

Dos and don'ts on writing the college application essay

A great essay will help you stand out from the other applicants, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin:

DO keep your focus narrow and personal

Your essay must prove a single point. Your main idea should be clear and easily followed from beginning to end. Ask someone to read just your introduction, and then tell you what your essay is about. (And remember, it's about showing them who you are.)

DO back up what you say

Develop your main idea with specific facts, events, quotations, examples and reasons.

Okay: "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"

Better: "During that night, I sang the theme song from *Casablanca* with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

DO give specifics

Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

Okay: "I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family. I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."

Better: "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

DON'T tell them what you think they want to hear

Admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university. Bring something new to the table.

DON'T write a résumé

Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

DON'T use 50 words when five will do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

Okay: "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends and teachers—and I have even noticed it myself—that I am not the neatest person in the world."

Better: "I'm a slob."

DON'T forget to proofread

Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. And don't rely on your computer's spell chick.[!]

Source: Adapted from *The College Application Essay, rev. ed.*, by Sarah Myers McGinty (New York: The College Board, 2012).

