

Intro: Your College Essay Process Starts Here

Welcome to the beginning of your app process! The following one-page guides are designed to help you craft a college essay that is clear, memorable and genuinely yours. The advice below collated from the deep breadth and depth of our team led by former AOs covers the core skills every applicant needs: finding an angle, structuring the narrative, writing (painlessly!) with specificity, and revising effectively.

Admittedly purposefully does not release sample essays from previous applicants because our philosophy is that the students who stand out are those who don't follow a formula. Over dozens of application cycles, We've observed that exposure to sample essays often leads to unconscious imitation, making it difficult for students to maintain their original voice. Admissions committees read tens of thousands of essays every year and are uninspired by recycled story arcs, familiar openings, or imitated tones.

Therefore, our approach in these guides center on helping you discover and articulate what makes you distinct: your perspective, voice, goals, values and experiences. Instead of essay templates, we provide frameworks, tools, and expert guidance to help craft your own story.

That said, several universities publish essays from admitted students as educational resources. Listed below are four sites we recommend. We have strategically shared resources from an Ivy+ university, two SLACs of varying selectivity, and a major private selective university. Review the following sites not to copy essay formulas, but to observe the range of approaches, topics, and voices that resonate with diverse undergraduate admissions teams.

1. **Johns Hopkins University: Essays That Worked**
apply.jhu.edu/college-planning-guide/essays-that-worked/
2. **Connecticut College: Essays That Worked**
conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/
3. **Hamilton College: College Essays That Worked**
hamilton.edu/admission/apply/college-essays-that-worked
4. **New York University (NYU): Essay Examples**
[nyu.edu — Essay Examples PDF](https://nyu.edu/~ Essay Examples PDF)

As you read the examples on the websites above, take note of what those essays have in common: specificity, a clear voice, and candid reflection. Pay attention to the AOs feedback on what they have identified makes each AO feel personal, memorable and unrepeatable, and strive for that in your own drafting. If you approach admissions essays not as a writing task but as a reflection exercise, you'll gain clarity about your story through the process of drafting and revising. These quick guides are designed to support every stage of that process.

To continue refining your writing voice, we strongly recommend you attend the Admittedly Academy featuring the author of these guides, Erin Gordon, on **June 11**. Further hone your essay writing skills by attending any one of her half-day workshops this summer: **June 13, July 18, and August 22**.

1) Tips for Making the Writing Process Easier

If you get paralyzed staring at a blank document or otherwise hate writing, these techniques can help.

Use Your Phone (not AI!)

Once your essay topic is set, open a voice memo app and just talk. Walk through the main points, memories, and realizations out loud. Complete sentences aren't necessary. Ramble. Repeat yourself. Then transcribe the recording, which will serve as your first draft and you can shape during revisions. This approach has a built-in advantage: it's already in your voice.

Typed from scratch: "My experience volunteering at the literacy center was transformative and taught me many important lessons about communication and patience."

Transcribed from voice memo: "I remember this one guy I tutored — he was maybe 60 — and he'd been hiding his whole life the fact that he couldn't read. When he finally read a full paragraph, he looked at me with tears in his eyes. That moment wrecked me in the best way."

The second version is alive, and your voice shines through clearly.

The Pomodoro Method

Remove the open-ended pressure of "I have to work on my essay tonight" and replace it with a defined, winnable task. Set a timer for five minutes and write only for that window. Then stop and take a break. Reset the timer and repeat. Often, once momentum kicks in, writing will continue well past the alarm. This technique makes the task psychologically more manageable.

Outlining

Don't expect flowing, gorgeous prose right away. Start instead with trigger words, sentence fragments, or a loose arc of an opening moment, what it revealed, how it changed things and what comes next. Then fill in one section at a time — even just **one** paragraph a day is progress. That pace produces a complete draft in less than a week without a single marathon writing session.

Mind Mapping

For non-linear thinkers, a mind map can surface connections that a traditional outline just can't. Write the central topic in the middle of a blank page, circle it, then branch outward with related memories and ideas. Next, step back, find the most compelling cluster, and start writing from there. The map isn't the structure of the essay; rather, it unlocks it. Use the techniques above to organize the material into a coherent narrative.



2) No Ideas vs. Too Many Ideas

When you've got too many ideas for your personal statement, evaluate what in your life makes you feel the most alive. A student who lights up talking about ceramics but goes monotone describing AP Chemistry should probably write about ceramics, even if chemistry seems like it'd be more impressive.

Eliminate repeats. If your activities section lists three soccer-related entries, write about something else entirely. The same goes for teacher recommendations. If the newspaper faculty advisor is writing a rec, consider writing about something other than journalism.

Admissions Officers aren't looking for the most impressive topic — they're looking for the most real one. Writing about a personal project of collecting broken umbrellas found on the subway, repairing them and then donating them to a shelter is an activity that reveals patience, resourcefulness, and could be written by one student and one student only. An essay about teaching a younger sibling to ride a bike can reveal communication skills, patience, and emotional intelligence more vividly than a summary of a lab internship.

When you've got no ideas, ask yourself: If a free weekend magically appeared — no obligations, no parents hovering — how would you choose to spend it? That answer often reveals the most genuine interests.

Similarly, ask friends and family what makes you distinctly you. Their answers might be surprising and essay-worthy.

Other prompts to spark ideas:

- What's the smallest decision that ended up changing something big?
- What do you own that says more about you than any résumé could?
- What's something you taught yourself?
- What did you used to believe that you no longer do?
- What's something about you people would never expect?
- What does your camera roll or search history reveal about what truly captivates you?

After answering these prompts, look for patterns. Is there a recurring theme such as problem-solving, caretaking, or obsessive curiosity? Consider whether two answers can merge — "the trip where everything went wrong" + "what a stranger said that changed things" = an essay about adaptability and connection.

Too many ideas and too few ideas are actually the same, very solvable problem — both require paying attention to what already lights you up.

3) Nailing the "Why Us?" Essay

A strong "Why Us?" essay can move an application closer to the admit pile. Done right, this essay shows Admissions Officers (AOs) that you understand what makes their university different and are excited about what you'll contribute there.

The prompt might be direct ("Why do you want to attend Yale?") or indirect ("Here's our mission statement. What resonates with you?"). Either way, the school is asking you to convey why *you* belong there, beyond its perceived ranking or prestige.

Focus on institution-specific opportunities -- specialized labs or institutes, programs, internships -- that exist *at that school only*. "I want to double major in theater and biology" is something you can do at any school. Instead, write, "After spending two summers monitoring pollinator populations with a local conservation nonprofit, I'm eager to join Dr. Patel's Grassland Ecology Lab, whose recent findings on native bee decline shaped the research question behind my senior thesis."

The same rule applies to location. "I want to go to Tulane because I want to spend four years in New Orleans" is a lifestyle preference, not a connection to a university. Write instead about participating in Tulane's legendary community-rebuilding initiatives in the Lower Ninth Ward and why that opportunity aligns with your background and interests.

Fun, non-academic details are fine to mention, but skip spirit traditions and athletics since most schools have them. "I can't wait to join the student section at basketball games and paint my face orange and black" is the same sentence you could submit to a hundred other schools with the colors swapped out. If the only thing unique about the essay is the school's name, it isn't unique enough. As Duke and Penn AOs often say, "If you can replace D-U-K-E with P-E-N-N, and your supplemental essays still make sense, we will be able to tell."

Similarly, don't write a Yelp review. "I've always dreamed of attending a school with a strong sense of community and rigorous academics" could appear — word for word — in an essay addressed to any college. The same goes for, "I was immediately drawn to Columbia's energy when I visited campus." Impressions aren't arguments. The admissions team needs to know why you belong there, not that you liked the vibe on a tour.

Strong: "Spending three summers documenting oral histories in my grandmother's village in Oaxaca shaped my approach to ethnographic research, and it's why I'm eager to work with Professor Amara Diallo at Georgetown, whose fieldwork in West African communities mirrors the approach used over those summers."

Do deep research beyond the school's website. Follow student organizations and professors on social media, watch day-in-the-life YouTube videos, and read the campus newspaper. The goal is an essay so specific to that school that it couldn't possibly be submitted anywhere else.

4) UC PIQs

The University of California (UC) system has unique admissions requirements. Rather than submitting one personal statement, applicants pick four (4) of eight (8) Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) and write 350-word essays for each. The UC system doesn't take letters of recommendation so the PIQs represent extremely valuable real estate. Here are tips for using them wisely.

Pick Prompts That Showcase Different Dimensions

No single PIQ carries more weight than others so choose four prompts that showcase you as a multi-dimensional person, building a composite picture. For example, one essay might cover a summer research internship, another a relationship with a grandparent, another a part-time job, and the last a personal challenge. Even if theater is the center of your universe, only one PIQ should be about theater.

Lead with Action and Impact

Rather than listing accomplishments, hook the reader with a meaningful moment: the discovery, the turning point, the decision. A reliable structure: what happened → what you did → what you learned → what's next. Avoid merely claiming characteristics like "resilience." Instead, show resilience through a specific scene.

- **Before:** "I worked hard to improve my grades after a difficult freshman year."
- **After:** "Sophomore year meant five-thirty alarms, lunch spent in the tutoring center, and many Saturday mornings at the library. By junior year, my GPA had climbed a full point."

Get In and Get Out

At just 350 words, there's no room for meandering or flowery intros in PIQs. AOs at the UCs **do not value** "fancy" writing prose; they want you to get right into it. Start with the moment that matters and every line should move the story forward or reveal self-awareness. Save literary flourishes for longer personal statements.

- **Common App style:** "As the morning fog lifted over the track, I laced up my shoes and felt the familiar mix of nerves and determination that had defined my four years as a sprinter."
- **UC PIQ style:** "I didn't make varsity until junior year. By then, I'd learned that improvement happens at 5 a.m. practices when no one is watching."

The UCs look for intellectual curiosity, initiative, persistence, and community awareness. Conclude your PIQs with how you'll show up as a UC student.

- **Example:** "Navigating disagreement in that restaurant kitchen taught me to be curious instead of defensive, a skill I'll use in a collaborative UC engineering lab."

5) Community Supplements

Many supplemental questions focus on “Community.” This is term so broadly defined that you can write about a family unit, a faith group, an online fandom, a school or community club, a workplace, any group you're a part of. Push past the generic — instead of writing about Model UN, write about the small prep group that drilled arguments at someone's kitchen table every Thursday evening.

Show Your Role, Not Just Your Membership

Admissions Officers want to know *exactly* what you did inside your community. Using active verbs that describe specific responsibilities and actions. Show (not tell) initiative or problem-solving.

- **Before:** "As part of my school's environmental club, I learned a lot about sustainability."
- **After:** "Every Friday at lunch, I led twelve members of our school's gardening composting group in labeling bins, trained new participants on sorting protocols, and persuaded the administration to switch to compostable trays in the cafeteria."
- **Before:** "I volunteered at the food pantry every Saturday and enjoyed helping people in my community."
- **After:** "Every Saturday morning, I sorted and repackaged donated goods, reorganized the intake system to cut client wait times in half, and trained six new volunteers on the updated protocol."

Make Growth the Center

A strong community essay should address how the group changed your values, habits, and thinking.

- **Before:** "This experience helped me become more responsible and empathetic."
- **After:** "Volunteering at the legal aid clinic taught me that you have to show up prepared because someone's housing situation may depend on it."

Bridge to College

End by connecting community contribution to future campus involvement, ideally at that specific school, which will convey fit and forward momentum.

- **Before:** "Being part of this community has prepared me for college in many ways."
- **After:** "Running that after-school coding workshop taught me how to meet people where they're at, a skill I plan to bring to the first-generation student mentorship program and the CS peer tutoring network at [target university]."
- **Before:** "I hope to stay involved in community service when I get to college."
- **After:** "The same instinct that kept me showing up to that literacy tutoring program every week — even when attendance was low and progress was slow — is what will drive involvement in [target school]'s community reading initiative and peer writing center from day one."

6) Overused Words and How to Replace Them

"Passion," for robotics, the environment, theater, is the single most overused word in college application essays so the word has lost all impact. Instead of claiming a passion for something, focus on **evidence**, **specific actions** and **concrete results**.

- **Vague:** "I'm passionate about marine biology."
- **Specific:** "Every weekend for two years, I collected and logged water samples from a tide pool near my house."

In the era of rampant AI usage, scan for other overused words and phrases, including "bridge-building," "real-world impact," and "outside my comfort zone" and replace them with unique-to-you wording.

Similarly, common topics — the championship loss, the service trip, the school-based leadership role — aren't disqualifying in and of themselves. But the expected takeaways ("I learned perseverance," "teamwork is everything") are. Push past the obvious.

For example, ask: What did I really learn or unlearn? What was more complicated than it seemed on the surface? What made me uncomfortable, or made me laugh, or made me rethink something I assumed was settled?

- **Expected conclusion:** "My semester abroad taught me to appreciate different cultures and step outside my comfort zone."
- **More revealing conclusion:** "My semester abroad taught me that I'd spent 16 years mistaking familiarity for safety and that the discomfort of not knowing what anything meant — including a menu, a joke, or a social cue — was actually the most alive I'd ever felt."

Essays can also fall flat when they try to capture an entire season, a full trip, or years of work. Zooming in on one moment — the time a plan completely collapsed, the conversation that shifted everything — reveals more depth than a summary.

Cliché-busting checklist:

- Is the essay telling a story, not summarizing an activity?
- Does the reflection go past the expected takeaway?
- Will the reader see how you think, not just what you did?
- Could this essay only have been written by you?
- Are the words individual and specific?

The difference between a memorable essay and a forgettable one is almost always specificity. A real moment, an honest reaction, a conclusion nobody else would have drawn from the same experience will make your essay sing.

7) Proofreading Tips

While AOs are primarily focused on the content of your essay, misspellings, missing words, and/or erroneous punctuation can have a negative effect on your application. Take proofreading as seriously as the writing itself. Here are tips.

Step away. The longer the draft sits untouched — days, even weeks — the more errors will surface when you return to it. Fresh eyes catch what familiar eyes skip.

Change the environment. If the draft was written at a bedroom desk, proofread it in the school library. If it was drafted on screen, print it and mark it up by hand. The brain processes familiar text differently in a new setting.

Read it out loud to yourself. Say every word. This is what world-class journalists do. Missing punctuation becomes audible. Awkward phrasing becomes obvious. Flat or repetitive wording stands out. Remember that most AOs are reading your essays “out loud” in their heads.

Get another set of eyes. Before hitting submit, have your Admittedly Counselor or Essay Specialist read as many core essays as possible. A fresh neutral pair of eyes will catch tone issues, repetition, and typos that even careful self-editing misses.

Read it backward. To spot typos, start reviewing at the last sentence and work toward the first, one sentence at a time. This breaks the brain's habit of reading what it expects to see and forces attention to each sentence in isolation.

Use the word count as a final check. After making last-minute edits, recount the words. It's easy to accidentally delete a word or duplicate a phrase during late-stage revisions, and a quick recount catches both.

Here are additional errors to scan for when proofreading:

Consistency. If a word is capitalized once, it should be capitalized throughout. Don't write "9 am" in one paragraph and "11 PM" in another. Note: "high school" does not need to be capitalized unless it's part of an official name like "Lincoln High School." Similarly, seasons ("fall internship") do not need to be capitalized, nor do course names that are not formal titles ("biology" versus "Introduction to Biology").

Comma overuse. When in doubt, leave the comma out. Read the sentence aloud — if there's no natural pause, the comma probably doesn't belong.

"They" errors. An institution is an "it," not a "they," as in, "When Riverside Academy announced it was canceling finals..." If referring to a person who uses they/them pronouns, establish that clearly at the outset so the usage reads as intentional, not as a grammar mistake.

An essay that's beautifully written but riddled with errors sends a message that details don't matter to you. Many Ivy+ institutions are subconsciously looking for sharp, detail-oriented students. A clean, error-free essay shows the reader that you care, are thoughtful, and seek precision, which is the kind of student selective colleges want.

8) What to Cut When Over the Word Limit

Let your early drafts run long. After all, spewed raw material is how strong essays get built. But as deadlines approach, trim like a surgeon.

Eliminate Redundant Words

Cut these:

- every single, each and every, totally, completely, absolutely, literally, actually, basically, just, quite, really, rather, extremely, very, super
- "14 years old" → "14"
- "my junior year of high school" → "junior year" or "as a junior"

When you spot "very" + an adjective, reach for a more precise word instead. For example, "very cold" becomes "frigid." "Very bright" becomes "piercing."

Cut Acronyms

If a proper noun appears only once, skip the parenthetical abbreviation entirely — it wastes space. If the name appears multiple times, the reader will connect the abbreviation without needing it formally introduced. This includes the school's own acronym. Writing "University of Southern California, (USC)" in an essay submitted to USC is unnecessary, as is saying "University of Pennsylvania" vs Penn.

Slash the Throat-Clearing

The real story is often buried a few paragraphs in. Throat-clearing shows up as:

- **Prompt repetition.** If asked "What object best represents you?", don't open with "The object that best represents me is..." Dive straight in, as in, "The pink sea shell on my desk was found when..."
- **Generic facts.** Don't open with national statistics; start with a personal story.
- **Over-written openings.** Sensory details are great but an avalanche buries the substantive point. For example, "I panted breathlessly as I ran down the poster-covered hallway, my Vans slipping on the linoleum floor as I rounded the corner, almost knocking over the principal in her high heels on my way to the newspaper room where I was needed to solve X problem." What's important is not the kind of shoes or the floor material but the problem that needed solving and how the student solved it.
- **Lead-up to the lead-up.** If the story is about performing at a prestigious showcase, skip explaining when the audition was discovered, why the decision was made to enter, and how the notification of acceptance arrived. Get straight to the performance!

9) Tone and Framing

Tone issues can tank an otherwise excellent essay. Avoid being apologetic, elitist, negative, or tone-deaf.

Watch for Privilege Signals

References to second homes, designer goods, skip trips, and exotic vacations are often read as elitist. Self-awareness matters. For instance, one student wrote about his talent for making conversation with Uber drivers in NYC. The essay implied he had plenty of cash to take Ubers in a city where most individuals use the subway; the essay also bordered on classist.

Another example... Stanford asks applicants to write a letter to a future roommate. One student wrote something like, "I look forward to connecting at the end of the day so we can talk about the cute girls we met." Not only was this misogynistic but it was tone deaf to the fact that his future roommate might be queer, transgender, or otherwise not interested in discussing girls.

Frame Positively

There are two accurate ways to say the same thing. For instance:

Negative Framing	Stronger Framing
"I suffer from anxiety."	"I have anxiety."
"I'm confined to a wheelchair."	"I use a wheelchair."
"Unfortunately, my GPA dropped."	"My GPA dropped that semester."
"I struggled because my family couldn't afford tutoring."	"Without access to tutoring, I built my own study system by..."

Scan your draft for words like "unfortunately," "only," "but," "just," "despite," or "limited by" and ask whether the same truth can be expressed more neutrally.

- **Before:** "Unfortunately, my school only offered two AP classes."
- **After:** "My school offers two AP classes. I took both and then pursued independent coursework through online platforms and classes at the local community college."

The second version signals initiative and resourcefulness instead of limitation and apology.

10) How to Conclude Essays

Reflection — articulating how an experience changed you — makes a solid essay ending. You can even go one step further: show the reader how that growth will impact you in undergrad and beyond. Make the essay topic feel like the beginning of something, not a one-off event. For example, describe how an interpersonal skill will translate to dorm or seminar life; identify an academic focus connected to the essay topic; commit to community involvement near campus; point to a career path related to the essay.

- Standard close: *"This experience made me realize how much I care about education equity."*
- Forward-looking close: "That realization is why I plan to pursue a concentration in education policy and get involved with the tutoring collective that operates out of the campus community center, bringing the same one-on-one approach that worked in my neighborhood to a new community."
- Vague close: *"Working at the animal shelter changed the way I think about advocacy."*
- Forward-looking close: "That shift is what's driving my plan to apply to [university name]'s Animal Law Clinic and minor in environmental policy. I'll take the same ground-level advocacy approach into a space where it can shape the law."
- Vague close: *"This experience made me want to pursue a career in mental health."*
- Forward-looking close: "Three years of sitting with friends in crisis taught me that the most important thing a person can offer is the ability to stay calm in someone else's chaos. That's the clinician, and the classmate, I intend to be."

Forward-looking closes do two things: they circle back to a quality or skill the essay addressed and they name a specific next step. The mental health example doesn't just state "I want to be a therapist" — it echoes a precise skill (staying calm in someone else's chaos). That callback makes the conclusion feel earned.

For school-specific supplements, a forward-looking close should mention a real program, clinic, lab, club or organization by name and explain why that particular opportunity is the logical next chapter. There's a meaningful difference between "I hope to get involved in research on campus" and "The longitudinal sleep study underway in Dr. Reyes's lab is a direct continuation of the independent experiment I'm conducting in AP Biology this fall." That specificity tells the admissions readers that the fit is genuine.