

Your College Personal Statement

Dig Deep, Stand Out Succeed

"YOUR ESSAY REVEALS SOMETHING IMPORTANT ABOUT YOU THAT YOUR GRADES AND TEST SCORES CAN'T—YOUR PERSONALITY. IT CAN GIVE ADMISSION OFFICERS [AND SCHOLARSHIP OFFICERS] A SENSE OF WHO YOU ARE, AS WELL AS SHOWCASING YOUR WRITING SKILLS." – THE COLLEGE BOARD

What Are They Looking For?

Purpose of the Personal Statement

Key Elements in the Essay

How to Structure Your Story

Brainstorming

What is Your Passion?

Mind Mapping

Bringing Your Passion into Focus

Drafting, Writing, Polishing

8 Essay Tips

Strong First-Line Starts

Sample Essays

Keeping a Personal Journal

What Are They Looking For?

Purpose of the Personal Statement

- Colleges and universities will use your admission and scholarship statement to help evaluate your writing skill.
- They will learn more about you as a person, your character, motivations, passions, hopes, dreams, sense of humor, challenges, and the life lessons you have learned.
- This is your chance to make a human connection to the reader on the admission team, to directly tell your story.
- You may show your character strengths and skills and explain any apparent shortcomings in a way you cannot in other parts of your application.

Key Elements in the Essay

- Colleges want to hear your authentic voice. Choose an idea and make it a “snapshot” of you – not everything about you.
- Show, don’t tell. Be vivid. Be interesting. Be specific. Show them your best writing.
- Stay on topic, stay organized, stay focused.
- If you are answering a specific essay question for a school, make sure you follow directions carefully and understand and directly address the topic.

How to Structure Your Story

- Brainstorm your passions and then Mind Map your top three ideas – which ideas are best? Which ones do you have more supporting details for?
- Choose your best Mind Map and write a sentence or two or more for each subtopic. Work quickly. Don’t worry about complete thoughts, about spelling or grammar. Get as many ideas down as you can.
- Create an outline of these sentences and supporting ideas and details – thinking ‘beginning, middle, end.’ Put some ideas aside if they are not working or are not strong (but save them). Add in other ideas as they occur to you.
- Develop your outline into a rough draft. Show it to others for help in editing.
- Try writing a few introductions and a strong first-line start. Hook the reader. Make the opening an eye opener.
- Write a meaningful conclusion that ties into what you have learned and the qualities that you want to emphasize about you. Leave a positive final impression.
- Draft and redraft. Choose words that convey a mature, positive attitude and words that are natural to you and your voice. Pay attention to your tone. Proofread. Check spelling and grammar. No texting abbreviations! Show it to others for help.
- Polish again and again. This essay will take many revisions. Allow yourself enough time for this process. Don’t leave it until the last minute. Submit an error-free, professional essay. Be proud of your story and your work!

Brainstorming

What is Your Passion?

- What surprised you today?
- What did you see that was beautiful?
- What are things that pop into your head for no good reason, an “obsession” that provokes, disturbs, inspires or pulls at you? For example: songs, animals, places, dreams, arguments, food, fears, movies, memories, talents, metaphors, heroes, things you love, hate, need, crave, ...etc.
- What are things you are good at? What are things you are bad at?
- What are specific moments that stand out in your life? Snapshots?
- Where would you be found on a Saturday night?
- What is your favorite place in the world?
- Share a favorite childhood memory.
- If a friend were describing you, what would they say about you?
- If you could choose one super-hero strength, what would it be and why?

Mind Mapping

Bringing Your Passion into Focus

Draw a Circle in the Center of Your Page. Drawing from the Brainstorming exercise, in the circle write an activity, talent, volunteer, job, or extra-curricular experience, a future goal, a passion, interest, or unique skill, strength, hobby, etc. There is no wrong answer. It's about you!

Ask Questions About What You Placed in Your Center Circle and as you think of answers, around the outside of the circle, write key words or phrases that will trigger your memory about what you were thinking when you answered these questions:

- Do you volunteer with this? If so, how long? Tell more about that.
- Why is it important to you?
- When did this start?
- Did someone influence this in your life?
- Tell more about the time you spend thinking, doing, teaching, learning about your center circle.
- Does this idea play any role in your future goals, study, plans?
- What would your family, friends, teachers, others say about you in relation to this theme?
- What have you learned about yourself from this experience, talent, hobby, skill...?
- Have you studied, practiced, worked at becoming better at something?
- Where would you be found doing this?
- What adjectives describe anything about how this makes you feel?

Your Mind Map May Take Any Form and ideas can lead to other ideas. After you have played with your map for a bit take a look at it. What ideas stand out to you as interesting, unique, part of your story? Are there words or a story that catch your attention? Highlight these and try writing a few sentences about the ideas. These are the sentences that you will use when you write the first draft of your essay. Have fun with this!

After Building Several Mind Maps, put them away for a few days and then come back to them. Which one has stayed with you as being interesting and compelling? Work on developing these ideas into a full essay draft, using descriptive, engaging language to tell the reader a “slice” of a story about who you are, what you care about, how you address challenges, find joy, interact with others, and plan for your future. This is your story and your voice! You are the expert. Enjoy the process.

Drafting, Writing, Polishing

8 Essay Tips (From bigfuture.collegeboard.org)

- 1. Get started by brainstorming.** Starting the essay can be the hardest part. Brainstorming about your personality traits and defining your strengths is a good place to begin.
- 2. Let your first draft flow.** After you've gathered your notes, create an outline to organize your essay and decide where you want examples to appear. Now you're ready to write your first draft. Don't worry about making it perfect. Just get your ideas flowing and your thoughts down on paper. You'll fix mistakes and improve the writing in later drafts.
- 3. Develop three essay parts.** *Introduction:* One paragraph that introduces your essay. *Body:* Several paragraphs explaining the main idea with examples. *Conclusion:* One paragraph that summarizes and ends the essay.
- 4. Be specific.** Give your essay focus by figuring out how the question relates to your personal qualities and then taking a specific angle. Make sure everything you write supports that viewpoint.
- 5. Find a creative angle.** Katherine, a college freshman, had to describe why she would make a good Reed College student for that school's essay. "I am a huge fan of Beat Generation writers, and many of the West Coast Beat writers attended Reed," she says. "So I related my love for writing and the Beats to why I would be a great fit for the school."
- 6. Be honest.** The essay question might ask you about your best quality, an experience that shaped you or the reason you want to attend a certain college. Don't be tempted to write what you think the admission officers want to hear; answer the question honestly.
- 7. Get feedback.** Show your draft to family, friends or teachers. Ask if it makes sense and sounds like you. Consider their feedback and make changes, but keep your voice. High school senior Dana warns, "Make sure the essay is in your own voice. If at some point you read over your essay and you hear your mother's voice, something is wrong."
- 8. Proofread and make corrections.** Read your essay over carefully to check for typos and spelling and grammar errors. It's best to ask someone who hasn't seen it yet to take a look as well. They're likely to see mistakes you won't catch.

Strong First-Line Starts

Who would have thought that a breath – a glorious, oxygen-enriched breath – would not only sustain my life, but shape my character as well? Who would have thought that this essential part of survival would not only allow me to do the activities that I love, but also teach me the value of passion and persistence?

From the Coliseum to Wrigley Field, all athletes have had their own arena. My own backyard has transformed into my battleground.

Coal choked my lungs as I stood poised. Adrenaline flowed through my veins, and I was off. I had just entered the human-sized game of Frogger: I was crossing a street in Beijing, China.

“Battle – so little when you arrive, so big when you leave.” Scrawled in black Sharpie on a piece of driftwood, these words hang beneath the weathered, black cowboy hat in the corner of a cook shack far from civilization. And so it has been with me since the day I first arrived at Battle...so many years ago.

I am peering over the edge, gaping at the wide expanse of air between the ledge and the surface of the water. I wonder how long it will take for my body to break the surface, to plunge into the dark blue lake below.

Two hundred lightning strikes in a forty-five minute drive; the car is swerving on the slick, clay road. . . we are in four-wheel drive; just my sisters, my mother, myself – I am seven years old – it is dark. A lone, white house is the only visible structure – our destination.

I sit in my inflatable chair surrounded by my family and friends, reeking of bug spray, scanning the opposite valley side for black bears. Our top tally is six bears at once. We had just finished a long day of marmot surveying, when we hear a loud rustling behind us. I quickly jump out of my chair to see two mountain goats venturing into our campsite. Without thought, I give a yeti-like battle cry that sends the white beasts scrambling up the rocky slope.

To my mother, it was a terrible waste of a garden plot, with all those sticks, rocks, and torn-up topsoil. To my father, it was a great hindrance to lawn mowing. To my ten year old brother, it was just another place for him to stomp through as he pleased. But to me, it embodied my imagination come alive. I loved my medieval fortress, with its walls of earth, stones, and wood thatched roofing, a moat, and a fragile stone tower. It meant the world to me, this medieval world in miniature.

A loud concert for a famous Korean rap group is just about the last place most would look for a short, black girl with crazy curls, but that is where you would find me.

Sample College Application Essays

Please write an essay (250-650 words) on the topic selected. You can type directly into the box, or you can paste text from another source.

Every day when I arrive home from school I am welcomed back by the smell of a sumptuous dinner. As I walk through the door, the aroma of rosemary and red wine reduction overwhelms my senses and I am met with the sight of my apron-clad dad toiling over an open flame stove. Whether it's the spice infused Saag Gosht, hearty Beouf Bourguignon or the comforting Duck Provençale, my family sits down to a mouthwatering dinner on a daily basis. But our enjoyment of our nighttime meal doesn't end with the food. Dinner became the place where I developed myself as a conversationalist, an inquisitor and a learner. It's at the dinner table, with my parents on either side of me, and an amazing meal in front of me, that I learn to appreciate not only food, but also discussion.

The table is where I become most animated. My mouth moves a mile a minute, my hands gesture wildly and I all but forget the Saag on my plate as I explain facts that become even more interesting as I share them over dinner. I remember one particular evening when cultural anthropology became the topic of conversation. Earlier that day I had watched anthropologist Jared Diamond's TEDTalk "Why Societies Collapse" in English class. Diamond detailed a five-point framework, citing social, environmental and ideological barriers as common factors in the collapse of societies. He applied his framework to past examples such as the Greenland Norse and the Easter Islanders and I understood why these societies perished as cultures. I became enraptured by the complexities and nuances of cultural theory. This excitement bled into the night and my eagerness to share my discoveries with my parents stemmed from a curiosity as to what they would contribute to my quickly expanding perspective. My dad's background in political economics and my mom's knowledge of history consistently added new layers to already captivating topics.

Sometimes our conversations are not always as harmonious. Due to a generational gap between my dad and me, we sometimes don't see eye to eye on issues concerning women. Possibly because he is an older dad he retains paternalistic and subtly sexist attitudes. We occasionally find ourselves arguing as I try to share my feelings regarding women and power. Through dinner conversations I have learned how to craft a strong argument and stand by my opinions. My dad is proud of being a consummate educator, and it is very difficult for him to acknowledge that some of his views may be wrong. In addition, his skills in debate are far superior to my own. These aspects make our disagreements even more intellectually challenging. When we debate, not only do I have to stand resolute in my beliefs, but I am also forced to create arguments that are on par with his well thought-out points. Most importantly, the process of challenging my dad's views has given me my own voice as a developing debater and feminist.

I acknowledge that I am exceptionally lucky to have parents who choose to treat me as an equal in discussion and, in doing so, allow me to grow as a thinker and conversationalist. From early on, my parents fostered an environment at the dinner table where I feel welcome to share my new insights as well as form opinions without the fear of embarrassment. I won't be returning home to my father cooking a wonderful dinner or sitting down to enjoy it, with my parents on either side of me, for very much longer. And no meal cooked on campus will compare to the

feasts I've had with my family. But I am excited for college where I can create a new kind of "dinner table"- one where I will be surrounded by like-minded peers, all as eager as I am to converse, debate and grow as inquisitive intellectuals.

What factors influenced your decision to apply to Barnard College and why do you think the College would be a good match for you? (250 word limit)

I love learning and I've grown up in environments where I'm encouraged to explore my interests. I argue for social justice, express myself through fashion and I am astounded by the cosmos. My global travel and my volunteer work have shaped my view of the world and my home community. At Barnard I can learn new things, focus on what I love and reach my true potential as a thinker and leader.

I've never been so excited about a college as when I read about Barnard's general requirements. The "Nine Ways" would enable me to explore everything I'm interested in, and more. I've long admired Barnard's astronomy department and I'm excited to explore this intricate science as well as continue to develop my understanding of cultures.

I learn best through conversation with others who are inquisitive and motivated to learn. While visiting Barnard I sat in on a freshman seminar and witnessed the small classes and deep discussion in action. I knew from then on that was exactly the learning environment I craved.

Being at a college that values women as leaders and learners empowers us to strive for our best. I'm eager to discover how leadership develops at the university level and I aspire to become an Athena Scholar.

I appreciate how Barnard takes advantage of its location and makes the city an extension of the school. I am excited to discover what only New York City has to offer and make it my own.

Alumna and writer Anna Quindlen says that she "majored in unafraid" at Barnard. Tell us about a time when you majored in unafraid. (250 word limit)

The general attitude towards Student Voice at my school has always been skepticism. From failed Spirit Weeks to disappointing dances of years past, nothing we organized ever seemed to contribute to students experiencing SOTA as a real community. As the newly elected President of the school, this stance initially undermined my confidence. However I've realized being president is not just about a title and accomplishing an outcome; it's about consistently demonstrating true leadership.

As President, I'm pushed to be unafraid of smoothing out interpersonal tensions, and challenging team members to finish what they've committed to. As I do this I risk social discomfort, however it's worth it to try to cultivate an environment where each person feels like they have a voice and can bring valuable skills to the table.

I've also chosen to confront my fears by initiating new programs, such as the ArtCity Series. This program is a monthly community event featuring a variety of artists showcasing the talent at SOTA. By sharing ownership of this event, the entire student body is united and committed to its success. We recently hosted our first show to an amazing turnout, which confirmed I was on the right track. This success gave me the reassurance I needed that taking a risk and trying something completely new was worthwhile. Being President has shown me that while I will encounter challenges and uncertainties throughout my life, I can enjoy success by trusting my instincts and remaining unafraid.

Pick one woman in history or fiction to converse with for an hour and explain your choice. What would you talk about? (250 word limit)

I've always loved Jane Austen; her novels have shaped my view of love and her characters inspire me to be clever and ambitious. What started as a childhood reverence grew into an appreciation of her as a role model? I'd love to talk with her about her life, beliefs and ideals.

Austen's books expressed her radical and feminist thinking. She valued women in a way few did in her time. She wrote strong female characters because she knew it was a woman's true nature to be witty, keen and driven. Austen challenged society by introducing bold characters, who valued their individuality and fellow women, more than the expectation that marriage was the primary goal.

She rejected the only marriage proposal she was offered because she valued her personal ideals over her society's expectations. She lived in an era when it was expected and imperative for a woman to marry a man who could financially support her. Despite this norm, Austen challenged society in favor of her own ideals, namely that nothing was worse than marrying without affection.

I'd like to ask her how she had the courage to resist these customary attitudes and hear her perspective on the state of women in today's society. I'd ask whether she believes women can ever truly be autonomous and free from harmful norms. As someone who values making my own mark in society, I'm curious whether she is proud of the effect she's made on my generation despite the compromises she made.

Keeping a Personal Journal

Try journaling daily, roughly a short paragraph a day. This is just meant to be fun, to get the writing juices flowing, don't worry about grammar, spelling, complete sentences, or topic.

Metaphor Game

Make a list of concrete nouns, representing things you care about, or just nouns. For example: soccer, light bulb, piano, college, sleep... Then make a list of abstract nouns: grit, optimism, learning, solidarity, responsibility, integrity, or other words love, trust... Have students (may work as teams) pick one word from each list and make a sentence that shows why they are alike: Love is like a light bulb: you can turn it off and on.

Obsession List

Brainstorm an obsession list – things that make you stop and notice, that catch your attention, occupy your daydreams. This may have some sparks of your story.

Free Association

Choose an object to look at in the classroom, in one-minute write as many things as you can about that object. Share your list with another person. What things were the same about your list, what were different? Helps students develop their own personal vocabulary.

GOOGLE THIS

bigfuture.collegeboard

the choice

college navigator nyt

thewashboard

scholarshipjunkies

collegegreenlight