



# College Connections **cicu**

## WRITING THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

**W**hy do colleges and universities often require an essay with an application? It's because they are seeking a fuller and more personal picture of the student than the other parts of the application – the high school transcript, SAT or ACT scores, letters of recommendation, even the personal interview – are likely to reveal.

By asking for an essay, the college admissions staff is saying to the applicant: "Please tell us more about yourself." The college may request an essay about career goals, the student's reasons for wanting to enroll at the college, a person who has deeply influenced the student, or leave the student free to choose a topic. The

choice of what to write about will shed light on the student's values, interests, thought processes, creativity, depth of knowledge, even his or her sense of humor. Is this applicant an arts person or mathematically oriented? Whimsical or methodical? Impulsive or cautious? Through the writing, the student can demonstrate his or her style, power to persuade, ability to organize thoughts, and mastery of English.

Although there is no one "correct" way to respond to a college essay question, any applicant should avoid:

- Writing a résumé, by simply listing or repeating facts that can be found in other parts of the application, or by trying to work too many accomplishments into the essay;
- Being too general or vague, rather than including specific and vivid details;
- Telling admissions officers what the student thinks they want to hear instead of what he or she wants to say;
- Using unnecessary words;
- Being dishonest by downloading an essay from a Web site, or talking a parent or friend into writing one; admissions officers won't be fooled.

Keep in mind that an essay may make a difference and help you stand out from the crowd, but won't compensate for bad grades or the lack of a rigorous curriculum.

## TIPS: WRITING THE COLLEGE ESSAY

- Know yourself. Consider what makes you unique and what is most important to you. Ask your parents, friends, and teachers what they see as your strengths.
- Start early. Good writing requires time for thinking, outlining, editing, and rewriting.
- Choose a topic. Make a list of what is important to you, or keep a journal of events in your daily life. Consider the people who are most important to you, and an idea for an essay should emerge.
- Find an angle. Within the boundaries of the topic, decide what story you want to tell. Ask yourself why the reader should care, and work in enough detail about your story and yourself to make a reader care.
- Focus, then cut to the chase. Don't try to cover too much.
- Look for patterns and connections. The essay has to be more than a series of loosely connected points or incidents. You're telling a story about yourself, and a good story should have a beginning, middle, and end.
- Evaluate your essay. After you've written a draft, take a break and look at it again in a few days. Have someone whom you know and trust to be honest with you read the essay and offer feedback.
- Edit the essay. Your writing should be simple, direct, and clear. Make every word count. Ask others you trust for more feedback, but don't overdo it; the essay shouldn't read as though written by a committee.
- Proofread the essay. Don't count on spell-checking and grammar-checking functions to catch all your errors. Look out for awkward phrases and vague, inexact language.
- Don't confuse your essay with an e-mail or text message. Abbreviations used in texting or e-mailing are not appropriate here. Put as much work into any essay submitted online as one sent by snail mail.

### Sources:

Nicole Verardi, "Help with the Writing Process" (March 2007) and Jennifer Gross, "To Ten Tips for Writing a College Essay (November/December 2000), <http://www.nacacnet.org>; "Essay Skills," <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html>; Carole Feldman, "How much do college admissions essays matter?", Associated Press, July 16, 2008, [http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-07-12-college-essays\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/news/education/2008-07-12-college-essays_N.htm)

## THE UNIVERSAL COLLEGE APPLICATION

The Universal College Application (UCA) was recently launched to make applying to college faster, easier, and more accessible to students of diverse economic and social backgrounds. Much like the Common Application (see [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)) it provides a centralized application form that can be used at many colleges.

The UCA hopes to ease the college applications process for low-income students and others who are not well represented among the college-bound by:

- Adding more colleges to its list, including public colleges and private colleges that do not use the Common Application;
- Welcoming colleges that do not require recommendations or student essays;
- Partnering with nonprofits and other organizations, including community colleges, churches, and social service agencies, to help applicants gain access to computers so that they can more easily fill out the UCA;
- Offering colleges more information about their applicants, in order to create better matches between the colleges and their prospective students.

At present, 82 institutions are members of the Universal College Application. Among them are the following independent colleges and universities in New York State:

- Bard College
- Concordia College
- Elmira College
- Hobart and William Smith Colleges
- Iona College
- Marist College
- College of Mount Saint Vincent
- Niagara University
- Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute
- Rochester Institute of Technology
- St. Bonaventure University
- St. Joseph's College (Brooklyn and Suffolk campuses)
- University of Rochester
- Vaughn College of Aeronautics and Technology
- Wagner College

Resources at the Universal College Application site (<https://www.universalcollegeapp.com/index.cfm>) include: information about the colleges that accept the UCA, links to the required forms and a PowerPoint presentation about the UCA for counselors.

## RESOURCES: WRITING COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS

### College Applications Can Be Too Good

[http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2008/02/12/college\\_applications\\_can\\_be\\_too\\_good/](http://www.boston.com/news/education/higher/articles/2008/02/12/college_applications_can_be_too_good/)

Informative essay recently published in the *Boston Globe* about application essays that arouse suspicion by being too slick; students are advised to avoid too much outside editorial guidance.

### College Essays Written by Teens

<http://www.teenink.com/CollegeEssays/index.php>

A selection of almost 500 college application essays on a wide variety of topics. Students should be inspired by seeing samples of what others have written and the ways in which they approached their subjects.

### Essay Skills

<http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/index.html>

At its site, the College Board offers useful tips for students on how to choose an essay topic, how to start a rough draft, types of essay questions, writing tips, and sample essays.

### Help with the Writing Process

<http://www.nacacnet.org/PublicationsResources/steps/Articles/Pages/HelpwiththeWritingProcess.aspx>

Among the resources at the site of the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC) is this helpful guide to writing the application essay, with sections on choosing a topic, deciding on how to approach that topic, getting feedback, and perfecting the essay.

## WHATS YOUR POINT? THE COLLEGE PAPER

Writing a college paper, even for students who won praise for their writing in high school, can be frustrating. The student has organized his thoughts, sketched an outline, written a number of drafts, checked spelling and grammar, proofread carefully, and accurately summarized what he is expected to know, only to find out that the professor expected more. "I'm doing everything I did in high school," the student protests, "and doing it better, too. What's the problem?"

The problem is that the professor isn't asking for a better version of a high school paper; she is, more often than not, asking for something different. Usually, unless she has specifically asked for only a summary, the professor is looking for an *argument*, the main feature of most college writing. If high school is more about the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* of a subject, then college is more about the *how* and *why*.

The high school student who can write a grammatically correct paper that clearly summarizes what he has learned may earn praise, but a college paper will usually require that a student:

- state a thesis (make a claim or assertion)
- offer evidence for the thesis (reasons for the claim)
- note possible objections to the claim
- reach a conclusion
- suggest the significance of the conclusion and further questions it might raise.

In other words, the college student is expected not only to show what she knows in a paper, but also to make a point about what she has learned. Writing a paper is how a student demonstrates that she is mastering the tools of intellectual inquiry – that she can make a claim, organize and analyze evidence to support that claim, is aware of possible objections to the claim, and able to reach a conclusion. Good writing, as the saying goes, is good thinking.

In a 2006 survey conducted by Maguire Associates for *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 44% of college faculty surveyed said that high school students are not well prepared for college

### Sample Essay Questions

- Describe how you have demonstrated leadership ability both in and out of school.
- Discuss a special attribute or accomplishment that sets you apart.
- Pick an experience from your own life and explain how it has influenced your development.
- Where do you see yourself 10 years from now?
- What do you consider to be the single most important societal problem? Why?

Source:

<http://www.fastweb.com/fastweb/resources/articles/index/103329>

writing, while only 10% of high school teachers agreed with that assessment. "Students are usually unaware of what it takes to write even a four- to five-page essay every two or three weeks," one professor noted in a typical survey response. Requiring more writing and longer papers from high school students that employ the skills needed for college-level work would be a start toward gaining such awareness.

Sources:

"College Writing." *The Writing Center, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill* (2004): <http://www.unc.edu/depts/wcweb/handouts/college-writing.html>

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Joseph M. Williams and Lawrence McEnerney, "Writing in College: A Short Guide to College Writing." *The University of Chicago Writing Program*: <http://writing-program.uchicago.edu/resources/collegewriting/>

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**Address:** 17 Elk St., PO Box 7289, Albany, NY 12224

**Phone:** 518.436.4781. **Fax:** 518.433.8825

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**Outreach Programs Staff:** Susan Nesbitt Perez - [susan@cicu.org](mailto:susan@cicu.org), Kiersten Hall - [kiersten@cicu.org](mailto:kiersten@cicu.org), Jen Lewis - [jen@cicu.org](mailto:jen@cicu.org), Pam Sargent - [pam@cicu.org](mailto:pam@cicu.org), Rebecca Hansen - [rebecca@cicu.org](mailto:rebecca@cicu.org)