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Writing the Admissions Essay

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Landmark College. 3-17-2026.

College&CareerPathways2026

Overview

- **Importance of a Strong College Essay**
- **How do I show I'm exceptional?**
- **Strategies to get you started**
- **Writing prompts from the Common App**
- **Strategies to keep you going**
- **AI: Should I Use It?**
- **Scoring Your Essay**
- **Conclusion**

Importance of a Strong College Essay

- **What is the essay's role in your application?**
 - Most schools put the most weight on your numbers: your grades and your scores . But- selective colleges receive thousands applications from straight-A students with perfect SATs. How can you set yourself apart? **Your essay**, along with your extracurricular activities and letters of recommendation can show what makes you an exceptional candidate.

How do I show I'm exceptional?

- **Most importantly- believe in yourself and your uniqueness:**
 - Everyone's got a story.
- **Demonstrate your unique qualities:**
 - Highlight your strengths, interests, and perspectives that might not be captured elsewhere.
- **Show your personal growth:**
 - Reflect on the experiences, challenges, or accomplishments that shaped your character.
- **Articulate your goals and aspirations:**
 - Why you are drawn to a particular college? How their programs align with your future plans?
- **Write like a pro:**
 - Find your voice, present your ideas in a clear and engaging manner.

Strategies to get you started

- Start writing **months** before your essay is due
- Write about what you know- something important to you or a unique moment in your life
 - Some oft-considered themes: personal achievements, volunteer stories, immigration stories, sports-related obstacle or success, or overcoming hardship
- **It's not just WHAT you write but HOW you present it**
 - Don't just recount an incident—reflect on it! Describe what you learned from the experience, how it changed you, what new lesson you'll take with you into the future.
- Use the intro to hook the reader

(Common App) Writing prompts:

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Strategies to keep you going

- **Be authentic:** don't try to sound like someone else
- **Honesty is disarming- go deep:** sometimes it's easier to be brutally honest with someone you don't know, here's your chance!
- **Show Don't Tell**
- **Write Several Drafts**
- **Read It Out Loud:** reading your essay aloud helps uncover passages that sound clumsy, long-winded, or repetitious.
- **Set Your Essay Aside:** for a few days. Come back to it with fresh eyes.
- **How does it end?** Have you answered the question or prompt you posed at the start?

AI: Should I Use It?

- **Why not? Here's why:**

- **Lack of authenticity:** AI-generated essays lack personalization and unique perspective, appearing generic and inauthentic. AI tools are no match for the human voice.
- **It's counter-productive:** Students should understand the value of learning to write and think independently. Why fake it?
- **Detection tools:** Many colleges use AI detection software to identify essays written by AI, which can result in application rejection.
- **Ethical concerns:** Submitting an AI-written essay is considered academic fraud

AI: Should I Use It?

- **What the experts say:**
 - **Cornell:** *“Ethical uses of generative AI include researching colleges, brainstorming essay topics, and reviewing the grammar and spelling of your completed essays. Unethical uses include (but are not limited to) using generative AI to outline, draft, or write your essays.”*
 - **Caltech:** *“If you are still wondering whether your use of AI in crafting your application is ethical, ask yourself whether it would be ethical to have a trusted adult perform the same task you are asking of ChatGPT. Would a teacher be able to review your essay for grammatical and spelling errors? Of course! Would that same teacher write a draft of an essay for you to tweak and then submit? Definitely not.”*
 - **The Common App:** *“Fraud may occur in the following circumstances without limitation: ...Submitting plagiarized essays or other written or oral material, or intentionally misrepresenting as one’s own original work: (1) another person’s thoughts, language, ideas, expressions, or experiences or (2) the substantive content or output of an artificial intelligence platform, technology, or algorithm.”*

Scoring Your Essay: good

- **Does your essay:**
 - **Present engaging ideas linked by an insightful theme?**
 - **Act as a metaphor for a larger issue or a reflection on an important question?**
 - **Grab and maintain the reader's attention from the start?**
 - **Contain vivid details?**
 - **Make the reader think?**
 - **Have a cohesive conclusion contains a surprising or novel analysis?**

Scoring Your Essay: not so much

- **Are there spelling mistakes? Bad grammar?**
- **Does it lack a clearly developed, cohesive theme?**
- **Is your essay missing key details?**
- **Is your language boring and drab? -OR- Did you use overly-flowery prose and too many descriptors?**
- **Are your supporting details undeveloped -OR- numerous but not pertinent?**
- **Does the conclusion fail to wrap up what is learned by the writer?**

In Conclusion....

- **Be Original!** Your essay can make all the difference in your application
- **Be brave!** Showing vulnerability is a strength.
- **Write it yourself!** We want to hear your voice, not the robot overlords' or your mom's.
- **Remember to edit!** Your writing should be clean and concise.
- **Ask others to read your essay!** Make sure you're conveying what you wish to convey.
- **Be proud of yourself!** Know that in the end you've done the very best you can.

Some awesome resources

- College Essay Guy <https://www.collegeessayguy.com>
- The Princeton Review <https://www.princetonreview.com/college-advice>
- College Vine <https://www.collegevine.com/guidance>
- Admissions Checkup <https://admissionscheckup.com>
- Bright Horizons College Coach <https://blog.getintocollege.com>
- Time Magazine Article: *How the College Application Essay Became So Important* <https://time.com/6995064/college-admission-application-essay-history>