**Gail Jacobson, Founder**

[**www.application-to-offer.com**](http://www.application-to-offer.com)

**The College Essay**

**1. Why is it important?**

The College essay is a way for students to uniquely distinguish themselves from the thousands of other applicants who may have similar GPAs, test scores and profiles.

It is the **ONLY** chance students get to directly address the admissions committee.

Admissions officers have indicated that the essay can become an important factor in admission decisions.

More and more schools are test optional – where you don’t have to submit your scores – so places even more emphasis on your essay!

Bottom line: it is worth investing the time and effort!

**2. What makes an Effective Essay?**

You don’t have to be an outstanding writer nor do you have to have an amazing topic or life experience to discuss. An ordinary topic can be a winning essay. The key is your approach. If you spend the time thinking before writing, and conveying something about you (e.g. core value, quality, talent, skill) in your unique style of thought, the essay will be powerful!

**3. Types of Essay Questions**

Colleges typically ask students to write 1- 2 longer personal statements and respond to several short-answer questions. Short answer responses can be equally challenging to write because you must choose your words and thoughts carefully to satisfy word limits.

Try to avoid discussing the same topic in both the long and short essays because you should use the opportunity to share something additional about yourself.

Each essay needs to contribute to the admissions officers understanding of “who you are.”

**Three Question Types for the Personal Statement:**

**a. Describe yourself**

Purpose: to learn more about you and what is important to you.

Response: keep focus narrow with discussion on one or two of your qualities/characteristics. Present yourself in an honest way.

These types of prompts are found in both the Common Application and the Coalition Application. See below.

**b. Why our College?**

Purpose: to learn how you will fit in at the college.

Response: discuss one or two things about the school that makes it the best fit for you. Be specific about resources/programs offered at the college or even refer to a campus visit.

**c. Discuss an Issue**

Purpose: to learn about your ability to think critically and creatively.

Response: support your points with facts, examples and reasoned explanations.

**Common Application and Coalition Application:**

The Common Application is a college admission application used by approximately 700 colleges and universities across the country. Participating schools usually require a school supplement, containing additional essay questions and other informational requirements specific to their school.

The Coalition (for Access, Affordability & Success) Application is also a universal application. Introduced in 2016, it has about 93 participating schools. University of Maryland College Park is a member school.

**What are the differences?**

* The Coalition schools must offer “affordable tuition plus need-based financial aid” and graduate 70% of students in 6 years.
* The Common Application schools must share the goal “of advancing college access.”
* The Coalition Application allows student to begin preparing application materials as early as freshman year of high school by creating a “virtual locker” for information storage. Students are also offered the chance to collaborate with a mentor.
* The Common Application coordinates with the Naviance tool available at most high schools.

Both applications strive to reduce the amount of application materials students must prepare.

Both applications include a fill-in portion (e.g. background information, activities, honors) and an essay.

**Common Application and Coalition Application Essay Prompts**

The prompts are similar and fall within the “Describe Yourself” category:

* **Meaningful Background/Identity/Interest**

Common Application:

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

Coalition Application:

Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your charcter or helped to shape it.

* **Challenge and Lessons Learned**

Common Application:

Recount a time when you faced a *challenge, setback, or failure.* How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

* **Questioning an Idea or Belief**

Common Application:

Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Coalition Application:

Has there been a time when you’ve had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?

* **Problem-Solving Something of Personal Importance**

Common Application:

Describe a problem you’ve solved or like to solve ranging from an intellectual challenge, to a research query to an ethical dilemma – that is of personal importance to you.

--This essay can encompass problem solving at any scale. The key is to explain its importance to you and your actions to solve or how you could identify a solution.

* **An Engaging Idea/Topic/Concept**

Common Application:

Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

* **Personal Growth**

Common Application:

Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others*.*

* **Meaningful Contribution to Others**

Coalition Application:

Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.

* **The Hardest and Best Part of being a Teen**

Coalition Application:

What is the hardest part of being a teenager now? What’s the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?

* **Topic of Your Choice**

Common Application and Coalition Application

Essay Length: Common Application between 250-650 words

Coalition essay is unlimited with a suggested cap of 550 words

**4. How to Write an Effective Essay?**

**A. Start Early**

Don’t underestimate the process. It takes time to decide what you will write about. Once you have an idea, it will take several drafts to get it right!

The ideal time to start is summer before senior year. This gives you time to think and draft, without the competing demands of homework and extracurricular activities.

Both the Common and Coalition applications are available now, and colleges will release their specific application requirements during the summer and early fall. Your goal should be to complete the Common or Coalition Application and core essay before school begins in the fall.

Another Advantage to starting early is that there will be more time to pursue scholarships!

**Organize Essay Prompts**: Collect all essay prompts and group by college, then prioritize by importance and deadlines. Once you have completed a set of essays for one school, you can often recycle essays in whole or part (with some modification) for other applications.

**B. Finding an Essay Topic**

*What is the Best Topic?*

Any topic which allows you to share something important about yourself with the admissions committee.

*What are your best sources for ideas?*

Think about your extracurricular, academic and personal experiences.

**How to begin the Idea Search:**

**1. Resume**

A resume can be a source of ideas and starting point for the college essay. It also can be a useful tool for identifying candidate schools.

The resume provides a snapshot of the high school years. The exercise of creating a resume can be helpful for self-examination and identifying areas of interest, study and possible goals. It organizes and categorizes high school experiences and reveals patterns of interest in subject matter and potential career paths.

**Academic and Activities Resume**  is a listing of your high school experiences for the past four years. It organizes, by year, your academic coursework, grades, achievements, honors/awards, extracurricular activities, leadership activities, work experience and community service.

***Look for Patterns*** of interests and areas of aptitude.

Ask yourself: - *Do activities/interests/hobbies fall into discrete categories by type?*

*- Are there consistent themes demonstrated such as leadership, volunteerism, or other identifiable interests?*

*- Are there subjects that dominate coursework and demonstrate aptitude?*

**Advanced Resume**  is a one-two page summary of the highlights of your high school experience in and outside of school. It also provides a select listing of coursework to emphasize subjects of interest and/or areas of aptitude. This resume includes only your most significant activities and accomplishments, with a brief description of your role as a participant.

Converting the Academic and Activities Resume into a one-page summary forces you to identify those experiences and achievements that are most meaningful and representative.

Ask yourself: - *Why are these courses, activities and accomplishments important to me?*

- *Are there memorable moments or experiences associated with these activities or courses?*

**2. Other Approaches to Identifying Essay Topics/Ideas**

* **Brainstorming by Writing Prompts**

Examples of Writing Prompts:

“I wish people gave me more credit for…”/“My claim to fame among family and friends…”/“No one should ever have to…”

These exercises are designed to help you identify your defining qualities, talents, skills that are worth writing about to the admission committee.

* **Brainstorming by Topic Categories**

Typical Categories include: academic passion, books/literature, career, entrepreneurship, challenges, community service, family, heritage/identity, humor, influential person, local/national/world issues, leadership, personal growth, talent, travel, work experience.

**3. Other Tips:**

* **Anecdotes can be extremely effective.** They provide a platform for sharing personal qualities and are interesting to read.
* **Mundane topics can be successful.** Your topic doesn’t need to be obscure.

It can be about an ordinary aspect of your life. For example: your neighborhood, making pancakes with dad, walking to school.

The key is to personalize the experience and share something of importance about you.

* **Topics you find interesting will result in better essays.**
* **Disconnects are confusing.** While your essay need not duplicate information in your application, it should have some connection if writing about a significant activity or passion.

For example: if your essay focuses on a meaningful extracurricular activity then one would expect to see that activity listed on the application form.

* **Topics on personal tragedy are challenging to write.** Students may lack emotional distance from tragedies, making these topics difficult to use to communicate their personal qualities.

**C. Essay Structure**

There is no magic formula but successful essays share some common elements.

**1. Beginning**

\*Begins with a compelling opening statement or paragraph that grabs the reader.

\*Introduces an anecdote, experience, person, place or thing that will convey something about you.

**2. Middle/Body Paragraphs**

\*Develops the details of your anecdote/experience/subject.

\*Connects your anecdote/experience/subject back to you.

*- What are your personal thoughts about the anecdote/experience/subject?*

*- How did you feel?*

*- How did you handle the situation?*

*- Did it change you in any way?*

**3. Ending**

\*Concludes with personal insight.

- *What is your overall purpose in sharing the anecdote/experience/subject?*

*- What does it reveal about you? (E.g. lessons learned, personal growth, attributes, goals)*

**D. The Writing Mechanics:**

**1. Use Your Own Voice**

Let your personality and qualities shine in the essay.

It is not about “sounding” impressive or sounding like your parents; rather, it is about presenting yourself through sharing of personal thought, anecdote or experience.

**2. Show Rather than State**

Don’t simply state the facts or list events. For example, don’t merely state that you are a leader. Describe how you managed 20 kids when you were a summer counselor.

A compelling essay will also explain the “why” and give details and examples. For example, it is always better to include a statement about “why” you organized a book drive than to simply state that you organized the event.

**3. Keep the Focus Personal**

Make sure your essay highlights you by sharing personal qualities, skills, talents or accomplishments.

It is also better to keep the focus narrow and in depth by limiting your discussion to an aspect or two of yourself. Share a “slice of life” rather than your whole life story.

**4. Keep it Honest**

Highlight your best qualities but don’t be afraid to show your vulnerabilities and opportunities for growth.

**5. Make it Interesting**

Essays should be interesting to read. The admissions officers will read hundreds of essays in a week!

**6. Use Good Writing Mechanics**

Pay attention to grammar, spelling, punctuation, and phrasing.

Remember that your audience is the admissions committee so your writing style should not be too informal.

**7. Answer the Prompt and Pay Attention to Word Limits.**

If responding to a prompt, make sure you have addressed the question.

Watch out for digressing or getting off track. If you are recycling an essay for multiple applications, makes sure it is tailored to the prompt.

**8. Draft, Draft and Re-draft**

Make sure you allow time to revise your essay. It is a process not a timed writing.

**9. Get Feedback and Help Proofreading**

Have someone review and proofread your essay. Do not rely on spell check only!

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