

EAST-WEST

SCHOOL OF INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

GUIDANCE NEWSLETTER



Dos and don'ts on writing the college application essay

Dos

Keep your focus narrow and personal

Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader should be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Ask someone to read just your introduction to see what he or she thinks your essay is about.

Essays that attempt to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee members what you've done- they can pick that up from your list of activities- but about showing them who you are.

Prove it

Develop your main idea with vivid, specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **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 gallbladder operation.

Be specific

To avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing, use vivid, specific details.

- **Okay:** I want to help people. 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 until their shoes filled with water or their fingers started to freeze or somebody's golden retriever signed its 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'ts

Don't tell your readers what you think they want to hear

Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

Don't write a resume

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.

- **Overloaded:** During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory.

Don't use 50 words when 5 will do

Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** Over the years, is has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers- and I have even noticed this about myself, as- 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. Don't rely on your computer's spell-checker. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

Choosing an essay topic



How to handle a topic

Often, you will be asked to write about an experience you've had, an achievement in your life, or a person who has been significant to you. Go beyond the what or who and dig into the how and why:

- This is a personal essay, not travelogue. So if you're writing about a trip to another country, describe how your experiences affected you and why they were interesting or meaningful to you. The people reading the essay are interested in what makes you tick and how you got the way you are, not in how the trains run in Paris.
- Are you writing a tribute to your grandparents and their influence on your childhood? Be personal and specific, not just sentimental. Explain how the particular things your grandparents did or said were important to you.
- Did you overcome an athletic injury and recover to perform well? A description of the type of cast you wore and your rehab routine won't make a compelling essay. But a reflection on what it felt like to watch your teammates, instead of playing alongside them, just might be the ticket.

Tips on avoiding possible pitfalls

- Writing a poem or making a videotape in place of an essay is probably not a good idea, unless you're applying to a specialized school that encourages such a submission.
- Humor can be risky, so be careful how you use it.
- Honor code rules are in effect when you write an essay, so do your own work and don't make things up. As a practical matter, other items in the application, such as letters of recommendation, make it likely that you'd be found out if you tried to give misinformation.

Some final tips

- Leave yourself time to rewrite and revise. For most people, this is not an easy assignment. You need to give yourself weeks, not days, and certainly not hours, to rework your essay.
- If your essay is longer than three pages (unless the instructions call for something longer), then it had better be interesting! Think hard about what you really want to focus on, and take out whatever distracts from your central point.
- The admissions committee will take your essay seriously. You should, too. You have a lot to gain by putting in the time and effort to write a good essay.