



Writing the College Application Personal Essay

If your student is applying to a four-year college, they will most likely have to write at least one personal essay. The personal essay is the main essay required in the Common App and most other major application systems. It aims to answer who are you and what do you value? And it's important. A recent survey shows that college admissions counselors weigh the personal essay more than standardized test scores and a personal essay can be the deciding factor in an admissions decision. Although most students will have to write various supplemental essays and answer school-specific questions, the Common App essay has a 650-word maximum and your choice of seven different prompts.

- 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.
- 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?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- 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?
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- 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.

In this *College and Career Corner*, we'll write you through some essay essentials and frequently asked questions to help get you on the right track for your personal essay and make your writing process easier.

Question 1 – How do I begin to write my essay? First, read through all the prompts and pick which one you'd like to answer. Make sure you understand the prompt and

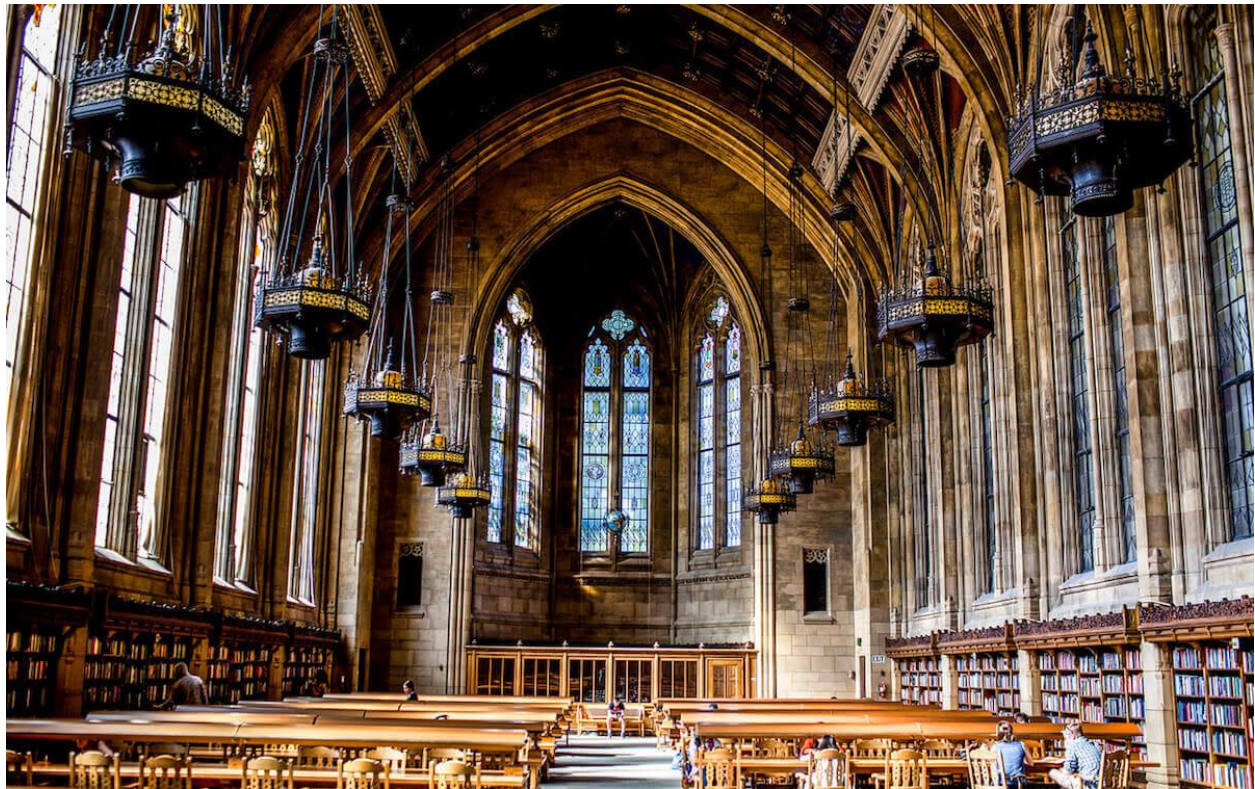


ST. JOHN'S
NORTHWESTERN
ACADEMIES

Writing the College Application Personal Essay

what it is asking you, specifically. Some essays will be similar but no two are exactly alike. It is important to make each essay prompt-specific. Then, start brainstorming ideas on possible topics.

Question 2 – How long should my essay be? It depends. The main Common App essay can be up to 650 words, while supplemental essays will vary between 250-650 words. While you may be able to reuse essays for schools with similar prompts, you should never repeat content for essays for the same school. Make sure each essay (main or supplemental) is on a different topic, value or aspect of your character.



Suzzallo Library at the University of Washington

Question 3 – What should my essay be about? You – your character, experiences, how you've grown over time, and things that have shaped you into who you are today. Learn to be vulnerable and share things about yourself that go beyond just the surface.



Writing the College Application Personal Essay

Question 4 – What are college admissions officers looking for? They are hoping that your essay will answer the following questions – Who is this person? Will they contribute something of value to our campus? And can this person write?

Question 5 – How will my essay be evaluated? Each school has its own criteria. Some may more strongly assess your writing ability, while others are more interested in your actual story. But both are important – your goal is to have a good story that is well told and grammatically correct.

Question 6 – What kind of structure should I follow? There are two common structures – Narrative and Montage. Narrative is the most commonly used when telling a story (introduction, main paragraphs, conclusion) and a Montage is a technique that involves using separate elements, ideas or stories to create a new whole. Just remember, this is not an academic or scholarly essay. This will not have a thesis, but you will still need an introduction, main paragraphs and conclusion.



No matter what prompt, topic or structure you pick, remember that the goal of the essay is to provide colleges with an insight into you are – aside from grades and test scores. It is your opportunity to have a conversation with them directly and let them know about important lessons you have learned or to showcase the things that you value and have shaped you and what you will bring to their classrooms and the larger campus community.

Once you have picked your prompt and topic, begin with an outline. As you outline and add more details, you may find that your topic changes or that your story is better suited to answer a different prompt. Change is okay! Just remember that no matter how or what you write on, that it will provide insight into the lessons you've learned or the experiences you've gone through that have fundamentally shaped your character and who you are today. Remember, this is your opportunity to show your personality, share your experiences and detail what is most important to you to the colleges you are interested in attending. If you have any questions, want examples, are looking for brainstorming exercises or need help writing and editing your essay, visit the College and Career Counselor, Ms. Catherine Lewis, in room 116 or reach out via email at clewis@sjnacademies.org or call 262-646-7283.