovers of the long sentence”; others prefer shorter sentences. Whichever type you are, make sure to change up your sentence length and structure every 3 or 4 sentences. Doing so will keep your reader’s interest.
- *Read aloud, then listen:* To assure that your writer’s voice is authentic, read your essay aloud to someone you trust. Then ask that person to read your essay back to you!
- *Editing method:* Instead of reading your essay from start to finish, read it from finish to start! By backing up through the essay, sentence by sentence, you will force your brain to examine each sentence out of sequential context. (Though this method may seem farfetched, it really works.)