

The College Application Essay

*“Blot out, correct, insert, refine,
Enlarge, diminish, interline;
Be mindful, when intervention fails
To scratch your head, and bite your nails.”
-Jonathan Swift*

Why Do Colleges Want an Essay? Isn't It Just More Work for Them?

Actually, admissions people tell us they look forward to this part of the application requirements. After all, this is the time for them finally to have a chance to hear your voice. This is also the time to make certain that this voice of yours is heard clearly and emphatically. The college essay is the part of the application that you can control and use to your advantage.

What Do Colleges Look for in the Application Essay?

There are many things revealed to the reader in an essay. First and foremost, of course, it conveys the level of your writing ability. Colleges want students who are articulate, conscientious, and creative. The level of your essay is an indicator of your academic strengths.

In addition, the essay reveals particular aspects of your personality. As you know from studying writing in school, choice is a critical aspect of the writing process. How you choose to approach the essay, what you choose to write about, and the style you choose to employ all indicate who you are.

How Much Does the Essay Count in the Admissions Process?

Trust us, it counts. Although there is no single mathematical formula for weighting the essay, it is certainly a major determining factor in the acceptance process. If you are applying to a highly competitive school, it is safe to assume that the other applicants are just as proficient and well-rounded as you. (One of our students, a valedictorian accepted at an Ivy League school, was amazed to discover that nearly every classmate in his English class had been valedictorian in his or her high school) Because grades, scores, and activities are fairly objective information, it falls to the essay to separate one bright student from another.

If you are a strong student who writes an exceptional paper, you have absolutely increased your chances of acceptance. If, on the other hand, you are strong student who writes a weak paper, you are likely to be dropped a notch in the admissions process.

How Do I Get Started Writing the Application Essay?

There are two basic approaches you can take. The first is the *I've got a burning passion, funniest ever, scariest, life-altering perfect story to tell, I've always known I was going to write about it, and this is my chance, don't stop me now* approach.

To which we reply: Good. You're halfway there. Keep an open mind, and we'll try to work that one of a kind story into a solid college essay.

The second approach is probably more common *Help, I don't know what to write about. I'll never be able to do this. Where do I start/ Would you write it for me* approach.

To which we reply: Good. That's what your trainers are going to help you overcome.

Let's get started. Set aside some time, make yourself comfortable and face your future. First, gather the applications from the colleges of your choice and analyze the tasks they expect you to fulfill.

A SAMPLING OF SOME TYPICAL COLLEGE ESSAY QUESTIONS

This section introduces you to the most common questions you will encounter. It also deconstructs the question and provides suggestions for approaching the task. We have indicated the specific college requiring the questions, but, obviously, we could not list questions for all the schools you may be considering. Be aware that many, many schools use the same questions or variations on the topics we examine. In fact, many schools use the Common Application form, and we cover these questions in this chapter. Even if you are not planning to apply to one of the schools we refer to, it is very important to read all the

Sometimes reading a prompt in a different format will trigger a response in you and start you on the path to delineating the essay for the college of your choice. There's an added bonus: thinking about each of these topics will prepare you those of you who choose to go on a personal interview. These ideas are representative of what you may be asked, and, how terrific, you'll have all the right answers because you've been exercising your minds throughout the application process.

Question 1

Choose and discuss a quotation or personal motto that reflects your values and beliefs and tells us something about the kind of person you are.

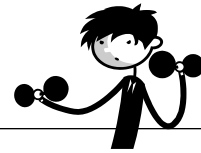
Cornell University

The choice of quotation can determine the tone and style of your essay. If you already have a personal favorite, go for it. If not, here are some tips:

- Pick up a copy of *Bartlett's Familiar Quotations* and randomly skim through it.
- Go online to various quotation sites and plug in topics of interest to you.
- Reflect on your favorite songs and extract lines as possibilities.
- Review the novels, plays, and poems you have studied for great lines or mottos.
- Think of family sayings and their implications

Remember, the idea is not only about choosing a quotation with potential, but it is also about what the quotation reveals about your values and you as a person. Always give credit to the source of your choice.

No pain, but real gain. It's time to stretch *your own* quotable memory:



EXERCISE:

	FAVORITE	WHAT IT REVEALS ABOUT ME
<i>Quotations</i>		
<i>Lyrics</i>		
<i>Mottos and Aphorisms</i>		

Question 2

You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.

-University of Pennsylvania

This question allows you to reveal your future plans and aspirations. You must realize that the page number implies that you have lived a good portion of your life already. The voice you choose should reflect a level of maturity and reflection. You can utilize any or all of the rhetorical strategies and literary techniques to create your scenario and persona. Be creative. Use such techniques as dialogue, symbol, epiphany, mood, and tone to develop your essay. Remember, it must reveal you and your values.

PRACTICE THIS SET WITH YOUR IMAGINATION IN HIGH GEAR
EXERCISE:



My age when I'm writing this autobiography is _____.

My age on page 217 will be _____.

Because page 300 is the end of the book, my circumstances at that time will be (be specific) _____

My personal circumstances on page 217 will be (be specific) _____

What this page (217) will reveal about me: _____

Question 3

Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and explain that influence.

--Harvard University

Generally speaking, this question refers to real people with whom you have interacted. The pitfall of this question is that many students choose a family member, which is perfectly fine, but it is often difficult to separate personal emotion from the point of the essay. By all means, choose honestly, but remember that the admissions committee will be reading many, many inspirational testimonials to relatives. **Avoid being sentimental, and focus on the influence and its power in your life.**

Question 4

Describe a character in fiction, an historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you and explain that influence.

This related question is easier for some students because it may not be as emotionally linked as the previous choice. Be honest. Do not choose a character that you think will impress the reader. Choose one that you truly respond to (remember how passionate Holden Caulfield was when he said he wanted to meet Eustacia Vye? He really let us in on his most private longings and values.)

Once again, **it is not just the character or work that you must address, but also the nature of the influence and its effect on you.**

BE HONEST WHEN YOU DO THIS NEXT EXERCISE
EXERCISE:

MY MOST INFLUENTIAL PERSON
(or character, or work of art, etc.)



Who: _____.

Why: _____.

Influence: _____

Circumstance or episode I recall that illustrates this influence:

Its effect on me:

Question 5

Recall an occasion when you took a risk that you now know was the right thing to do.

--University of Pennsylvania

This question requires that you reflect on the risk and explore the long term effects of your decision. To construct a complete response, you must explain the nature of the risk, the reasons you took it, and how, with the benefit of time, you now know you made the right decision. **It is always a plus if you can relate that decision to your current personality and explain how it will benefit you in your college experience.**

LOWER YOUR APPLICATION ESSAY RISK BY COMPLETING THE FOLLOWING CHART
EXERCISE:



The Risk	Why Taken	Specifics	Right or Not?

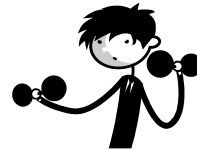
Question 6

What is your favorite word and why?

--University of Virginia

This is a very challenging and creative question that is deceptive in its simplicity. Your choice will reveal your understanding of nuance and tone. It's a great question to have fun with – but don't jump to easy and trite responses. Think and explore the possibilities of language . . . and of course, be yourself.

SURE, YOU HAVE A WORD FOR IT.
EXERCISE:



Word	Definition(s)	Why It's a Favorite

Question 7

Have you witnessed a person who is close to you doing something you considered seriously wrong? Describe the circumstances, your thoughts, and how you chose to respond. If you discussed it with a person, was his/her justification valid? In retrospect, what, if anything, would you have done differently and why?

--Duke University

Not for the faint-hearted, this question is very personal and you need to consider all the requirements carefully. You must isolate a moral problem, share an intimate relationship, analyze your situation and response. You may reveal more than you realize. Pay careful attention to your tone – avoid pomposity and preaching. If applicable, remember to address the other person's rationale and its validity. And then, you must include how time has or has not altered your view of the episode. An essay this complex is a rich opportunity if you are comfortable with it. If not, avoid it completely.



HERE'S YOUR CHANCE TO PLAY JUDGE AND JURY
EXERCISE:

The offense:

Your Circumstances:

Who:

Your thoughts:

What:

Your response:

Where:

Your reflections over time:

Why:

* * * * *

The following questions are for **you** to examine and think about. Follow the form of the previous examples. These should give you a clear idea of the scope and variety of writing opportunities available to you. Really flex your muscles – write the answers in note form or talk them out with yourself or a good listener. This is your strength training, and it will pay off. The more familiar you are with the process, the less nervous you will be, and the more confident a writer you’ll become.

Question 8

Please respond to one of the following quotations. We are eager to know more about you as a person. We hope to find out who you are, how you think, what you think about, and how you choose to express yourself.

1. *“We seek [community] more often than we find it; we find it in odd and surprising ways; it is real but is also fragile, uncertain, and sometimes ambiguous.” Amherst College President Tom Gerety, Commencement Address 1994.*
2. *“There is no use in trying,” said Alice; “one can’t believe impossible things.” “I dare say you haven’t had much practice,” said the Queen. “When I was your age, I always did it for half an hour a day. Why, sometimes I believed six impossible things before breakfast.” Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland.*

--Amherst College

Questions 9, 10, 11

Look out any window in your home. What would you change and why?

What form of discrimination most concerns you?

Technophobe or technophile?

--University of Virginia

Questions 12 and 13

Life brings many disappointments as well as satisfactions. Could you tell us about a time in your life when you experienced disappointment, or faced difficult or trying circumstances?

Make up a question that is personally relevant to you, state it clearly, and answer it. Feel free to use your imagination, recognizing that those who read it will not mind being entertained.

--Massachusetts Institute of Technology

Question 14

What has been your most profound or surprising intellectual experience?

--Duke University

Question 15

Of the activities in which you have been involved, which has meant the most to you, and why?

--Emory University

Question 16

Please respond to the following: If you had only 10 dollars or the equivalent in another currency, to plan a day's adventure, where would you go, what would you do, and who would you take with you?

--The Johns Hopkins University

Questions 17, 18, 19, 20

If you were given one year to spend in service on behalf of others, what would you choose to do, and why?

What is the most difficult decision you've had to make? How did you go about making it?

What idea, invention, discovery, or creation do you think has had the biggest impact on your life so far?

What particular accomplishment up to this point in your life has given you the greatest satisfaction? Briefly explain.

--Princeton University

Question 21

Write an essay that conveys to the reader a sense of who you are. Possible topics include, but are not limited to, experiences that have shaped your life, the circumstances of your upbringing, your most meaningful intellectual achievement, the way you see the world – the people in it, events great and small, everyday life – or any personal theme that appeals to your imagination. Please remember that we are concerned not only with the substance of your prose but with your writing style as well.

--Columbia University

Question 22

We ask you to write a personal essay that will help us to know you better. In the past, candidates have written about their families, intellectual and extracurricular interests, ethnicity or culture, school and community events to which they have had strong reactions, people who have influenced them, significant experiences, personal aspirations, or topics that spring entirely from their imaginations. You should feel confident that in writing about what matters to you, you are bound to convey a strong sense of who you are.

--Yale University

YOUR OWN PERSONAL INTERVIEW

Take a break. You deserve one after all these warm-ups. While you're cooling down, consider that by now you should be very comfortable with the various types of questions you may encounter. Now it's time to personalize your workout. For this training, we're going to put you through a personal interview – with yourself!

What follows is a fairly random list of categories that we want you to fill in with specifics. We've mixed the list up so that you can think in clusters, intuitive reactions, or spontaneous responses. Feel free to add to the list or to modify it to suit your needs. Come back to the list – let it marinate in your brain. This is the fun part. Be loose – pull out all the stops – brag – exaggerate – be witty, serious, clever, academic – let your mind free-associate as you brainstorm. Don't just give one word answers – search for the potential in your answers. We guarantee that by the time you've worked your way through the interview, you will have many, many ideas for your college essays. (Of course, your responses are just a springboard to more fully developed explanations.)

The list is to combat writer's block and make you aware of how interesting and unique you really are.

BEGIN HERE . . .

My favorite movie(s) are: (why?)	Driving:	Something I hated . . . until:
I wish I knew . . . (person or character)	Temptation – (avoided or given in to):	My favorite place on earth:
I wish I knew . . . (ideas)	The things or people that make me cry:	My creed or I believe:
My goals are:	Things that fill me with wonder:	I won't part with:
I can't live without:	What a character!	Just once I'd like to:
The greatest thrill for me would be:	My unsung hero:	I soar when. . .
The song that moves me most is: (why?)	I'm so frustrated by:	An opinion I changed and why:
My dream job would be:	The best thing I ever learned:	Sports and me – what a team:
A pet story or memory:	First loves:	I love . . .
A unique talent I have:	I'm outraged by:	Words I love:
Something I'm ashamed of is:	I have to change:	Words I hate:
Best friends or old friends or lost friends or new friends:	My favorite paintings or artists are:	The greatest gift:
Colors in my life:	My secret haunt:	An emotional tug of war:
The greatest gadget:	A time period I wish I had lived in and why:	The weakest link:
A secret desire I have is:	The best book I've read this year is: (why)	Stick with me, kid, I'm going places:
The most moving thing I have ever read or heard or seen is:	I'm proudest of:	Most people don't know this, but I'm . . .
If I could change one thing:	I'd like to meet:	Food, glorious food:
The best of times:	An ethical dilemma I faced:	But you can't choose your family . . . or can you?
The worst of times:	An injustice:	My road not taken:
Rituals:	I did it!	The sweetest sounds I ever heard:
The things or people that make me laugh:	There will never be another . . .	Time is on my side because:
A practical joke:	I'm a survivor:	Not all lessons are in class:
A disaster, (comic or real or imagined):	The joys of nature:	I took a chance:
	A challenge I met:	I get a kick out of:
		I need. . .

Well, student, do you know thyself? We bet you know more about yourself than you realized. And of course this is an exercise you can do anywhere, anytime, with multiple repetitions and an entirely different set of answers. Up the ante – play with the list in a humorous vein. Then change and provide serious answers for the queries. Change again and try to fill it out for someone else. **The goal here is to have you work the material to suit the questions.**

WORKING THE MATERIAL

This is the skill we want you to develop and refine.

After you have spent serious time with the questions and informal time with the personal interview, it's time to pre-write your essay. Now you have to choose an episode or belief or activity that is critical to you. For example, let's assume that dance is your passion. Using dance as your frame of reference and with a few specific questions in mind, **work the material**:

1. First, list several broad contexts to consider, such as a challenge, a triumph, a fear, a hope.
2. Next, decide on your topic, or passion, or episode. (We've chosen dance.) Prepare yourself thoroughly with all aspects of your choice: your actions, reactions, sights, people, sounds, emotions, etc.
3. Now, mold the information to fit the question. For example, using DANCE as your topic,
 - An *academic lesson* might evolve from a choreographer's direction.
 - You might discuss a *social challenge* in terms of an audition.
 - Your most *treasured recreational moments* might be when you are moving to the music.
 - Your *ethical goal* might be to bring dance to underprivileged children.
 - A *personal or spiritual triumph* might be a difficult sequence you've mastered.
 - An injury might force you to examine your *occupational goals*.



We're sure you get the idea. You take the basic area you're going to write about and tweak and modify it until it suits your purposes. (Make certain you adapt your essay to the specific needs of each of the colleges to which you are applying.) In other words, we've looked at the big picture, and now you are going to focus the scene into a tight shot that will be intense, alive, and unique to you. And, when you do this, the admissions readers will truly hear **your voice**.

A FEW NOTES ABOUT WRITING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

It's time to get to the nitty-gritty of writing the essay. Just as repetition strengthens your writing muscles, it also makes your form smoother and more graceful. Spend a few minutes reviewing the following points with us.

First and foremost, BE YOURSELF! The college admissions officers want to get to know a real person, someone they would like to meet and talk with. It is this genuine character who has to catch their attention. If you are whimsical, be playful; if you are academic, be scholarly; if you are forthright, be direct. There is no single approach to success.

Remember that first impressions do count. Make the opening of your essay reach out and grab the reader. After all, your paper has to be heard above all the others yet to be read.

Carefully read and deconstruct the question being asked of you. The personal essay is usually one that is centered on a character-building event or experience. The questions could be related to such ideas as:

- An important person
- A character in a novel
- A decisive moment

Once you have your question, consider the following when thinking about and planning your essay:

- How does the episode/event/idea you choose connect in some way to what you're going to do in this college?
- Be positive NOT negative. Of course, you can be critical of an issue, but be careful. Often your subtext and diction reveal more about you than you may realize. Avoid whining, blaming, and ranting. For example, don't write about how your math teacher hated you and that's why your grades were low, but you showed him and got a tutor and passed to spite him.
- Be careful with emotional topics. It is easy to be maudlin or overly sentimental. Try not to write about divorce, family deaths, personal losses or defeats. This is not to trivialize these life-altering occurrences, but to make you aware that it is very difficult to relate a personal emotion of this nature to a universal understanding for the reader.
- Don't be cutesy; it can backfire on you. There's a fine line between cutesy and clever. If in doubt, leave it out. For example, avoid writing a "recipe" for a successful college student – 1 cup of hard work, 1 tablespoon extracurricular activity, a dash of spunk, etc. This may have been fresh once, but it is trite and ineffectual now.
- Stay away from straight autobiographical chronologies. BORING!
- Write something you're comfortable with. You will know it so well that the examples and details will ring true and flow easily.
- Try for something a little obscure, a small turning point that made a big difference. The uniqueness will be charming.

- Write a tight, polished gem of an essay instead of a sweeping global paper that will be vague and general. You don't have to include everything you know.

When you finally have a chance or you have the idea fixed in your head, write the first draft. Remember to:

- Write with focus and a clear voice;
- Pay attention to clarity of thought, organization, and syntax;
- Engage the reader;
- Elucidate, illuminate your idea with details, examples, anecdotes;
- Try to keep it in present tense if at all possible;
- Use the active voice;
- Keep it short;
- Do not sound like a thesaurus. Nothing is more awkward or makes the readers laugh as much as the misuse of pompous and inappropriate words. Be natural in your writing. Imagine you are having a conversation with the reader.

The well-worn advice of your many English instructors works very well here. Try to begin your essay with one of these:

- A real quotation you like;
- A piece of dialog;
- A rhetorical question;
- A startling statement;
- An engaging anecdote;
- A challenge.

And last, once you've written the first draft:

- **LET SOMEONE ELSE READ IT BACK TO YOU OUT LOUD.** We can't stress this strongly enough.
- Ask for comments and suggestions from your instructor(s) and those whom you consider can offer good advice and from those who really know you. (Take advice, but don't let them change your style or voice. They had their chance; this is your essay.)
- **REVISE.**
- Let someone else read the revision back to you **out loud**.
- If needed, revise and revise again.
- **PROOFREAD!**

Quite a workout! By now you should feel the burn and begin to see the results of your hard work. Take a break and read some successful college essays written by your peers.

SAMPLE STUDENT ESSAYS

Although there are as many different personal essays as there are writers, a quality paper conveys confidence, clarity, control, and creativity. The following papers exhibit AP-level strengths and are typical of strong and successful essays. Each student was accepted to his or her college of choice.

We've reprinted the essays as written and have added commentary to illustrate the strengths of the essays.

Sample Essay A: Self-generated Topic

Bulldogs have it easy. They're long since retired from the first bull baiting contests, which started in England in 1200, and they don't do much anymore. One of these continually relaxing animals lives in my home. My family and I affectionately call her Daffodil. She resides in our linen closet, atop a mass of unused comforters, pillows, and sheets, and on average, sleeps twenty-two hours each day. IN some of my more slothful moments, I have pondered what a bargain it would be to trade all earthly pleasures for the constant idleness and lack of responsibility that my dog enjoys, though I always find my present state to be superior.

During the rare occasions when Daffodil is awake, she sits upright in a regal posture, her massive head positioned between her bow legs for maximum Feng-Shui effect. Gazing off at apostrophic ideals, she resembles a philosopher. When consulted for advice, she sits and ponders with a stare that Oppenheimer might have given when ruminating over sub-atomic theory. Aside from her role as family philosopher, she also serves as a social worker and teacher. She listens to all problems, no matter how trivial, and teaches the art of reticence and patience. There is something to be said for her wisdom in these matters.

Out in the real world, Daffodil would hardly be successful. Sometimes she is antisocial, and as I have already pointed out, she is lazy. But from her, I have derived some important life lessons. Her stoic nature and calm acceptance of her surroundings are excellent examples of her teachings, which I employ in my life. When helping friends, I bear the same ponderous look and offer my taciturn, minimalist wisdom only after hearing the whole story. (From speaking to Daffodil, I know that simply talking about problems is often a better remedy than any advice.) She has set an existentialist example for me: very often she seeks and finds a beam of sunlight that passes through the smallest break in the window shades. Watching her bask serenely in this tiny square of warmth demonstrates the proper way to seek out the best of the present, and to savor it completely. She can often be seen enjoying every morsel of food she encounters, devouring not only what is in her bowl, but licking the bowl itself and the floor until she is satisfied that she has extracted every bit of pleasure from that very moment in her existence.

Partly as a result from all this eating in her spare time, Daffodil is Buddha-like in appearance. But she is no false idol, only a friend and a teacher. In the end, her greatest lesson to me has been one that I stumbled on myself. I looked to Daffodil amusingly for advice, but her gift to me has been the confidence that I should look for inspiration in the strangest of places, even in the upstairs linen closet.

COMMENTARY

This is an excellent essay for the following reasons.

Paragraph 1: The opening is unique and intriguing. We want to read more. The tone—light, informative, and slightly tongue-in-cheek, is established early and indicates the warm and open personality of the writer.

Paragraph 2: Original details and images, such as the first sentence, enliven the description of Daffodil in a vivid and unusual manner. These images also reveal the breadth of the writer. Humor and allusions, the juxtaposing of Oppenheimer and Feng Shue, and the use of Daffodil as a foil for the candidate provoke the reader with a sense of the bright, observant, and charmingly quirky writer. The final sentence about wisdom provides the transition to the third paragraph's topic.

Paragraph 3: The vocabulary is mature and appropriately used. Syntactical constructions are varied and natural. Every detail and image rings true. The reader is carried by the genuine nature of the essay. This is a writer who probably has pondered philosophy and the meaning of life. And he has the wisdom and maturity to see in it through a unique lens. He understands the gifts he has received: the simple and the true, the friend and the teacher, and the known and the now.

Paragraph 4: The unity and structure of the essay is well planned—alternating Daffodil and the writer and returning to the opening of the essay with a twist of insight as a conclusion. The essay is a delight! The readers want to know this candidate who shows such insight, self-awareness, and whimsy.

Sample Essay B

I consider myself a connoisseur of paper. I've grown sensitive to its feel, its color, its holistic perfection in blocks and pads, its singular simplicity in sheets. There is an unmistakable potential in a new notebook, freshly cut, tightly bound, ready for the world outside the factory. And now I sit, writing upon that same threshold, writing the concluding remarks to my own manufacture, writing as I have throughout. I've always had an intimate awareness of paper. As a baby I fell asleep each night grasping not a doll but a tissue. It was, however, only until I had learned how to write that my true love affair began. Paired with a pen and a pad, I brazenly trumpeted out into the bungalow colonies and retirement communities of my childhood in search of contents for my "important papers," as I called them. Unlike other great epic journeymen, I didn't strive for just one end. I marched through Elysian Fields and Aeolian winds for a purpose far broader than, say, a home and wife in Ithaca or a golden fleece. In my tiny hand there was a world of uncertainty, and I committed myself to fill that void. Inspiration breathed through many lungs: news of eye surgeries and cocktail parties, visiting relatives and trips to the supermarket. To me, any news was fit to print, and I was fit to print it all.

This brand of literary liberty, in which I had so freely indulged, had left me with an intrinsic and indomitable desire to write and to write and to write. It was also this intellectual attribute that hastened a great change in third grade. Having finished the first long term report of my school career, in my mind a truly stunning intellectual work about penguins, I handed the rough draft to my mother to check for minor problems.

"Wait. I don't know what you're talking about. You have to make it clearer," she said.

And, so we embarked upon the great revision of my penguin report, a watershed in my literary "career." So grand was the impact of this lesson in clarity and communication that it still plagues me today, even as I write this essay, the final work of my childhood. Through alternating episodes of anger and tears, my mother and I slowly rewrote the entire paper, sentence by excruciating sentence. This personal reformation would culminate with a very short poem written in reaction to the flamboyant graffiti of New York's SOHO district. In small gray print on rolled computer paper, its coherence stood in drastic contrast to the sprawling runon sentences of years preceding. High school has left me an amalgamation of these ways. As such, I find a wide open future ahead - as a journalist or a linguist, a presidential speechwriter or international lawyer, a writer of any sort. Whatever I become, whenever I become it, I will find my peace among books and reams and sheets of paper.

COMMENTARY

This is a top-notch essay for the following reasons.

Paragraph 1: The opening statement, almost poetic in its rhythm and imagery, prepares the reader for an unusual and interesting paper. There is a subtle comparison between the unprinted paper and its potential and the applicant and his potential. Writing in a mock heroic style, the applicant reveals his control of humor, allusion, metaphor, and diction. There is a very fine mix of scholarship and gentle self-mockery.

Paragraph 2: The first person narrative moves freely and lightheartedly. The incorporation of dialog adds to the understanding of our writer and his future epiphany. The self-deprecating tone adds to the humor and keeps the paper modest and light. The maturity of the sentence structure and vocabulary is a nice foil to the third grade penguin paper.

Paragraph 3: Connecting the point of the essay and the subject of the essay, this paragraph brings the reader from the young journeyman to the present writer. The essay is intelligent and thoughtful.

Paragraph 4: The conclusion masterfully unites the goals, personality, and original thesis of the essay. Well done!

Sample Essay C: A Personal Challenge

It was a warm summer afternoon in August, and from what I remember, the atmosphere of the small place we were in was definitely not a comfortable one. The air was thick and moist, the sun was hot and potent. Here in this room were five individuals awaiting a challenge. And I, Lindsay, the only female, was one of them.

After eight long years of preparation, I stood on that hard wooden floor facing the judges who were about to decide my fate. I thought to myself, "Am I ready? Am I good enough?" Am I going to pass?" Trying to conceal the glut of emotions running through my fear-filled body, I quickly forced myself to smile; however, my anxiety was completely revealed by the apprehensive expression plastered across my face.

At that brief but significant moment, my name was finally called. "Lindsay," a judge said. "You're up." So with my stomach churning and legs trembling, I quickly hurried to the black X in the center of the room, turned around and faced the mirrored wall behind me. I could see the reflection of my Sensei in the glass, and as my eyes met his, I realized how important this day was. "If I could only show them what I'm capable of," I thought to myself, "then maybe, just maybe, I would finally become a Black Belt."

While standing with the other students before the judges and my teacher, I reviewed the entire test in my mind. Each student completed five dance-like self-defense moves, otherwise known as Katas. When it was my turn to start with the fifth Kata, the very last Kata, my mind suddenly went blank. However, what I didn't realize was that, because I had practiced these sequences so many times, the movements had actually become a part of me. As soon as my teacher shouted, "Yoi!" (a command to assume the starting position), the Kata came back to me naturally. Although I was able to finish, I wasn't sure if every aspect of the test I had just completed was absolutely perfect. But even still, I was sure that I had tried my best, giving the judges my utmost attention and showing them, with great spirit, what I was capable of accomplishing.

Suddenly, I was brought back to reality when my Sensei reentered the room. He came in carrying four black belts. That meant one of us had not passed. After we stood facing each other in silence for what seemed like an eternity, he summoned one of the judges to join us. It was then that I saw it. It was then that I knew that I had passed. As the judge approached me, he carried a black belt. The happiness I felt at that moment was ineffable. I was so proud of myself. Although I had so many other responsibilities in my life, I had still persevered in order to make my dream of becoming a Black Belt a reality.

Upon tying the black belt around my waist, I realized the significance of what I had just accomplished. Suddenly, I was instilled with feelings of pride, self-confidence, and the personal fulfillment of achieving a life-long goal. And, then it hit me. At that

instant, I began to comprehend the genuine spiritual aspects of karate. Through the years, my teachers had always guided me by saying, "Seek perfection of character. Be faithful in all your endeavors. Respect others. And refrain from violent behavior." I heard these words every time I met with him, and, although the actual words had been branded into my mind, until that afternoon, I had very little conception of their meaning. Until this point, my main mental objective was to memorize these phrases; my physical one, to master the corporal aspects of karate. But now that I had passed the test, I knew that all was going to change. The second that judge handed over my belt, not only did I begin to understand the "true" meaning of karate, but I began to feel it as well.

Now that I am a Black Belt, I have begun to teach other children, hoping to instill in them the same qualities that my teacher had instilled in me. Being on the "opposite side of the fence" has done more than just show me that I can teach. It has really shown me that I have so much more to learn. Oscar Wilde once said, "The true Black Belt is the white belt of a beginner, stained by the dried blood and sweat of the owner." And for me, becoming a Black Belt is more than just the means to an end. Only now am I truly beginning.

COMMENTARY

Paragraph 1: The essay immediately introduces the candidate and draws the reader into the challenge. The topic of the essay is delineated and the difficulty of the situation foreshadowed by the writer's diction: not comfortable, thick and moist, hot and potent.

Paragraph 2: The writer controls the emotion of this section by maintaining strong topic adherence. The personal questions involve the reader, who subconsciously looks forward to or supplies the unspoken answers.

Paragraph 3: Details and strong images "show" rather than "tell" the experience. Now that the stage is set, the writer establishes the thematic statement of the essay – "If I could now only show them what I'm really capable of." Obviously, the essay is also intended to show what she is capable of.

Paragraph 4: Informative and detailed, this body paragraph reveals the character of the writer, persistent, qualified, self-effacing, spirited.

Paragraph 5: The speaker's passion for her subject, her emotions and responses are vividly expressed through her choice of topic.

Paragraph 6: This lifts the essay into the higher range. Here, the speaker clarifies her values and is honestly reflective of her own progress and maturity. She moves from the physical to the mental and spiritual planes and indicates to the reader that a sensitive, thoughtful, and committed student has written the essay. She demonstrates the ability to make the abstract concrete.

Paragraph 7: The final statement synthesizes the concepts of the piece and the personality of the writer. Scholarship, insight, and the ability to apply a specific experience as a metaphor for a personal philosophy all indicate a fine candidate. She concludes strongly: "Only now am I truly beginning." We can feel confident that this effort will help open the door to the college of her choice.

A Final Thought: This essay's strength is its controlled development. We move logically through the experience to its conclusion. Along the way we follow the emotional and cognitive development of the writer. Focused and deliberate, ending with a highly affirmative statement, the essay builds nicely and indicates clarity of thought. The vocabulary and syntax are appropriate and effective for their purpose.

Sample Essay D: Personal Memoir

Ms. Skipper was a whale of a woman. She was enormous, walking sideways to get through the classroom door. She wore the typical fat lady's dress, blue with hundreds of little red flowers. She was possibly the scariest woman you ever saw. Her chin folded into her neck, which disappeared where her broad shoulders met the rest of her oversized body. None of that ever mattered. Ms. Skipper was Queen of her castle, and boy, did she love her fourth grade subjects. There was never a moment when she didn't have time to cheer us on or make us laugh. Despite her intimidating appearance, my fourth grade teacher was the funniest and sweetest woman I have ever met. That's the reason I remember the mistake I made that early morning eight years ago.

The class was studying electricity. It was a unit I had been looking forward to all year. Sure the Native Americans and long division were interesting subjects, but this, this was special. I still remember the excitement I felt every morning as I walked into class. There wasn't a fourth grader in the school who knew circuits better than I did. Whether it was particle flow, negative charge, or interface transit molecule acceleration, I was an electrical master equaling the great Mr. Thomas Edison.

For those few weeks there was only one thing I loved more than electricity. Her name was Roxanne. She got my heart racing faster than a game of schoolyard dodge ball. And so it came to the final game of our unit. We would be working with actual electrical equipment: wires, batteries, and light bulbs. We would also be working in groups.

For me that meant just one thing, maybe, just maybe, if I were lucky, I would be paired with Roxanne. She was a goddess with beautiful green eyes, long curly locks of brown hair, and a smile bigger than an ocean. My heart skipped a beat every time I heard her name. I remember thinking; "I wouldn't even know what to say to her."

"Brian and Stacey, Peter and Kim, David and Justin." As each group was called out I knew my chances were increasing. "Marisa and Nicole, Daniel and Tom," and then . . . "Alex and Roxy," as Ms. Skipper called her!

I almost fell out of my chair. My excitement climbed to dangerous levels, until I realized something terrifying. I actually had to talk to Roxanne. A bead of sweat lined my upper lip. I painfully cracked all ten of my knuckles. God, I was nervous.

We started our work, building circuits and making connections. Light bulbs illuminated the room. Roxanne and I were getting along great. I was a genuine Casanova. Then I made the terrible mistake that still haunts me to this day. We had just finished building a circuit composed of a light bulb and two unprotected wires. Trying to impress Roxanne, I arched my hairless chest and declared, "I wonder what would happen if I stuck these in the electrical outlet."

Roxanne gave me a look, flashed a smile, and said, "I don't know, but I dare you to find out."

I knew it was a bad idea. I was a prisoner of my own desires. With just the slightest of youthful hesitation, I murmured, "What could possibly happen?" and plugged the wires in.

Crack! Fizzle! BAMB!

The bulb exploded with whirls of acrid smoke as red-tinged sparks sputtered over the rows of desks. The entire class gasped in unison as they turned and stared. Worst of all, Ms. Skipper was furious. She charged across the room (imagine that!) and pulled me away yelling as only she could. Worst of all, she said the three words that no student ever wants to hear, "Stay after class." For the rest of the day I sat hunched over my desk, nervously awaiting my fate.

It seemed like an eternity until the bell, but finally it rang. All the students cheerfully packed up their belongings and left, all of them, except me. Ms. Skipper sat at her desk. I sat at mine. The room was eerily quiet, even the birds had stopped singing. The tension was killing me. I had to do something. I slowly got up from my chair and walked over to Ms. Skipper's desk. I began to cry. I'm not sure how another teacher would have handled the situation but Ms. Skipper opened her arms and brought me into her enormous body.

She didn't tell me I was a bad kid, or that I was a troublemaker. There would be no phone call home. Ms. Skipper told me I was lucky to be alive. The electric shock could have sent me flying across the room. She told me how frightened I had made her and how disappointed she was with my behavior. If you thought I was crying before she spoke, you should have seen me after. I apologized. Ms. Skipper forgave me and reminded me that everyone makes mistakes. I was dismissed but still the crying continued.

I collected my things and I left the room bleary-eyed. All I could think about was getting home. I just wanted the day to end. I had made a fool of myself in front of Roxanne. I was sure she would never talk to me again. Nothing could have made the day worse. I was wrong. As I left the room, I heard laughing. Roxanne and her friends had come back for a forgotten coat. They had been standing just outside the room. There I was, tears running down my face and the love of my life was staring me straight in the eye. Roxanne looked at me for a moment and then darted through the door.

To this day I swear she was laughing as I ran down the hall. I didn't speak to Roxanne for the rest of the year but if you love a happy ending, she was my date for the fifth grade dance.

The lessons I learned that day remain with me even now. Taking risks is an important part of life, even when the outcomes may blow up in your face. I feel challenged when faced with uncertainty. My interests may have changed from electricity to history and politics but I still get that thrill from learning. My youthful curiosity hasn't died but rather matured through high school.

What I took with me from, not just that day but the whole year, is what Ms. Skipper taught us about being comfortable with who we are, that appearances are irrelevant. I made the mistake of sacrificing my own values in the face of beauty. I don't think Ms. Skipper would hold me accountable for the mistakes by a schoolboy romantic, but I do believe there is something to learn from every experience. Ask me today whom I have fonder memories of and the answer can be given without hesitation. It's the lady in the big flowered dress, who bestowed perfect papers with red lipstick kisses. Roxanne and Ms. Skipper were diametrical opposites; one a physical beauty, and the other a beautiful spirit. I can now see the beauty in all our imperfections.

COMMENTARY

This is a strong essay for the following reasons:

Paragraph 1: The opening clearly establishes the topic and tone of the essay, as well as the writing skills of the applicant. The memoir is so smooth and real that the reader quickly identifies with the writer. The descriptions and observations are lively and concrete. The unabashed affection for his teacher is an endearing quality of the essay.

Paragraphs 2-11: The body of the narrative rapidly develops – the plot is universal and specific at the same time. The diction, dialog, and events prove the wisdom of writing about what is true and real to you. His details, cracking his knuckles, puffing out his hairless chest, bring the essay to life. We laugh and ache for the writer. We care about him and can't wait to see what happens next. The essay also demonstrates how a small and seemingly insignificant event can be developed into a very unique and effective piece of writing.

Paragraphs 12-17: Concluding his memoir, the writer reintroduces the subject of his essay, Ms. Skipper. The episode, which stood on its own charm, now serves to illustrate an important lesson and turning point. Sweetly poignant and adolescently humorous, the essay is a wonderful vehicle for the writer's voice. And, the admissions committee listened and accepted him.

Sample Essay E: A Specific Page from Your Autobiography (p. 217)

... keep myself from crying. All my life, I have gone by instinct, by my raw emotions. Textbooks do not contain a chapter on how to keep your hands from shaking while giving an injection. No amount of reading can make it easier to look into their eyes, as you know for certain that there's nothing more you can do.

After sixteen years, it was still just as difficult as the first time I had done it. I lifted his tiny, lifeless body off the table. As always, I was instantly brought back to the age of fifteen, the first time I'd ever had to hold an animal that was no longer living. I expected his body to be stiff and cold. But his body was still warm, his fur just as soft. As I lifted him into my arms, his head drooped over to one side and his flaccidity was the only true sign that he was dead. Even as I held him, I still envisioned him breathing, and as I held my old stethoscope to his chest, I heard phantom heartbeats that I knew couldn't possibly be there. How could my mind still be playing tricks on me after so many years?

It's hard to tell what's real and what's not anymore. If after ten years of practicing medicine I still couldn't tell for sure whether an animal was dead or not, how could I be sure that anything was really the way I saw it?

I washed my hands, threw off my scrubs, and dashed to my car. A storm was approaching, and I wanted to be home. When I pulled into my garage, I didn't even notice I had left the door open. I simply ran inside and before my husband even realized who was charging at him, I wrapped my arms around him and smiled, thankful that I could be there with him. He simply smiled back, and without any words, he understood that I'd had a hard day at work. He walked me to the den where our three-year-old terror was sleeping like an angel on the couch. I sat down beside him, stroking his back and before I knew it, my husband was waling back into the den carrying a tray holding two cups of cocoa and a plate of marshmallows. He built a fire, setting himself onto the couch, and I nestled beside him.

Before we were married, the most exciting moments of my life were when I graduated from veterinary school, and any time I saw an animal I treated walk out of the hospital perfectly healed. Now, I reveled in moments like these. The quiet moments radiating throughout our house, the gentle breathing of my baby lying

beneath my old baby blanket, the familiar smell of my husband's sweater, and the silence of snowflakes outside as each one waltzed its way to the ground. I was in bliss until I heard the buzzing of the pager on the countertop in the cold kitchen upstairs. My eyelids sank, and I drew in a deep breath as my husband clutched my hand. I stood up and looked at him, and again with no words, he let go his tight grasp and stared into the glowing fire as I plodded my way up the stairs.

The storm made it almost impossible to see, but then, covered in a thick layer of ice and snow, I saw the old familiar sign of the animal hospital and I smiled. As much as I wanted to be home, I had an impulse to run into the hospital and save the day. A dog that had been hit by a car that skidded over a patch of black ice was brought in to the hospital. I put on a pair of scrubs and prepped myself for surgery. Standing over the dog for three hours, I did all I possible could to save him. At 12:32 A.M. I pronounced him dead. I took off my surgical mask and stared at him as the technicians disconnected him from the machines. His paws still had snow stuck to them. I picked some off, and as it melted in my hand, I glanced over at the line of cages along the wall. The little dog I had treated earlier was sitting up, staring at me. I laughed at his overgrown ears and walked over to his cage. His tail wagged so wildly that it was hitting the walls of the cage, making a thunderous noise against the steel. I lifted him up and cradled him in my arms. He fell asleep and at that moment, I felt it had all been worth it. The long hours, the studying, the fights about when I would go back to work – it was all worth it because now that one of my patients felt comfortable enough to fall asleep in my arms, I could go home and tell my husband that I had a good day.

COMMENTARY

This is a powerful essay for the following reasons:

Paragraph 1: The writer cleverly includes words ostensibly left over from the previous page, to add to the verisimilitude of the essay. The actual entry reads beautifully – setting, plot, conflict, characterization, and theme are foreshadowed. The topic is painful, yet holds the reader.

Paragraph 2: The development of the storyline reveals the intelligence and sensitivity of the subject. Every word is carefully chosen – obviously the applicant is a gifted creative writer who consciously develops her themes and images.

Paragraph 3: Posing the questions of life and death, reality and delusion, this brief entry is crucial to the character.

Paragraphs 4 and 5: The writer shows her skills and command of imagery and symbol. She develops the scene, with its literal and figurative storm, and contrasts its coldness and death with the warmth of life, love, and home. The maturity of the piece, which could have deteriorated into bathos, is her strength. Her use of a retrospective voice helps create this distance and addresses the flashback aspect of the essay prompt.

Paragraph 6: Once again, the diction and use of detail, such as the snow melting on the paw, raise this essay from the pitfall of cliché and attest to the compassion and sensitivity of the writer. Who wouldn't want to have this writer as a member of their academic community?

A FEW FINAL ILLUSTRATIONS

The following bits and pieces from myriad college essays illustrate the limitless venues for you to explore. They also should re-emphasize the variety of writing styles encountered by the admissions people.

- ❖ *In my opinion, my entire being – my soul, my inner essence, my thoughts, my actions, my mannerisms, my heart – can all be interpreted through my hands. Take a look at my hands on any given day, and you are bound to learn at least one thing about me. They are my tools, strong, small, and precise. Often, they are stained with acrylic paint, or chalk, or a leaky pen. Nourished by cool, wet clay and the smell of turpentine, my fingers pinch the forearm of the sculpture as it narrows down to the wrist. I extend forward the figure's long arms by using my palms to press the shoulders inward. I use the pads of my fingers to transform conspicuous lines into dimpled flesh. My long nail scrapes out a collarbone and a dramatically arched spine. My fingers draw soft rolls on the sculpture's body to create skin as soft as velvet drapery and masses as voluminous as water. Hours later, I find pieces of hardened clay hiding underneath my nails.*

- ❖ *The summer of my junior year I was both anxious and eager. It would be the first I did not spend with my close-knit group of summer girlfriends. When we literally made the decision to go our separate ways, I was frightened. I suddenly became unsure of my social skills and worried that it would be difficult to make new friends. The choice to separate was a risk that I now know was the most important risk I have taken to this point in my life. It opened my eyes to a world of prejudices that I had been sheltered from my entire life.*

- ❖ *I decided to celebrate my birthday in the same hall that I made reference to in earlier chapters. It is the hall that lies deep within my mind: a hall that I can visit in search of inspiration and assurance. In this "Hall of Heroes" stand those whose lives I seek to emulate. Strolling down the hall and gazing at the great men and women who stand before me, I cannot help but feel like a lesser man in orbit among giants.*

- ❖ *The travel website, expedia.com, advertises low-cost vacations to exotic resorts in Tahiti this year. A much more adventurous holiday awaits me, however, and it's right in my living room. To me, playing the piano is as exciting, fresh, and relaxing as a fancy vacation because unlike a packaged getaway, it can be custom tailored to my mood or desire.*

- ❖ *I have finally discovered it. It is everything they said it would be. It is an element more valuable than platinum, more malleable than gold, and more brilliant than all the diamonds in the limitless heavens. I have finally discovered it: metaphoric "Jello," my passion for learning. The connection between Jello and learning embodies the belief that there is always room to broaden one's horizon through exploration. Jello comes in a spectrum of diverse flavors: orange, raspberry, grape, lemon and lime. The opportunities in school also come in many flavors: math, history, art, science and language. There's always room for learning.*

- ❖ *When I finally decided to take AP Bio, it really was one of the best decisions of my high school career . . . The work was difficult, and I worked harder than I have ever worked in my life to keep grades up. I studied and I went to extra help – two experiences which were*

fairly new for me. After I got the hang of it, it became a puzzle to me, an exciting enigma that was both challenging and enjoyable. I learned more about the world around me than I had ever thought possible. I found myself answering rhetorical questions uttered over the lunch table like, "Where do hiccups come from?" and "Why can't I make up missed sleep on the weekends?" Eventually my friends learned to keep their biology-related questions to themselves, for fear of my actually knowing the answer.

I became a Bio Nerd. I saw ADP on a license plate and thought adenosine diphosphate; the obvious answer to "which kind of worm would you rather be?" was clearly "annelids!" I enjoyed every minute of it.

- ❖ *I listen. The music begins. The notes and melodies ring in my ears. I am dancing – dancing as free as an autumn leaf blowing on the wind. I am so involved in the music that nothing around me matters. I am untouchable. When I stretch my arm, the energy spills out the tips of my fingers. From my pointed toes to the expression on my face, my whole body is in tune with the rhythm of the music. I am no longer a person. I am movement and energy and life.*
- ❖ *The wind whooshed through the trees behind me, rushing up the waves into parachutes ready to envelop little children playing inside. I ran to the water and dove in. Of those who live near the water, some love it and some hate it. Me? I hated it.*
- ❖ *A wrong turn on the N-12 traveling to the Sabi Sabi Desert in the East Rand led us through the most desolate part of South Africa. The people stared at our car passing down the sandy path that served as a road, with their faces shiny and dark under the hot African sun. They were alone with nothing, absolutely nothing in the middle of a vast expanse of land. This was the face of poverty, and the only thing separating me from them was the pane of glass out of which I stared, observed, and remained silent.*
- ❖ *"cause I'm the naked cowboy, coming to a town near you," he sang, as I filmed for a documentary I was creating for the William H. Cosby Future Filmmakers Workshop at NYU. The "naked cowboy," singing in Times Square in New York City on a cold winter day, has no fear. He has confidence and self-respect. How else would he be able to stand outside, nearly nude, serenading strangers?*

Well, do you want to read more? We did, and so did the admissions committees. Each snippet was part of a successful essay. Your break is over; time for you to go for the burn. Set those applications on fire and do yourself proud. **You're ready!**