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INTRODUCTION

Writing your personal statement is a challenging process. It requires a high level of thought, self-reflection, and purposeful composition. The intention of this guide is to enable you to approach this process with the mindset that writing your personal statement is an opportunity for personal growth, not simply another obstacle in the admissions process.

As such, this guide has two goals:

To give you an opportunity to reflect on your life experiences and connect with yourself.

To walk you through the process of writing your personal statement, from start to finish.

While our aim is not to make this process easy, this guide will provide you with the tools and strategies you need to approach it with confidence. Let's begin the journey by answering some common questions.

What are college essays?

Almost everybody knows you must write an essay, or perhaps multiple essays, to gain admission to the college of your choice. But for many students, these essays remain amorphous assignments reserved for the weeks leading up to application deadlines.

Many are confused about the details: *Is this just another essay like those I've written for school assignments? What should I write about? Are there any*

original ideas left? Who will read my essay? We'll answer all those questions and more—but first, let's frame the task more concretely.

The personal statement, the essay that nearly all students have to write, is an approximately 650-word (two-and-a-half pages, double-spaced) document offering an opportunity to present your perspective and personality to admissions officers.

In a way, it is easier to define the personal statement in terms of what it is **not**. The personal statement is not a memoir; it is not an analytical essay; it is not your opportunity to write a manifesto.

This is your chance, however, as a person on the precipice of adulthood, to reflect on what has been meaningful to you over your past 17-or-so years. It is your chance to find your voice, to communicate how you see yourself, how you see the world, and how you might fit into a larger community (like a college, for example).

Your objective should not be to write the “best” or “most groundbreaking” essay. This goal-oriented perspective will likely leave you with an essay that reads like a poorly written sports docudrama. Instead, you should strive to connect with yourself and your personal history.

It is a rare gift to be given a structured opportunity to make sense of your life experiences. Above all, the purpose of this guide is to assist you in embracing that opportunity with curiosity and determination rather than with fear.

Why do colleges want you to write essays?

In an effort to get to know the “real” you, college admissions officers gather as much information about you as possible. Your GPA and your course selection will provide them with means to observe your time-tested ability to meet deadlines, participate in projects, and study for exams. Your standardized test scores, if you send them, will yield a window into how well you've mastered core academic skills like critical thinking and quantitative analysis, as well as an understanding of how well you perform under pressure. The two or three letters of recommendations they read, written by recommenders of your choice, will give them external testaments to your mettle. And your list of activities will indicate that you have participated in something larger than yourself, and that you are not just a homework robot.

Ironically, in their attempt to get to know the “real” you, they only give you one extended opportunity for you to speak on your own behalf. **That opportunity is the college essay.**

College admissions officers want you to write an essay because they want a glimpse of how you interact with and view the world. Many high school students conceive of attending college as an abstract goal: something that you should want to do, but that is hard to picture yourself doing. If admitted, you will be attending college in a very real way. You will be making new friends in

MORE INFORMATION



For more details regarding test-optional policies and their effect on the college admissions process, see page 81 of the Appendix.

freshman orientation; you will be asking your roommate to pass the salt in the dining hall; you will be responding to questions and comments from both fellow students and professors in seminars.

The college essay is an opportunity for admissions officers to see what kind of person will be haunting the halls of their campus. This insight is something that no number of grades, test scores, or recommendations could ever communicate, because it can only come from one place—you.

But who are these admissions officers, anyway? Isn't it critical to understand your audience?

Who reads your college essays?

If we had a nickel for every time a student asked who the admissions officers were, we'd be rich. The fact of the matter is that nobody really knows who they are, or at least not specifically. We are, however, able to make some inferences about who they might be.

For the most part, admissions officers will be higher-educated and in their late twenties to early thirties, although age may vary by institution. They will often hold undergraduate degrees, advanced degrees, or both, from the institutions at which they now work.

They will have studied a wide range of disciplines and subjects throughout their academic careers—but don't think you're writing to a room of dry academics. Admissions officers will also be aware of pop culture trends (they read thousands of high schoolers' essays every year, after all), familiar with TikTok, and likely fanatical about the New York Times crossword.

Admissions officers are smart, so don't feel like you need to hold their hands. Gone are the days of admissions offices being full of old white men. Often, you will be writing to a group of people who come from diverse backgrounds: they will be of different races, ethnicities, sexual orientations, gender identities, political affiliations, and religions. The main things to keep in mind are they're smart and they've read a lot of personal statements (like a ton).

How admissions officers read essays varies from institution to institution. Sometimes admissions offices will hire essay readers as temporary workers for one admissions season, but more often your readers will be full-time admissions officers. Of course, not all the essays can or will be read. Most admissions offices divide their applicant pools into three broad categories:

- ▶ Those who meet the basic academic requirements of the institution (defined as grades and/or standardized test scores).
- ▶ Those who don't meet the basic academic requirements.
- ▶ Those who represent "special cases" for admission (e.g., recruited athletes, legacy students, and children of faculty or administrators).

Those who do not meet basic academic requirements will generally not have their essays read, unless they are special cases for admission. Those who do



HAVE YOU HEARD?

Stanford received 47,450 applications in 2022. With a staff of 27 admissions officers, that works out to be about 1,757 essays per officer.

will have them read twice to avoid bias.

Colleges split up applicants into geographic regions. There will be one or two admissions officers who will read the applications for each region. Generally, this information is listed on each college's website, as are the academic requirements, often represented as the admissions profiles of the prior year's admitted students.

Once your application is deemed to meet basic academic requirements, it typically takes an admissions officer less than ten minutes to read your essay. Heartbreaking, we know.

The fact is that many essays are structured in similar ways and discuss similar topics, so admissions officers develop a good sense for telling whether an essay will be compelling just from the first couple of sentences. This means that each sentence you write must be purposeful, acknowledging the struggle involved to maintain their attention.

After the essays are read twice, a certain amount will be sent on to "committee," where admissions officers gather and make the final decisions. Usually, the admissions officer from your region will present your application and all of its details (including GPA, test scores, and essays) to the other officers and ultimately to the Dean of Admissions.

Colleges are pretty secretive about how they make the decisions in these meetings, but this stage is when your essay will have the most impact. Academic performance becomes less of a factor once applications reach committee, as almost all applicants in this stage will be academically competitive.

What separates the lucky from the unlucky will be how memorable their personal statement is. And that's where this guide will come in handy.

RECAP: INTRODUCTION

- ▶ The personal statement is not an analytical essay; however, it is an opportunity to reflect meaningfully on your life experiences, your community, and your individual growth.
- ▶ Admissions offices want you to write a personal statement because it is their opportunity to understand how you perceive and relate to other people and communities.
- ▶ Admissions officers are smart, culturally aware, and are looking for a college essay to stand out from the pile of essays they've been reading all day (there's a lot of them).
- ▶ Two admissions officers will read your essay, and then, if they decide to move forward, one of them will present it and your application to a larger group of officers called a committee who will make the final admissions decision.

GETTING ORGANIZED

Students (and parents) often underestimate the number of essays you will need to write during the admissions process. The majority of you will use the Common App for most of your applications.

In general, you will have to write a main essay that will be sent to all your schools (the personal statement), and supplemental essays particular to specific colleges on your list. If you are not sure whether your school accepts the Common App, you should visit the “Find a College” tab on the Common App’s website to confirm whether the school is a Common App member.

Another platform you may use to apply is the Coalition for College, founded in 2015. Less frequently, schools will use a native application platform embedded on their websites. Make sure that you know which application platform the colleges on your list accept before proceeding with the processes outlined below so that you are familiar with the different word counts required for the personal statements.

The personal statement prompts themselves are relatively similar across platforms, so there is no need to worry about the specific content of the prompts at this point. Even though you will send one personal statement to all of the schools on your list, because of supplemental essays, if you are applying to 12 colleges you may need to write up to 36 essays (three supplemental essays per college). Luckily enough, most essays fall into one of the following categories.

MORE INFORMATION



To read the Coalition for College personal statement prompts, see page 82 of the Appendix.

1. The Personal Statement

The personal statement, typically around 500–650 words, is your chance to show off your unique voice. It gives admissions officers an idea of your personality, maturity, critical thought, creativity, and—yes—writing skills. These are abstract concepts that can't be effectively communicated through “the numbers.”

Typically, your personal statement will be structured as a narrative with a clear personal growth arc. We will discuss how to structure your personal statement in more detail later in this guide, but you should begin this process with the understanding that writing your personal statement will require you to write a story of some kind. Through this guide, you'll develop a complete personal statement that communicates who you are in a genuine, thoughtful manner.

The Common App: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story. (650 words)

2. “Why X College?”

This supplemental essay is often shorter, somewhere between 150–300 words. It represents your chance to make a case for your “fit” at a particular school and prove that you've done your research. You'll typically want to cite specific courses, professors, and extracurricular activities to demonstrate a depth of knowledge about the institution.

Barnard College: What factors encouraged your decision to apply to Barnard College and why do you think the college would be a good match for you? (300 words)

3. The Diversity/Community Essay

While this essay takes various forms, colleges are essentially looking to understand how you've contributed to building a community, no matter where you're from. Think about it this way: you're going to be living with and learning from students from across the world for four years. How are a unicycle rider from Eugene, OR, a microscope geek from Ithaca, NY, and a stick-and-poke artist from Lausanne, Switzerland going to change the way each other views the world? The best answer to that question lies in their responses to this essay prompt.

University of Michigan: Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it. (300 words)

KEY CONCEPT



The term growth arc refers to the internal change you experience through the course of a narrative or an event in your life. See pages 33–56 in *Giving Your Story Shape for a further explanation.*

MORE INFORMATION



For further guidance on supplemental essays, the Additional Information section, and the COVID-19 question, see page 73 of the Appendix.

4. The Major Essay

Colleges want to see evidence that you've thought about what you might want to pursue, academically and vocationally. Keep in mind, most of these essays (aside from program-specific prompts, such as performing arts portfolios) are non-binding. Everyone expects that you'll change your major at least once, so don't be afraid to take a stance.

University of Southern California: Describe how you plan to pursue your academic interests and why you want to explore them at USC specifically. Please feel free to address your first and second choice major selections. (Approx. 250 words)

5. The Weird Essay

Some schools include wacky, creative essays to attempt to push the boundaries of how students think. University of Chicago and Tufts University are notorious for these.

University of Chicago: If there's a limited amount of matter in the universe, how can Olive Garden (along with other restaurants and their concepts of food infinity) offer truly unlimited soup, salad, and breadsticks? Explain this using any method of analysis you wish—physics, biology, economics, history, theology, etc. (500 words)

6. Additional Information

This is the only truly **optional** supplemental essay. Before deciding to respond to this prompt, ask yourself these questions: *Is there anything missing in the portrait you've painted of yourself? Are there any circumstances that made it difficult to navigate school or extracurricular activities? Are there any potential red flags on your application or transcript such as a failing grade or missing credits?*

Because most college application essays fall into one of the above categories, you should be able to submit the same essays, with some minor tweaks, to most of your schools.

We'll cover supplemental essays, the Additional Information section, and the COVID-19 question in the appendix of this guide, but for the most part, the personal statement is the largest and most intimidating aspect of the application process. For that reason, **the bulk of this guide is organized around crafting a strong personal statement.**

RECAP: GETTING ORGANIZED

- ▶ You might use different application platforms for different schools, but your personal statement can typically be adapted easily to the prompts for each platform.
- ▶ You will certainly have to write a main personal statement, but the number of supplemental essays you must write will depend on where you apply.
- ▶ Make sure that you know which application the colleges on your list accept and have a general sense of how many supplemental essays each of your schools will require.
- ▶ No supplemental essay is truly optional, aside from the Additional Information section and the COVID-19 question.