

Key Ingredients:

A standout college essay has several key ingredients:

- A unique, personally meaningful topic
- A memorable introduction with vivid imagery or an intriguing hook
- Specific stories and language that show instead of telling
- Vulnerability that's authentic but not aimed at soliciting sympathy
- Clear writing in an appropriate style and tone
- A conclusion that offers deep insight or a creative ending
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There are no set rules for how to structure a college essay, but these are **two common structures** that work:

- A montage structure, a series of vignettes with a common theme.
- A narrative structure, a single story that shows your personal growth or how you overcame a challenge.

Avoid the five-paragraph essay structure that you learned in high school.

Though admissions officers are interested in hearing your story, they're also interested in **how you tell it**.

- An exceptionally written essay will differentiate you from other applicants, meaning that admissions officers will spend more time reading it.
- You can use literary devices to catch your reader's attention and enrich your storytelling; however, focus on using just a few devices well, rather than trying to use as many as possible.

Most importantly, your essay should be about you, not another person or thing. An insightful college admissions essay requires deep self-reflection, authenticity, and a balance between confidence and vulnerability.

Your essay shouldn't be a résumé of your experiences but instead should tell a story that demonstrates your most important values and qualities.

College essay checklist



Topic and structure

- I've selected a topic that's meaningful to me.
- My essay reveals something different from the rest of my application.
- I have a clear and well-structured narrative.
- I've concluded with an insight or a creative ending.

Writing style and tone

- I've crafted an introduction containing vivid imagery or an intriguing hook that grabs the reader's attention.
- I've written my essay in a way that shows instead of tells.
- I've used appropriate style and tone for a college essay.
- I've used specific, vivid personal stories that would be hard to replicate.

Content

- I've demonstrated my positive traits and values in my essay.
- My essay is focused on me, not another person or thing.
- I've included self-reflection and insight in my essay.
- I've respected the word count, remaining within 10% of the upper word limit

College Essay Writing: Dos and Don'ts

Do!

1. Express yourself as briefly and as clearly as you can.
2. Do tell the truth about yourself. The admission committee is anonymous to you: you are completely unknown to it. Even if you run into a committee member in the future, he will have no way of connecting your essay (out of the thousands he has read) to you.
3. Do focus on an aspect of yourself that will show your best side. You might have overcome some adversity, worked through a difficult project, or profited from a specific incident. A narrow focus is more interesting than broad-based generalizations.
4. Do feel comfortable in expressing anxieties. Everybody has them and it is good to know that an applicant can see them and face them.
5. Do tie yourself to the college. Be specific about what this particular school can do for you. Your essay can have different slants for different colleges.
6. Do speak positively. Negatives tend to turn people off.

DON'T

There are five other stereotypes to avoid:

1. The **"my favorite things"** essay. Sample: "These are the things that I am for: puppy dogs and sunshine and Mrs. Fields cookies. These are the things I am against: spinach, nuclear war and being grounded. "
2. The **"trip essay"**. Example: "I went to Israel this summer, and it was exciting because I had to adapt to different food, different customs and a different way of life." Bauld complained that "everything is different except the essay."
3. The **"3-D essay"**. Sample: "I feel I have the determination, discipline, and diversity of interests to succeed at whatever I do." This is general and dull.
4. The **"Miss America"** essay. "A high school kid should steer away from the big issues," he advised. "When they go on and on, like a beauty queen about nuclear war or abortion, it just generates a lot of cliches and makes them sound like they're parroting their parents."
5. The **"jock"** essay. Sample: "Through wrestling, I have learned control, goals and how to work with people." Admissions officers do not recommend any formula that shows how the student had accrued "noble achievement A, noble quality B and high-sounding attribute C."

College Essay Example A

A travel through my room reveals almost everything about me. The walls are splashed with two tones of eye-burning pink, fairies dance across the vibrant wallpaper sprinkled with sparkles, a white-washed dresser covered in knick-knacks, and an overflowing toy box fit perfectly in this Technicolor dream room.

In one corner of my room, a paint-by-numbers portrait that my grandfather created in a World War II hospital silently tells its story. My grandfather, an Italian barber, raised six children in Bayonne, NJ with my grandmother. My grandparents worked hard to deliver the most American of promises – that your kids will have a better standard of living than you. In that regard, my mother, who put herself through college to become an engineer, made good, affording to give me my own room, a luxury she never knew.

The next corner of my room contains a nondescript desk and laptop, the same as anyone's room. Who would guess that this desk is also the launching pad of myYearbook.com, a 1.6 million member social networking site that I created? Layers of spec sheets, Post-Its, and emails form a sea of productivity that I find comforting. Scribbled telephone numbers and names remind me of deals I did and didn't do, reporters who did and didn't write on me, and technology worries I never stop trying to resolve. Half-drunk coke cans tell the tale of a dozen all-nighters, and someone who is at her most creative at night.

The desk is not all business though. My calculus and economics texts bookend my laptop, and a bouquet of dead flowers from my boyfriend rest in peace on my shelf, revealing a morbid sentimentality. Although the flowers have long died and the water completely evaporated, the card and its words "Jeg synes a du er fantastisk og du er det beste ting i mit verden," are the only reason the flowers never made it to the garbage. In Danish, the sentence translates to, "I think you are fantastic, and you are the best thing in my world." Ever since I started dating him, I have been learning more and more about his Danish culture, and I plan to go to Denmark twice this year.

The third corner holds my well-worn, folded-up gymnastics floor beam and barely used grips. Unlike many gymnasts though, I prefer not to wear the grips on bars because they make it harder to feel the bar. I started gymnastics when I was five, and since then my hands have earned their calluses, and I am proud of them. You won't find me moisturizing my hands except to keep them from splitting on the bars.

In the last corner hangs a painting I bought while organizing an online Tsunami Aid Art Project. It was my first significant project online and helped give me a sense of the power of the Internet to connect people. As part of the artist community WetCanvas.com, myself and two other members organized a tsunami-related art project with all proceeds donated to charity. We raised \$10,000 in funds, and had about 100 pieces of work donated from artists in nine countries.

Sadly, I know this will not always be my room. The pink fairies will give way to adult- sized possessions and responsibilities. The knick-knacks will break, and the sanctuary of my childhood will soon seem so childish. But, for now, I will embrace the pink, the fairies, and the simplicity of life in my mom's house. I will look forward to the possibilities of creating another space, as uniquely my own as this one, and as uniquely a part of my past as this room will always be.

The applicant took us on a cinematic tour of her room and cleverly established her credibility as a candidate through detail and anecdote. Very few applicants will be able to write about creating a social media network, but the candidate does so in a seeming off-hand manner. Similarly, references to the American dream, sports achievement, and community service are all established in the space of one essay.

College Essay Example B

One fateful evening some months ago, a defensive linebacker mauled me, his 212 pounds indisputably alighting upon my ankle. Ergo, an abhorrent cracking of calcified tissue. At first light the next day, I awoke cognizant of a new paradigm—one sans football—promulgated by a stabbing sensation that would continue to haunt me every morning of this semester.

It's been an exceedingly taxing semester not being able to engage in football, but I am nonetheless excelling in school. That twist of fate never would have come to pass if I hadn't broken my ankle. I still limp down the halls at school, but I'm feeling less maudlin these days. My friends don't steer clear anymore, and I have a lot more of them. My teachers, emboldened by my newfound interest in learning, continually invite me to learn more and do my best. Football is still on hold, but I feel like I'm finally playing a game that matters.

Five months ago, right after my ill-fated injury, my friends' demeanor became icy and remote, although I couldn't fathom why. My teachers, in contrast, beckoned me close and invited me on a new learning journey. But despite their indubitably kind advances, even they recoiled when I drew near.

A few weeks later, I started to change my attitude vis-à-vis my newfound situation and determined to put my energy toward productive ends (i.e., homework). I wasn't enamored with school. I never had been. Nevertheless, I didn't abhor it either. I just preferred football.

My true turn of fate came when I started studying more and participating in class. I started to enjoy history class, and I grew interested in reading more. I discovered a volume of poems written by a fellow adventurer on the road of life, and I loved it. I ravenously devoured everything in the writer's *oeuvre*.

As the weeks flitted past, I found myself spending my time with a group of people who were quite different from me. They participated in theater and played instruments in marching band. They raised their hands in class when the teacher posed a question. Because of their auspicious influence, I started raising my hand too. I am no longer vapid, and I now have something to say.

I am certain that your school would benefit from my miraculous academic transformation, and I entreat you to consider my application to your fine institution. Accepting me to your university would be an unequivocally righteous decision.

College Essay Example C

It's 4 a.m. and I'm bent over my computer screen. In front of me is one of the photographs I intend to submit for the Charles Lewin Digital Photo Essay Competition. It is a silhouette shot of a tall, smiling woman – my mother – framed against the backdrop of a gorgeous red sunset. Though I'd used the whip-pan technique to give the photo the same dynamic, inspiring, whirlwind energy I associate with my mother, it's not quite right. I've been fiddling with the white balance and color pallet for hours, trying to capture the perfect amount of luminosity in my mother's eyes. At that moment, my mother herself comes in, asking why I'm up so late on a school night. When I show her the picture, her eyes light up in exactly the way I've captured in the photo. That photo essay, capturing the beauty of three generations of women in my family, went on to win me first place in the competition. And yet the moment that I shall carry with me forever is the one from 4 a.m. that night. The moment when my mother's eyes lit up in joy and wonder as she understood exactly what I was trying to say through my photography. In that moment, I knew for sure that I'd be chasing this feeling for the rest of my life.

Though that moment cemented my love for photography, I've been playing around with a camera since I was 5 years old, when my father first introduced me to his favorite hobby. I was a shy, quiet kid and photography allowed me to experience the world and communicate my feelings like I never could before. Most of our weekends were spent taking pictures, from micro nature photography on our camping trips to event photography for every community event. Even back then, I was constantly asking questions about why one picture looks better than another. I credit my father for helping me develop my photographic "eye". The training of those early years helped me develop my sense of aesthetic placements, framing, and positioning.

To this day, I am obsessed with learning about the technical side of photography. I have a natural analytical bent of mind that exists along-side my artistic vision; and so, I gravitate towards understanding exactly how aperture, depth of field, shutter speed, exposure, composition, and white balance can be used as a tool of artistic control in photography. My favorite way to unwind is to read books and online articles about photography and techniques I'm currently obsessed with. I also love experimenting with different styles of photography. Though art photography is my passion, I spent a couple of years as the staff photographer for my high school newspaper. This foray into the journalistic arena helped to broaden my horizons and consider the social impact of photography.

Lately, I've become passionately interested in the philosophy and psychology of photography. There are two books that inspired this journey - "The Art of Photography" by Bruce Barnbaum and "Studio Anywhere" by Nick Fancher. These books led me to think deeply about the artistic merit and social impact of photography and inspired me to sign up as a volunteer photographer at the local community center. I remember when an older lady, a little self-conscious about her appearance, asked me to take a photo of her in her evening dress at a fund-raising event. When I showed her the photo I took, her expression transformed from anxiety and discomfort to pride and confidence, just like my mother on that fateful Tuesday night. That's another moment of joy I'll carry with me forever.

Alfred Stieglitz once said - "In photography there is a reality so subtle that it becomes more real than reality." Every photographer has a vision of their own reality and the greatest joy I feel is when I successfully communicate this philosophy using my work. (648 words)

College Essay Example D

Man's Best Friend

I desperately wanted a cat. I begged my parents for one, but once again, my sisters overruled me, so we drove up the Thompson Valley Canyon from Loveland to Estes Park to meet our newest family member. My sisters had already hatched their master plan, complete with a Finding Nemo blanket to entice the pups. The blanket was a hit with all of them, except for one—the one who walked over and sat in my lap. That was the day that Francisco became a Villanova.

Maybe I should say he was *mine* because I got stuck with all the chores. As expected, my dog-loving sisters were nowhere to be found! My mom was “extra” with all the doggy gear. Cisco even had to wear these silly little puppy shoes outside so that when he came back in, he wouldn’t get the carpets dirty. If it was raining, my mother insisted I dress Cisco in a ridiculous yellow raincoat, but, in my opinion, it was an unnecessary source of humiliation for poor Cisco. It didn’t take long for Cisco to decide that his outerwear could be used as toys in a game of Keep Away. As soon as I took off one of his shoes, he would run away with it, hiding under the bed where I couldn’t reach him. But, he seemed to appreciate his ensemble more when we had to walk through snowdrifts to get his job done.

When my *abuela* was dying from cancer, we went in the middle of the night to see her before she passed. I was sad and scared. But, my dad let me take Cisco in the car, so Cisco cuddled with me and made me feel much better. It’s like he could read my mind. Once we arrived at the hospital, the fluorescent lighting made the entire scene seem unreal, as if I was watching the scene unfold through someone else’s eyes. My grandma lay calmly on her bed, smiling at us even through her last moments of pain. I disliked seeing the tubes and machines hooked up to her. It was unnatural to see her like this—it was so unlike the way I usually saw her beautiful in her flowery dress, whistling a Billie Holiday tune and baking snickerdoodle cookies in the kitchen. The hospital didn’t usually allow dogs, but they made a special exception to respect my grandma’s last wishes that the whole family be together. Cisco remained at the foot of the bed, intently watching *abuela* with a silence that seemed more effective at communicating comfort and compassion than the rest of us who attempted to offer up words of comfort that just seemed hollow and insincere. It was then that I truly appreciated Cisco’s empathy for others.

As I accompanied my dad to pick up our dry cleaner’s from Ms. Chapman, a family friend asked, “How’s Cisco?” before even asking about my sisters or me. Cisco is the Villanova family mascot, a Goldendoodle better recognized by strangers throughout Loveland than the individual members of my family.

On our summer trip to Boyd Lake State Park, we stayed at the Cottonwood campground for a breathtaking view of the lake. Cisco was allowed to come, but we had to keep him on a leash at all times. After a satisfying meal of fish, our entire family walked along the beach. Cisco and I led the way while my mom and sisters shuffled behind. Cisco always stopped and refused to move, looking back to make sure the others were still following. Once satisfied that everyone was together, he would turn back around and continue prancing with his golden boy curly locks waving in the chilly wind.

On the beach, Cisco “accidentally” got let off his leash and went running maniacally around the sand, unfettered and free. His pure joy as he raced through the sand made me forget about my AP Chem exam or my student council responsibilities. He brings a smile not only to my family members but everyone around him.

Cisco won’t live forever, but without words, he has impressed upon me life lessons of responsibility, compassion, loyalty, and joy. I can’t imagine life without him.

Word count: 701