



HER LEAD

THE HERLEAD FELLOWS' GUIDE TO WRITING A COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

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A Quick Guide to This Guide:

So you're beginning to write your college app essays. First, take a deep breath! Relax. College applications can be stressful (especially the idea of summarizing yourself for a college admissions board in a few hundred words) but if you let yourself have fun, keep an open mind and stick at it, writing your college essay can be personally rewarding. Colleges won't be the only ones learning new things about you – YOU will be discovering new truths about yourself as you go along!

This article, split into two parts, will give you exercises for getting an idea for your essay, and strategies on honing it to written perfection. It's in part adapted from this presentation. So let's get this baby started!

PART

1

GETTING AN IDEA

THE DO'S AND DON'TS

DON'T WORRY ABOUT PROMPTS

If you're applying to the Common App, there'll be list of personal essay prompts, and you'll be asked to select one that your essay falls under. For example, #3 is: Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome? You can see the other 2018-19 prompts [here](#). But I'll let you in on a not-so-secret tip: the prompt you select doesn't really matter.

Or at least it doesn't matter nearly as much as finding the best way to tell your story. So focus on your story first, and save which prompt to file it under for very last step. In fact, the prompts are designed so you can put almost any essay at least in almost any category. In other words, it's not the box that matters, but what you're putting into it.

DON'T FEEL YOU NEED TO COPY OTHER PEOPLE'S STYLES

Every person is different. Every personal essay is different. In fact, the more unique, the better. I know there are tons of books out there like *College Essays that Got Me Into Harvard* blaaaah etc., but that doesn't mean your personal essay should be exactly like one of those.

DO BE CREATIVE

You're going to get the most power out of your personal essay by thinking outside the box. By creative I don't mean that your personal essay needs to be a haiku or interpretive dance; I mean think imaginatively about what someone might not know from looking at the rest of your application or even from meeting you. Some of the best college essays tend to find the most inventive point to describe a person outside of grades, GPA and hours spent volunteering.

DO START EARLY

Give yourself as much time as possible to develop your essay by getting a head start. Summer, when you're out of school, and early fall, when you're not in the dregs of school yet, are great times to start brainstorming and reflecting. Commit yourself to dedicating a certain amount of time every week to at least thinking, discussing, or writing your essay.

But...how do I start developing my idea in the first place? Read more below!

* A Step By Step Exercise on Flushing Out College Essay Ideas:

Note this isn't the only exercise out there! Any way that gets your essay done, and done well, is the right way. But the strategy below I call the 'Disney Princess' approach. I'll be the first to say princess stories can be problematic, but Disney storytellers tend to do an award-winning job of writing a succinct 'I want' song that summarizes the main character in only a few verses and a chorus, from "How Far I'll Go" to "Part of Your World" to "Colors of the Wind." What they do in 2 minute songs, you get to try in 500 words. Below, let's pretend Moana is doing the 3 part essay idea exercise.

STEP Write 10 words to describe yourself, then choose 2-4 that feel most important to you.

1

Example: Curious, explorer, brave voyager, daughter of chief, granddaughter, Polynesian, strong-willed, ocean and animal lover

Now, Moana might resonate most with "strong-willed" (her character), Polynesian (her heritage/ethnicity), daughter of the chief (her gender and her responsibility as next in line), and ocean (something that inspires her). Yours might be your race, your hobbies, your sexuality, your personality.

STEP Using those 2-4 words, write a Twitter bio sentence that summarizes you.

2

@iammoana Strong-willed daughter of a Polynesian chief who loves the ocean. Writing this sentence (1) helps your brain think through your identity and (2) BAM! now you've got a pre-made sentence you can easily weave into your essay to tell admission counselors who you are in 10-14 words. Take this middle paragraph from Moana's 'essay:'

"But after struggling in my canoe, charting the ocean for days, I realized something more powerful than any tidal wave: I know who I am. I know where I'm going. I'm a strong-willed daughter of a Polynesian chief who loves the ocean. And I would save my people."

STEP Use basic storytelling structure to tell us about you in 4-6 sentences.

3

The most important aspect of your essay is story. And most stories follow a general arc from the character's normal everyday world to a challenge, task, or goal, and finally to resolution, whether that looks like failure, success, or a mix of both. A story isn't what happened, it is an impression of what happened.

Once there was ____, and every day they ____ until one day when they _____. And so _____. So they ____until finally _____and ____ (personal discovery).

Take the words you listed in part 1 and 2, and fill in the blanks.

Moana's might look like:

Once there was a strong-willed daughter of a Polynesian chief, and every day she dreamed of sailing the ocean — until one day when a disease struck her island, and so she had to journey beyond the reef to save her home. So she learned from the demigod Maui how to sail a canoe, until finally she found the powerful healing Heart of Te Fiti and saved her island, discovering that she can voyage as far as she likes, as long as she remembers where she's from.

Read over the 4-6 lines you've written. Do you feel inspired, touched, or curious enough about them to write more about it? If so, that might be your essay idea, so get writing a bit more, and check out the next section. But keep in mind if this first try doesn't entirely resonate with you that you can always repeat steps 1-3 and come up with multiple "once there was" story ideas. After reading each, which one speaks to you most? Which one might help you discover something new about yourself?

After you've found an idea that really ignites your brain, let's get into the process of writing and honing it into a full-fledged essay.

PART

2

**WRITING THE
IDEA**

Now that you've selected a topic for your essay, it's time to dive into writing it! One type of essay you can write is a narrative essay, which shows your perspective on an event from your life. Narrative essays are a powerful tool to engage your reader through storytelling and offer insight into your emotions and thought process. Because narrative essays reflect on you, they are a fantastic option for your college application essay. Narrative essays can take any structure that molds well to your story, but most will contain an introduction, body and conclusion. Let's break each of those down.

Introduction:

Your introduction should not only set the scene for your essay but provide an enticing hook and a thesis that your story will support. To begin, your hook should be attention grabbing, and can be anything from a question to a fact to an image. Think less along the lines of cliched dictionary definitions and more along the lines of why you decided to tell this story. Did this event change a fact in an enticing way (i.e. Thomas Jefferson High School had never had a female student body president)? Maybe start your essay with that! Once your reader is engaged, you should provide the necessary information to understand the story without throwing in filler information. Who does the reader need to know about? Where is this taking place? What background story do they need? Lastly, you should include a thesis statement, but a thesis statement in a narrative essay is slightly different than those in an argumentative or expository essay. Your thesis can be a lesson you learned from the events in the essay (i.e. I'll never trust Google Maps again), a larger universal theme (i.e. It's true: mothers know best) or simply the beginning of a tale (i.e. I started off on a pre-dinner run, deciding to take a different route than usual).

Body:

With a solid introduction, the body of your essay should come naturally. This section is your opportunity to detail the events in your story from your point of view, showing the reader what happened and why you acted the way you did. It's usually most logical to tell your story in chronological order, but it's certainly not necessary. The key is to show rather than tell, focusing on descriptions (try to use all 5 senses!) that provide insight into your thoughts and emotions. Rather than simply writing what you felt, describe why and what made you feel that way and how you reacted. (i.e. instead of writing, "I felt like I stuck out at football tryouts," you could write "I walked onto the field but felt like I walked into the men's restroom. All 100 eyes were on me. My hair swung, feeling heavier than before. The smell of sweat peeking out from men's Axe body spray covered me as my flowery perfume faded away. Why, oh why, did I decide to try out for the football team?" Throughout the body of the essay you should ensure that the story you're telling acts as evidence for the thesis in your introduction.

Conclusion:

Finally, you can wrap up your essay with a concrete conclusion. You should, of course, tell the ending of your story, but beyond that, you should reflect on the significance of the event to you and to your life. What did you learn? How did you change? How has this affected your life? Your conclusion is also your last opportunity to ensure your reader takes away a better understanding of you. You want your reader to understand your thesis, but more importantly, you want your reader to learn about you as a person. Try to include a lasting thought that reflects something about the way you think, learn, understand or reflect (i.e. I look forward to the day the tech industry mirrors the diverse, rich culture of our world, and it begins with me.)

When structuring your essay, you should first and foremost consider how you can best convey your message and share who you are, and while the structure above will leave you with a great story, it's always important to tell your most authentic story, which means that it is entirely acceptable to break each and every rule above. College application essays are your chance to share you on paper, and these tips will hopefully enable you to do so.