

Seven Secrets for a Great College Essay

Writing college essays is very different from most of the writing you do in high school. Your audience isn't a teacher, and you are the subject of your essay.

These seven secrets will help guide you to an effective essay:

- **Grab attention, keep attention, end well.** Your essay should engage the reader from the first line, and never let go.
- **Show, don't tell.** Saying that you're confident (persistent, friendly, tall, etc.) usually isn't believable. Your actions, thoughts and writing style can reveal who you are.
- **Tell a story.** This isn't a school paper. Entertain and engage.
- **No selling.** It's obnoxious. Let your recommendations do that.
- **Be a human.** Write in your natural voice and allow your personality and perspective to come through. Let them see your humanity.
- **Take your time.** A quality essay takes thirty to sixty hours. It's best to spread that over many months—it makes it easier, and you have time to ponder and improve.
- **Get great support feedback.** Keep checking in with people as you come up with your story, write rough drafts, and craft a polished essay.

You'll know you're there when people who know you well can say "hey, this sounds like you, and I really see your personality and strengths in this."

And a special bonus secret: Have fun! This is a lot of work, but it can be a meaningful experience where you grow, learn, and produce something you can be proud of.

The Three Things You Have to Do

1. **Know who you are.** If you want your essay to show who you are, you'll have to do some personal exploration. It's not what most teens (or adults) spend much time on.
2. **Tell Your Story.** You have a story to tell. The topic doesn't have to be big; it just has to give a good picture of you.
3. **Write it Well.** A clear, easy-to-read, well-written essay will stand out. Take the time to make it shine.

Three Types of Content in All Great Essays

There's no formula for a great essay; each one is unique. They all contain three types of content, woven together and integrated into an engaging story:

1. **Stuff That Happened.** There are specific events, conversations, places...this is what gives the reader a sense of "oh, I'm in a place and time and can visualize what's going on." What were you (or others) doing and saying?
2. **Your In-the-Moment Experience.** What were you thinking and feeling? What was going through your head at the time of the event or action?
3. **Your After-the-Fact Analysis, Insights, and Perspective.** This is what you understand, think and feel *today* as you look back at the story and experience in your essay.

These three kinds of content work together in the essay—they aren't listed out like evidence. Read some of our sample essays to see how this works.

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