



WRITING AN EXCEPTIONAL  
COLLEGE ENTRANCE ESSAY

A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE



**Doorway  
to College**<sup>TM</sup>  
Foundation

# ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	1
Step 1. Getting Ready: Prewriting	4
Step 2. Putting Pen to Paper: Drafting	17
Step 3. Polishing Your Work: Editing	27
You're On Your Way	35





# INTRODUCTION

You have worked hard throughout your academic career. You've maintained good grades and participated in extracurricular activities that developed your talents and leadership skills. You've served your community as a volunteer. You've done your best on your college admissions exams. You've amassed reference letters from teachers, coaches, counselors, and community members who sing your praises. One task remains — one really important, can't-rest-yet task





that could mean the difference between a college of your choice and the college of your dreams: the entrance essay.

Whether it is the essay for the Common Application or the supplemental essays and shorter written responses required by many institutions, one or more samples of your writing will be required for most college and university applications. These writing samples are evidence of your writing ability and your potential contribution to campus life — both academically and socially. The more competitive the institution, the more importance it will place on your writing sample.

Perhaps you feel confident. You've always loved to write. How hard can it be? Simply structure the essay as you've been instructed, toss in a little razzle-dazzle, and ... *voila!*

But look around you. Whether you realize it or not, thousands of students are clamoring for the same dream you hold. They have accomplished all you have and maybe even more.

When an admissions officer works her way through a stack of applications, she may see very little that distinguishes one student from another. Stellar exam scores? Check. Soaring GPA? Check. Campus leadership positions? Check.

In fact, a large percentage of applicants may be capable of handling the level of coursework at the institution, and many who are rejected may be as qualified as those who get in.

With so many applicants looking equally impressive, how can you stand out from the crowd? Your essay. It's the one place where

**“The applicant should take this opportunity to share with readers information about their hopes, life experiences, aspirations, and ambitions. The personal statement should not be a repeat of what has been presented in the application; rather it should be an opportunity to provide valuable personal insight. We ask that the applicant take the time to be reflective, think critically, and honestly find their own voice. The personal statement should enhance the reader's understanding of the applicant and the context of their experiences.”**

**— Mae Brown, Assistant Vice Chancellor of Admissions & Enrollment Services at University of California at San Diego**

you can truly show what makes you special. It can be the factor that ultimately determines whether an applicant wins a place in the freshman class — or not.

For some students, the admissions essay can be daunting. Writing for class assignments is one thing, but writing about yourself — and trust us, no matter what the prompt says, the topic is *you* — can be a challenge. Whether you find it difficult to sing your own praises without sounding conceited, or whether you struggle to articulate the qualities that make you unique, you are not alone.

That's where this book comes in. We will walk you through the process of crafting an admissions essay that shows you are a one-of-a-kind, three-dimensional person, not just a name on an application. From analyzing the prompt and brainstorming ideas; to drafting your essay; to revising, copyediting, and proofreading, we'll be with you every step of the way.

So, what's the secret to writing an exceptional, entrance-winning essay? It all comes down to you.





## STEP 1

# GETTING READY: PREWRITING

Colleges that require an entrance essay to determine admission will present a variety of writing topics to students. They may ask you to speak to your intellectual pursuits, a circumstance in your life that required courage, or maybe even your view of some important historical event. No matter what the prompt, there will be one constant: Colleges want to learn about *you*. They want to get a sense of what kind of



person will be roaming the halls of their campus for the next four years if they decide to admit you.

Successful college entrance essays do more than just shine; they display important information about you, such as the following:

- Your personal statement
- A word portrait of you
- A glimpse of your beliefs and worldview
- Your unique life story
- Your sense of integrity
- Your intellectual curiosity and passion for learning
- What makes your heart sing
- What struggles you've overcome
- What makes you distinct from others
- What unique perspective you will bring to the table

It's not necessary to have completed original scientific research or started your own nonprofit to win a seat in the freshman class. College admissions officers are simply seeking ambitious, intellectually curious young adults who will bring something

**College admissions officers are simply seeking ambitious, intellectually curious young adults who will bring something special to their campus environment.**





special to their campus environment. It's your job to convince them that they really need you.

Keep in mind that essays by the thousands pour into colleges and universities across the nation every year. Sitting at the other end of that onslaught are tired, overwhelmed readers who must sift through a mountain of paper — or terabytes of electronic submissions — and find the few that make them sit up and take notice. They're looking for the essays that stand out like diamonds in the rock. Helping you to write an essay that is your very own sparkling gem is the goal of this book. So, let's get started.

**“The truth is, any great piece of writing is preceded by hours and hours of thinking. Have more respect for the power of words than to spit them out without any real forethought.”**  
—Stephen King

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PLANNING

You probably wouldn't start out on a trip without first doing at least some planning. So why would you begin writing your college admissions essay without first planning what you will say?

Before you write, do a little bit of prewriting — studying the prompt, gathering ideas, and organizing them. It will make the writing process go smoothly and efficiently so you end up with your best-possible essay.







## LET'S TALK ABOUT PROMPTS

College entrance essay requirements come in all shapes and sizes. Most colleges or universities will likely ask applicants to write in response to a prompt.

Some prompts may focus on a concept that seems foreign to you, such as a statement about scientific inquiry or a quote from a Shakespearean tragedy. It's easy to feel a little nervous here, especially if you are uncertain or ill-informed about the subject matter.

Most important to remember is that the goal of the essay is for the reader — otherwise known as the college admissions counselor — to learn more about you. Pay close attention: The assignment will ask you to insert your own life experiences and beliefs into your treatment of the topic. This is where you need to find a way to shine a bright light on yourself, your values, and your achievements, both personal and educational.

Some institutions require one or more essays in addition to the one submitted with the Common Application. Some may also allow you to submit musical recordings, artworks, and other artifacts that demonstrate your talents and abilities. Read the application requirements for each school carefully so as not to overlook any of them.

**The goal of the essay is for the reader to learn more about you.**





## THE COMMON APPLICATION ESSAY

As of this writing, more than 500 colleges and universities accept the Common Application ([www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org)), which includes an essay component. In recent years, topics have included the following:

- The story of a personal background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful that your application would be incomplete without it
- An incident or time when you experienced failure
- A time when you challenged a belief or idea
- A problem you've solved or would like to solve
- A place or environment where you are perfectly content
- An accomplishment or event that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood

The prompts and essay guidelines (including maximum essay length) are reviewed annually; check [www.commonapp.org](http://www.commonapp.org) for the latest updates.

## SUPPLEMENTAL ESSAYS

Required by many colleges and universities, supplemental essays and short-answer questions can be about almost anything imaginable. Some may be fairly predictable — asking students to comment on a quotation, describe career plans, or tell why they want to attend the particular school. Others may be more novel, such as “Design a course you would like to take,” “Write a letter to a prospective roommate,” or “Tell what makes you happy.”

Then there are the truly “uncommon prompts,” such as “Tell us your favorite joke and try to explain the joke without ruining it,” “What’s so odd about odd numbers?” and “How do you feel about Wednesdays?”

“We ask you these questions precisely because we love, love, love seeing where your brain goes when you’re asked a question you’ve

never thought about before,” says Grace Chapin, Senior Assistant Director of Admissions for the Pacific Northwest and Director of Transfer Admissions at the University of Chicago. “These are the kinds of intellectual encounters you’ll have on our campus every day; it’s rare that a professor will ask you to explain how your loss in the big sports game affected you, but very common for someone to ask you a question you’ve never encountered, and to see how you work with it.”

## ANALYZING THE PROMPT

Despite the many ways in which they are posed, most college essay prompts tend to ask one of the following three questions:

- **Why us?** Why do you want to attend this particular institution?
- **Who are you?** Tell us a little bit about yourself.
- **Talk to me about something interesting.** Show us how you think by describing your views on a topic or issue.



Study the prompt to make sure you understand what it is asking for. You must directly address all parts of the prompt. Begin by underlining the key words, then break down the parts of the prompt and restate them in the form of a “to-do” checklist. For example, here is a recent essay question from the Common Application:

Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

Let’s underline the key words in this prompt.

Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?

This prompt has three parts. Let’s restate them in the form of a list:

- Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content.
- What do you do or experience there?
- Why is it meaningful to you?

When you have finished your first draft of the essay, return to your list and check off the items to make sure all is covered.

## ACTIVITY: ANALYZE THE PROMPT

Once you have decided upon the prompt to which you will respond, write it down in your journal, underlining the key words. Then write the prompt in the form of a to-do checklist.



# DECIDING WHAT TO WRITE ABOUT

If you've been given a choice of prompts, your first job is to decide which one to respond to. Once that decision is made, you'll need to select a specific topic to write about in response to the prompt. If you're having trouble making either of these choices, the following two activities can help.

## ACTIVITY: WARM-UP JOURNALING

Take out a notebook and start brainstorming ideas in response to one or more of the following questions:

- What are you passionate about? What are you excited about learning?
- If money were no object, how would you spend your time?
- What makes you unique?
- Describe an experience that changed your perspective on things.
- Take a trip down memory lane. Read old essays, poetry, and personal writings that will remind you of the values you hold dear.
- If you had to write an essay for the NPR program "This I Believe" segment ([www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html](http://www.npr.org/thisibelieve/about.html)), what would you write about?
- If you had to describe yourself in three words, what would they be?





- Draw a self-portrait on a piece of paper. (This doesn't have to be expertly drawn; a stick figure is fine.) Then cover the rest of the page with words and phrases that describe you.
- Write yourself a letter to be opened in the future. What do you want to say to your 20-something self? Your 30-something self? What do you hope you will have experienced and accomplished by then?
- Imagine a party is being thrown for your 65th birthday by friends, family, and colleagues who have known you over the years. What do you hope they will say about you at this event celebrating your life?

This activity can be a messy process that includes doodling, note-taking, list-making, and free-writing. Write nonstop for a set period of time, say, 20 minutes. Don't worry about punctuation, capitalization, or grammar, and don't judge any of the ideas yet. Just get them down on paper, letting one idea lead to the next, and the next. You can decide later which ones to keep and which to toss.

**“Knowing yourself is the beginning of all wisdom.”**  
— Aristotle

***TIP: We recommend you do this activity by hand, not on your computer. You are more likely to free your mind up to creative thinking in this way. You may wish to purchase a notebook or journal specifically for recording and processing your thoughts and ideas during the college application process.***



## ACTIVITY: CROWD SOURCING

Now it's time to seek input from your "tribe."

- Talk with a parent, trusted friend, or sibling who can help jog your memory of recent or compelling events in your life that may fit well within the prompt.
- Ask friends and family to weigh in on what they feel are your most outstanding qualities. Take it a step further and urge them to provide you with examples.

- Talk with your teachers, coaches, job supervisors, and other adults who have worked closely with you over your high school career. What do they see as your greatest strengths and promise for the future?

Walk through these simple steps, and then settle on a writing topic — one you can write about with confidence and infuse with warmth and authenticity.

And that's it. Don't worry about the rest — yet.



**“Everybody is original, if he tells the truth, if he speaks from himself. But it must be from his *true* self and not from the self he thinks he *should* be. ”**

**— Brenda Ueland, *If You Want to Write: A Book about Art, Independence and Spirit***





## THE SECRET SAUCE

Intellectual curiosity and a passion for learning is the “secret sauce” of success — not only for your admissions essay but also for the rest of your academic and professional career. One key trait you will want to demonstrate in your essay is your curiosity and love for learning. This is not something that can be faked. (If you feel this is an area where you need to grow, read “4 Reasons Why Curiosity is Important and How to Develop It” by Donald Latumahina, at [Lifehack.org](https://www.lifehack.org).)

## DON'T BE AFRAID TO TAKE RISKS

Your essay will be one among thousands that admissions officers must sift through. It's common for students to be afraid of taking risks on a task that could have such an influence on their future. It may seem like a good time to play it safe and go for a conventional approach. If

**“I have no special talents. I am only passionately curious.”  
—Albert Einstein**

there's any time to write a standard, five-paragraph essay, this would be it, right?

Maybe not. Consider that the vast majority of applicants are probably thinking the same thing you are right now. How will you stand out above the crowd? While there is nothing wrong with the five-paragraph essay, if this approach is not the best match for your ideas, don't limit yourself. It is okay to get creative and take a different tack. (Do limit yourself to the prescribed word count, however!)

Consider a student we'll call Claudia. As she struggled to come up with a topic for her admissions essay, her English teacher asked, “What do you love?” He had observed that she had a passion for poetry, particularly the work of Alan Ginsberg. Claudia decided to write a poem in the model of Ginsberg's poem “Howl,” which begins with the line, “I saw the best minds of my generation destroyed by madness...” Her poem was well written and reflected her views on society, her generation, and her place in both. Her creative submission won her a seat in the freshman class of a very selective university, her first choice.



Taking risks also means a willingness to be vulnerable. It's difficult to show who you really are if you aren't willing to open up about yourself. Yet revealing your true self to strangers can feel scary for many students. Tapping into and sharing your own creative voice takes courage.

Think of it this way: You are in search of the college that is right for you. If they don't like the real you, then that college probably isn't the best fit. So take the leap and let your true colors shine through in your writing.

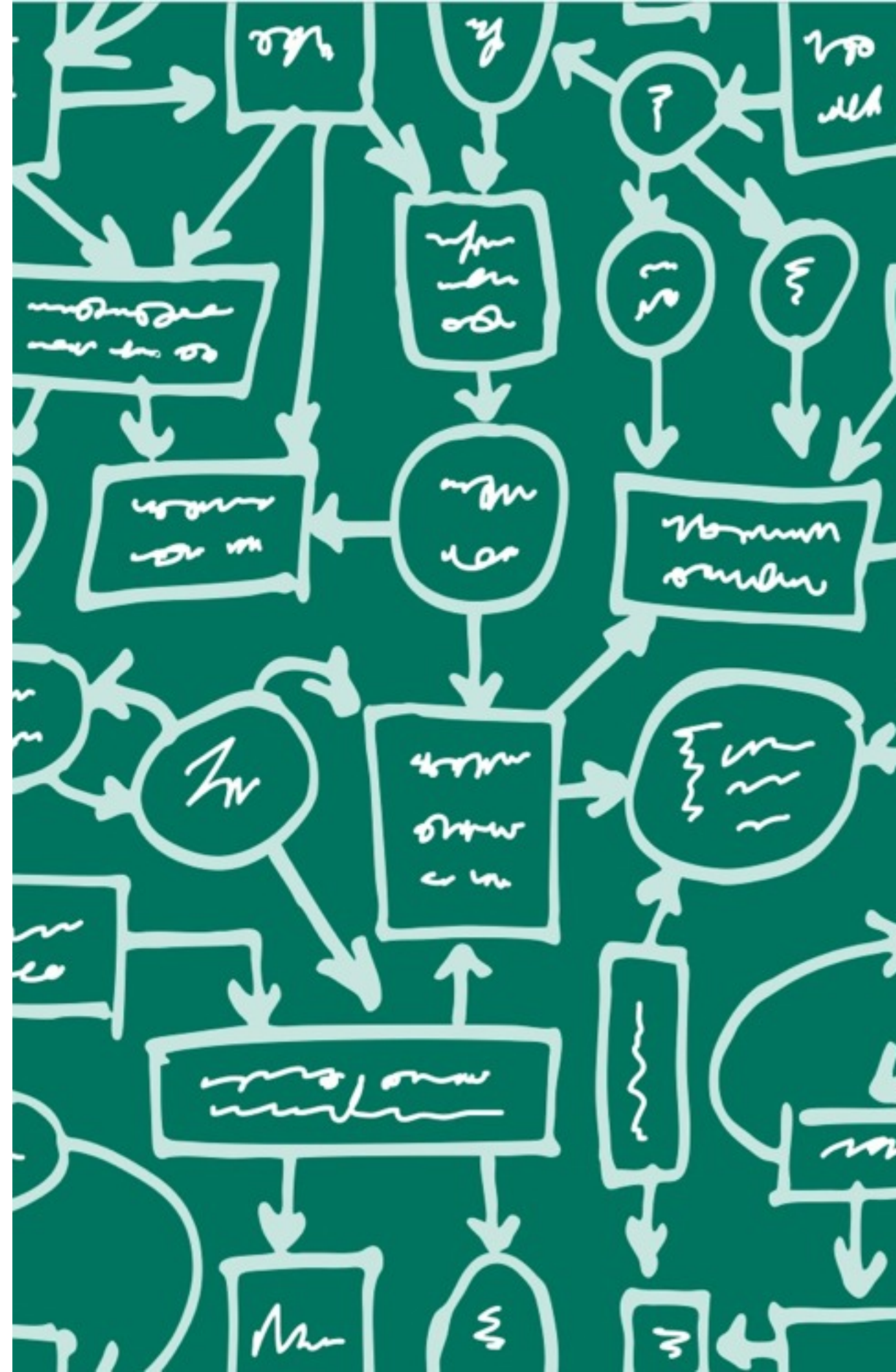
Don't write what you think the audience wants to hear. If you do, your essay will be among the hundreds that sound the same. Rather, write from who you really are, using your own distinct voice.

## GET ORGANIZED

You're all set. You have received your prompt. You have finally settled on a topic, and you feel ready to begin.

As an example, let's say the prompt notes that President Abraham Lincoln experienced a series of failures before successfully winning the presidency in 1864. You are then asked to describe an instance in which you failed and tell what you learned from the experience.

**Make sure you have a general road map showing where your essay is going and how you plan to get there.**





Building on the theme of overcoming obstacles, you decide to write about your numerous attempts to make the high school basketball team. The experience was challenging. You were cut during your freshman and sophomore years. Eventually — despite the early disappointments — with a lot of practice and a timely growth spurt, you made the team. But, more than that, you learned valuable lessons in humility, hard work, and perseverance.

With such a fabulous narrative, all you need to do now is commit the story to the page. Easy, right? Not always.

**“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”**

**“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.**

**—Lewis Carroll, *Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland***



Once you have narrowed down your topic, consider the following steps:

- **Continue brainstorming.** Look back at the ideas you gathered in the earlier activities, and use a highlighter to mark the ones that best pertain to the topic you've chosen. Then continue brainstorming to flesh out these ideas and go deeper.
- **Give thought to how you will organize your essay.** Yes, colleges want to hear about you. But they also will give consideration to whether or not you presented your ideas in a compelling and cohesive manner. Don't feel that you have to choose one particular formula. There are many ways to organize an effective essay.
- **Sketch an outline or graphic organizer in which you organize your ideas.** Hash out the main ideas of each paragraph with just a simple line or two for direction.
- **Be sure that you have enough reasons and examples** to support your topic by enumerating them on the page.
- **Decide how you will start your essay.** Then jot down what details you plan to share in the body of the piece. And, finally, how do you plan to wrap up your masterpiece.

## ACTIVITY: GATHER AND ORGANIZE YOUR IDEAS

In your notebook, continue gathering ideas that fit the prompt and writing topic you have chosen. Then, continuing in your notebook or turning to a computer document, arrange your ideas in the form of an outline or graphic organizer.

How detailed your outline or graphic organizer is at this stage is up to you. Just make sure you have at least a general road map showing where your essay is going and how you plan to get there.

Now that you have narrowed down a writing topic, some solid supporting evidence, and an organizational strategy, let's delve into the traits that will make this college entrance essay truly exceptional.



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## STEP 2

# PUTTING PEN TO PAPER: **DRAFTING**

Once you have gathered and organized your ideas, you are ready to begin writing. How can you express your ideas in a way that is both engaging to the reader and appropriate for the purpose? That's what this chapter is all about.

But first, let's talk about a few pitfalls that are common to the writing process.

# A WORD ABOUT PROCRASTINATION

You're feeling pretty great. You have journaled and brainstormed some really cool ideas. It's been a blast chatting with friends and family about all the things that make you special. You feel you have a good grip on the topic you've chosen, and you've got an idea of how you want to organize your ideas.

So there's no reason why you shouldn't just dive right in and get this essay in the books. The problem is, other things just keep coming up. Chores. Homework. Tons of senior year fun. As each day passes, you feel less and less inspired to write.

Suddenly, you're looking for ways to avoid writing. Before you know it, that breezy feeling of I'll-get-to-it-when-I-get-to-it morphs into serious doubts about whether you are up to the task.

According to the Association for Psychological Science, a recent study that looked at the effect of procrastination on college students found that "procrastinators earned lower grades than other students and reported higher cumulative amounts of stress and illness. True procrastinators didn't just finish their work later — the quality of it suffered, as did their own well-being."

**Once you are successful in gearing up and getting started, keep things moving. Don't stop. Allow yourself to become swept up in a writing momentum that will carry you toward a successful conclusion.**

What can you do to avoid this common writing pitfall?

- **Make a daily list of writing goals.** Keep the list within reach so you can feel successful as you check off each task you complete.
- **Assign yourself deadlines.** This will keep you on task. If you don't meet the deadline, set a very real consequence for failing to meet your obligation. No writing? No party. Make sure your deadlines leave room for the all-important steps of revising, editing, proofreading, and seeking feedback from others.
- **Reward yourself for reaching each of your writing goals.** If the exhilarating feeling of checking off an item isn't enough for you, give yourself the gift of a cup of coffee or a chocolaty treat.
- **Kick the social media habit as you write.** Stay away from Instagram and Snapchat. Keep off of Twitter and Facebook. Turn off your phone, and refuse to check your e-mails. They can wait. This essay cannot. If limiting screen time is a challenge for you, several apps are available to help you block distracting sites during the time you have set aside for writing.
- **Don't overthink.** When preparing your first draft, just get words on paper; you can critique and refine them later. And if you find you can't write, then pick up a pad of paper and a pencil, and doodle some notes. The act of scrawling words and images on the page can help coax you in a writerly direction. Don't stare at a blank page for long; start writing!

*Here is the key:* Once you are successful in gearing up and getting started, keep things moving. Don't stop. Allow yourself to become swept up in a writing momentum that will carry you toward a successful conclusion.



## ACTIVITY: GOAL-SETTING

In your notebook, create a table similar to the one below, and use it to establish deadlines for each stage of the writing process. You should begin this activity at least a month before the deadline.

TASK	DEADLINE
Gather & organize ideas	
Write first draft	
Revise first draft	
Copyedit first draft	
Get feedback from two reviewers	
Incorporate changes from reviewers	
Proofreading	
Final draft sent to college	

## TAKE THE PRESSURE OFF

There's no such thing as the perfect admissions essay. Perfection isn't even what colleges are looking for. In fact, you might run into an essay question that asks about a time you failed or in which areas you think you need to improve.

With writing, perfectionism can be your nemesis. It can squelch creativity by discouraging risk-taking or even causing writer's block. If you freeze up or fall into "paralysis of analysis," unable to move forward from the prewriting stage, perfectionism might be your problem.

Remember, the college essay is only one part of your application. So relax, do your best, and trust that the work you do on the essay will help land you in the college that is right for you.

**"The more relaxed you are, the better you are at everything." – Bill Murray, actor and comedian**

## PLAGIARISM? DON'T EVEN THINK ABOUT IT

Plagiarism is the use of words or ideas belonging to another person and passing them off as your own. It's okay to borrow an inspirational quote or idea, but always give credit to the original author.

Plagiarism carries stiff penalties in college — and in life — and if you plagiarize, you *will* get caught. A wide variety of software is available to colleges and universities for use in catching word thieves.

So before you copy and paste that sentence from an online encyclopedia — or, heaven forbid, think of using someone else's college entrance essay — stop. Do you want to risk your future just to make this essay-writing task a little easier?

Remember, admissions counselors want to learn about *you*, not some anonymous Wikipedia author or other random writer on the Internet.

**"Everybody is talented, original, and has something important to say." – Brenda Ueland**



# STRIKING THE RIGHT NOTE

Are you ready to begin? Before you start writing, it's important to give thought to the overall feel of your essay. This is where **tone** and **voice** come into play.

Let's start with tone. Believe it or not, you could write the most amazing college entrance essay, but if you fail to hit on the appropriate tone, you could be in trouble.

## WHAT IS TONE?

Think of tone as attitude. Every piece of writing is going to have its own attitude or character. It's very important for the tone to convey the right manner for a particular piece.

For example, a text message to your best friend is going to be quick and casual. A book about how to overcome the loss of a pet is going to be serious and thoughtful. A letter to the president of the United States is going to have a formal tone. A review of a rock concert will likely have a fun feel.

A thank-you note? That's right — it will convey a sincere and grateful manner. Now you're getting it!

So what's the best tone for a college entrance essay? Most college experts will advise you to aim for a tone that is not too formal and not too casual.

Too formal means that you have forgotten to get personal. The reader will have a hard time "hearing" your voice. She won't get a sense of who you are and what life lessons you have learned.

Too casual means you have littered your copy with slang and casual phrases that demonstrate a familiarity that isn't appropriate for addressing strangers in an official capacity. Your language is a little lazy, and you haven't used standard English grammar and conventions. These characteristics show a level of immaturity that suggests you might not be ready for college.

What's in the middle? For one thing, your tone should be *positive* — not Pollyanna, just optimistic about yourself and your future. By all means, avoid snark. Even negative situations can be presented in a positive light.

Show yourself as someone who takes responsibility rather than casts blame. Show how you have grown and learned from your past, and how that past can help you in the future.

Give some real thought to how you can stay positive and on message as you write. If you find yourself stuck at a dead end, it could be that you have lost your focus or your writing voice. If you start off positive, but veer off toward sarcastic, you are on the wrong path. Above all, keep your tone consistent throughout the piece.

## WHAT IS VOICE?

In your writing, one of your goals should be to let your distinct voice come through. What is voice? It's more than style, or a way of putting words together. Voice is the soul of your writing — the expression of your unique sensibility and your outlook on the world.

**"The idea is to write it so that people hear it and it slides through the brain and goes straight to the heart."**

— **Maya Angelou**

One way to let your voice come through is to write the way you talk. Imagine you are speaking to the admissions counselor in person, perhaps over coffee or tea. Imagine your body language, facial expressions, and intonations. How can you let that level of enthusiasm and passion come through in your writing?

Once you have your words on paper, go back and clean up any unconventional grammar or too-informal tone, but try to leave as much of your original voice intact as possible. Then read your writing aloud. Does it sound natural and authentic?

In the brainstorming activities in the Prewriting chapter, you spent some time exploring who you are — your unique life experiences and passions. There is only one you. If you speak from the heart, your voice will come shining through.


When you are ready for others to review your work, ask them whether they can hear your voice in the writing. Remember, if the admissions counselors can't "hear you," you won't be admitted.

Now that we've covered the big picture, it's time to start writing. Are you ready?

**There is only one you.  
If you speak from the  
heart, your voice will  
come shining through.**







“An opening line should invite the reader to begin the story. It should say: Listen. Come in here. You want to know about this.”

— Stephen King, quoted in an interview with Joe Fassler in *The Atlantic*

## THE OPENING PARAGRAPH

You know the old adage: You never get a second chance to make a good first impression. The same is true of your introductory paragraph. This is where you hook your reader. You’ll need to write something so captivating, so interesting that the reader is compelled to keep reading.

No sweat, right? Actually, this is easier said than done.

Your task is to write something so gripping that those sleepy essay readers will be immediately awakened to your message. Failing to grab the attention of

your reader means that your essay will suffer a quiet, anonymous landing at the bottom of the pile. Some admissions boards may not read anything beyond the first few sentences if they aren’t “hooked.”

Exceptional opening paragraphs are —

- Clear and concise
- Bold and unique
- Interesting and engaging
- Personal and thought-provoking

One way to ready yourself for writing a strong opening paragraph is to study the work of other writers — some famous, others not so famous. Check out some of the following attention-grabbing opening lines from some of literature's best writers:

“Ships at a distance have every man's wish on board.”  
—Zora Neale Hurston, *Their Eyes Were Watching God*

“Her father would say years later that she had dreamed that part of it, that she had never gone out through the kitchen window at two or three in the morning to visit the birds.”  
—Edward P. Jones, “The Girl Who Raised Pigeons”

“It was a wrong number that started it, the telephone ringing three times in the dead of night, and the voice on the other end asking for someone he was not.” —Paul Auster, *City of Glass*

Admit it: You feel inspired to read on!

You may not count yourself among the literary giants, but by exposing yourself to their work, it's easy to get an idea of the kind of writing that pulls a reader in. So how can you achieve the kind of hook that these writers did in their now-famous books? Here are some ideas:

- **Pose a question** that will start the reader's wheels turning. It should be thought-provoking and create some level of interest. For example: “Have you ever had the urge to write your name in sand with big, broad, looping letters?”

- **Use a quote** — relevant and compelling — to conjure up some new idea or curiosity in your personal essay. For example: “Football is like life — it requires perseverance, self-denial, hard work, sacrifice, dedication, and respect for authority.”  
—Vince Lombardi
- **Introduce a personal experience** from a beloved family member or friend that means something special to you. For example: “My grandfather never missed an opportunity to tell a corny joke. I pretended to laugh. We all did. How I wish I could hear one of those corny jokes just one last time.”

By studying the masters and taking some bold and unexpected risks, you can write an exciting first paragraph that those admissions folks will love.

## STEER CLEAR

### What makes an opening paragraph *ineffective*?

- Offering a dictionary definition of a word
- Repeatedly restating your introductory ideas
- Presenting vague and undefined information
- Immediately giving away all the details
- Opening in a way that is more suitable for an academic paper than a personal essay



# THE BODY

Here we go! We have arrived at the heart of your essay. The body is where you will tell your story. You will give many great examples. You will be descriptive and thoughtful. But most important, this is where you will keep the promise that you made in your opening paragraph to deliver an interesting read.

Imagine that you have been gifted with a beautifully wrapped present. The box is expertly wrapped in gleaming silver foil paper, and a lush and sparkly ribbon is draped around the box and styled into an exquisite bow. You are enthralled. Seriously, you cannot wait to open this gift, certain that something truly wonderful must wait for you on the inside.

Now, imagine your disappointment to find the box empty. You would feel let down, right?

That is precisely the risk you take if you write an amazing opening paragraph and then fail to follow up with the kinds of details that are worthy of such an introduction.

So let's talk about some ways that you can write a stellar body for your essay. A strong essay will include certain elements: description, details, elaboration, and support.

- **Description:** This is your chance to shine, so use words that are extraordinary. For example, swap out the word *happy* for *joyous*. Also, employ all of your senses — sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch — to describe a scene, a feeling, or an event in your essay.
- **Details:** Don't skimp on the details. If you began your essay talking about a painful period in your life when you overcame the

hardship of a family member's illness, then don't withhold the details because they are, well, painful. Share what you think the reader will want and need for a strong reading experience. Help them feel like they are there.

It's tempting to be reserved when illustrating personal experiences with specific details. Some fear being overly detailed or sharing too much. Others err on the side of being too vague or giving too little description. Remember, you can always trim the text during the review and revision process. Go for more than you think you'll need, with the idea that you can cut later if the writing is too verbose.

- **Elaboration:** Elaborate wherever you think the reader may feel confused or in need of additional information. For example, it may be necessary within the context of your story to elaborate on a conflict you had with a family member who was sick.
- **Support:** If you have made a strong assertion in your opening paragraph's thesis statement, don't forget to support your point of view with reasons and examples. Be detailed and structured, devoting a paragraph to each key idea.

Ultimately, by allowing yourself to be honest and "real" in your college entrance essay, you help the reader to feel a connection to you and your story.

**"Writing is an extreme privilege but it's also a gift. It's a gift to yourself and it's a gift of giving a story to someone." — Amy Tan, author of *The Joy Luck Club* and *The Kitchen God's Wife***

# THE CONCLUSION

As you near the end of this writing project, it's important to give thought to how you will wrap up your essay. Just as you started your piece strong and "in charge," you need to end it in the same way. This is your last chance to make an impression on your reader.

Famed actor and director Orson Welles once said, "If you want a happy ending, that depends, of course, on where you stop your story." That may be true, but for a college entrance essay, wrapping up with a powerful ending is all about leaving a big impression.

What makes a great ending? Let's take a look at how other literary folks have done it:

The scar had not pained Harry for nineteen years. All was well.  
— *Harry Potter and the Deathly Hallows* by J. K. Rowling

So we beat on, boats against the current, borne back  
ceaselessly into the past. — *The Great Gatsby* by F. Scott  
Fitzgerald

It is true that there is nothing like a blaze in the hearth to soothe  
the nerves and restore order to a house. — *The Hundred  
Brothers* by Donald Antrim

The wake itself remains, etched out across the water's surface;  
then it fades as well, although no one is there to see it go.  
— *C* by Tom McCarthy

Which of these final lines made you feel sad? Hopeful? Inspired, or confused? The fact is, well-written conclusions come in all shapes and sizes. And while no one expects you to craft a mind-blowing

final paragraph with a sensational last line worthy of a Pulitzer Prize, you are very capable of inspiring emotion in your reader.

It can be helpful to walk away from the essay after you have written the body but before writing the conclusion. After a couple of days, give the essay a fresh look, reading it from beginning through the body without stopping. Get a sense of the main ideas and emotions that the essay conveys. Then write your conclusion.

When writing a concluding paragraph, do the following:

- **Consider how you want the reader to feel upon reaching the end.** Are you aiming for happy and relieved? Sad and thoughtful? Or are you hoping to leave the reader with a great laugh?
- **Clue the reader into the conclusion with a transition word or phrase**, such as, *finally*, or *ultimately*. Doing so will make it clear that the end is near and send a message to the reader that you remain in control of the essay's structure and message.
- **Refer to your opening paragraph**, but resist the urge to repeat it. If you began with a quote, write some concluding thoughts about that quote. Or you may wish to explain how a personal story turned out in the end.
- If you have written about something that happened in your past, **bring your reader back to the present day**.
- **Wrap up any loose ends** that you may have left within the essay.
- **Strive to connect your story to experiences shared by humankind.** By invoking the broader context of the world around you, you will demonstrate your understanding of how your story fits into the bigger picture.





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Walk away from the essay after you have written the body. After a couple of days, give the essay a fresh look, reading it from beginning. Get a sense of the main ideas and emotions that the essay conveys. Then write your conclusion.

- **Weave in your desire for a quality education** that will help to advance you in life.
- **Reflect and validate** — through your use of details and descriptions — that you have given serious thought to how you have grown and learned through your life experiences.

The concluding paragraph is often cited by students as one of the most difficult parts of an

essay to write. But it's not that hard if you believe in what you are writing and truly have experienced a revelation of thought and meaning in your life.

Once you have created your first draft, you are ready to refine and polish your essay. Turn the page to learn about revising and editing your writing.





### STEP 3

## POLISHING YOUR WORK: **EDITING**

You're not finished yet! You've crafted a first draft of your essay. Now it's time to spiff it up and make it the best it can be.

No writer is perfect. No matter how many books or magazine articles they may have published or how many awards they've won, all good writers need to edit their work. And even after multiple revisions, not a



single professional writer can claim to have never let a typo or a misspelled word slip by her.

Professional writers are just like you — they make mistakes and often have to go back into their work to look for problems. And just like you, they may not always find this part of the writing process to be their favorite. Maybe they've already spent a lot of time with the piece and just want to be done. Sound familiar?

While this is normal, it's also extremely important that you resist the urge to rid yourself of this essay without first revising, copyediting, and proofreading your work.

## REVISING, COPYEDITING, AND PROOFREADING

The editing stage of the writing process has three parts:

- **Revising:** This is where you focus on the big-picture — how ideas are organized and presented, as well as the overall tone and flow of the piece. Revising can include adding, subtracting, rearranging, and rewriting text.
- **Copyediting:** Here you focus on improving the writing at the sentence and word level. You might tweak your word choices and sentence style, as well as clean up any errors in spelling, grammar, and punctuation.
- **Proofreading:** This is your final look to make sure all is as it should be.

You may revisit each of these steps more than once, and you might find yourself doing some of the tasks simultaneously. But thinking of

these as three separate stages can help you to zero in on the specific things you need to look for in your writing. The discussion on the following pages can help you to better define these tasks.

## REVISING

After you have finished your essay, walk away. Yes, that's right. Set it down and step away for a day or two. This will allow for some much-needed separation. When you return to the essay, you will be able to approach the writing from a fresh perspective.

Put yourself in your reader's shoes. Try to imagine yourself reading the essay from the perspective of a college admissions counselor. Use the following checklist to guide you in what to look for.



## REVISION CHECKLIST

- **Does the writing meet the assignment?** Does it thoroughly respond to the prompt, answering each part of the question being asked? Is the writing within the word-count limit?
- **Does the writing tell the reader about *you*** — your character, your interests, and the way you view the world? Does it show your intellectual curiosity and passion for learning?
- **Does the writing have a controlling idea and purpose that is clear to the reader?** Have you met the purpose?
- **Does the writing stay on topic throughout the piece?** Remove any irrelevant details, loosely connected information, and fluff.
- **Is the tone appropriate for the audience and purpose** — not too informal, but not too stuffy either? Does the writing express your unique voice and a consistent point of view? Are all these used consistently throughout the piece? Most important, is the writing genuine?
- **Is the writing engaging?** Does it catch and hold the reader's attention throughout the piece?
- **Is the body of the essay well organized and complete?** You don't have to follow a particular formula, but the writing should have a clear *beginning*, *middle*, and *end*. Are your ideas fully developed, well-reasoned, and adequately supported? Do you use appropriate paragraphing and adequate transitions? Are the introduction, conclusion, and overall organizational strategy effective? Does the writing address any basic questions the reader is sure to have?

## COPYEDITING

Read the essay aloud to catch any remaining errors, awkward phrasings, or otherwise clunky prose. By reading the words out loud, your voice demands that your eyes and brain pay attention.

If you stumble over a sentence when you read it, there's a good chance that your reader will stumble over it, too. Revise the sentence so that it reads more clearly.

The following checklist will help you know a few more specifics to look for.

## COPYEDITING CHECKLIST

- **Does the writing use a variety of vivid words, phrases, and sentence structures?**
- **Does it use mature, precise vocabulary?**
- **Do the sentences flow smoothly?**
- **Is the writing concise? Is there any awkward or unnecessary repetition of certain words or phrases?**
- **Does the writing employ standard English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and usage?**

**Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that he make every word tell. — E.B. White, *The Elements of Style***



# PUNCH UP YOUR PROSE

As we talk about engaging readers, ensuring that they continue to read and enjoy your essay, it's important to consider the way you use language. If you like to write, then you might admit to having fun constructing sentences that are long and super sophisticated. If you don't like to write, you may be inclined to toss in extra words here and there to pump up the word count.

Neither of these options is a good idea.

If your writing is too complex or “showy,” your reader will tire quickly. Think about it: In this modern age of digital content, readers tend to have a short attention span. It's better to be efficient with your words.

Similarly, if you use unnecessary words to increase your word count, your audience will bypass all the “filler” and scan the essay for the good stuff. Trained readers will know what you're up to.

Remember, sometimes less is more. Concise, direct prose is often more powerful than wordier approaches.

So what should you strive for in your writing? Ultimately, one of the keys to crafting a quality essay is to write with confidence, clarity, and flair. Aim for bold, declarative sentences that are clear and direct. Sprinkle in descriptive words where they are needed. And always choose active verbs over passive ones.

Not sure what we're talking about here? Take a look:

- **Choose active over passive voice.**

*Passive:* I was asked by Mark if I wanted to take part in the group assignment.

*Active:* Mark invited me to take part in the group assignment.

- **Consider alliteration, or the repetitive use of consonants.**

*Ordinary:* The sun dipped into the ocean as night fell.

*Extraordinary:* The sun set onto the sea as night soaked the sky.

- **Avoid adverbs in favor of more powerful descriptors.**

*Good:* Rose spoke to the child sweetly.

*Better:* Rose cooed sweet compliments to the child.

- **Steer clear of the verb *to be*.**

*Good:* Carlton was happy to be recognized for his hard work.

*Better:* Carlton basked in the praise that recognized his hard work.

- **Bring language to life with similes and metaphors.**

*Simile:* Her words ran down my spine like melting ice.

*Metaphor:* Her grandchildren brought sunshine to her later years.

- **Avoid awkward repetition.**

For example, if you are writing about an award that you received, how many times did you use the word *award*? Consider using other words, such as *achievement*, *recognition*, *honor*, or *prize*.

## OTHER WRITING HABITS TO AVOID

When punching up your prose, be sure to avoid the following:

- **Clichés** — common phrases that are tired and overused

I felt like I had been hit by a ton of bricks.

- **Colloquialisms** — informal or inappropriate language

He seemed like a pretty cool dude to me.

- **Contractions** — a shortened combination of words (okay in many writing situations, but to be used sparingly, if at all, in formal writing)

She wasn't friendly, so I'd decided to go home.

- **Etc.** — the abbreviation for *et cetera*, a phrase meant to indicate that there is more information you did not include. Replace this with *and so on*.

My mother loved to sing, dance, laugh, and so on.

- **Overuse of exclamation points** — This punctuation mark should be reserved for messages that are truly exciting. Your writing should be positive, even enthusiastic, but it shouldn't read like the chants of a cheerleader at a pep rally.

## GETTING FEEDBACK FROM OTHERS

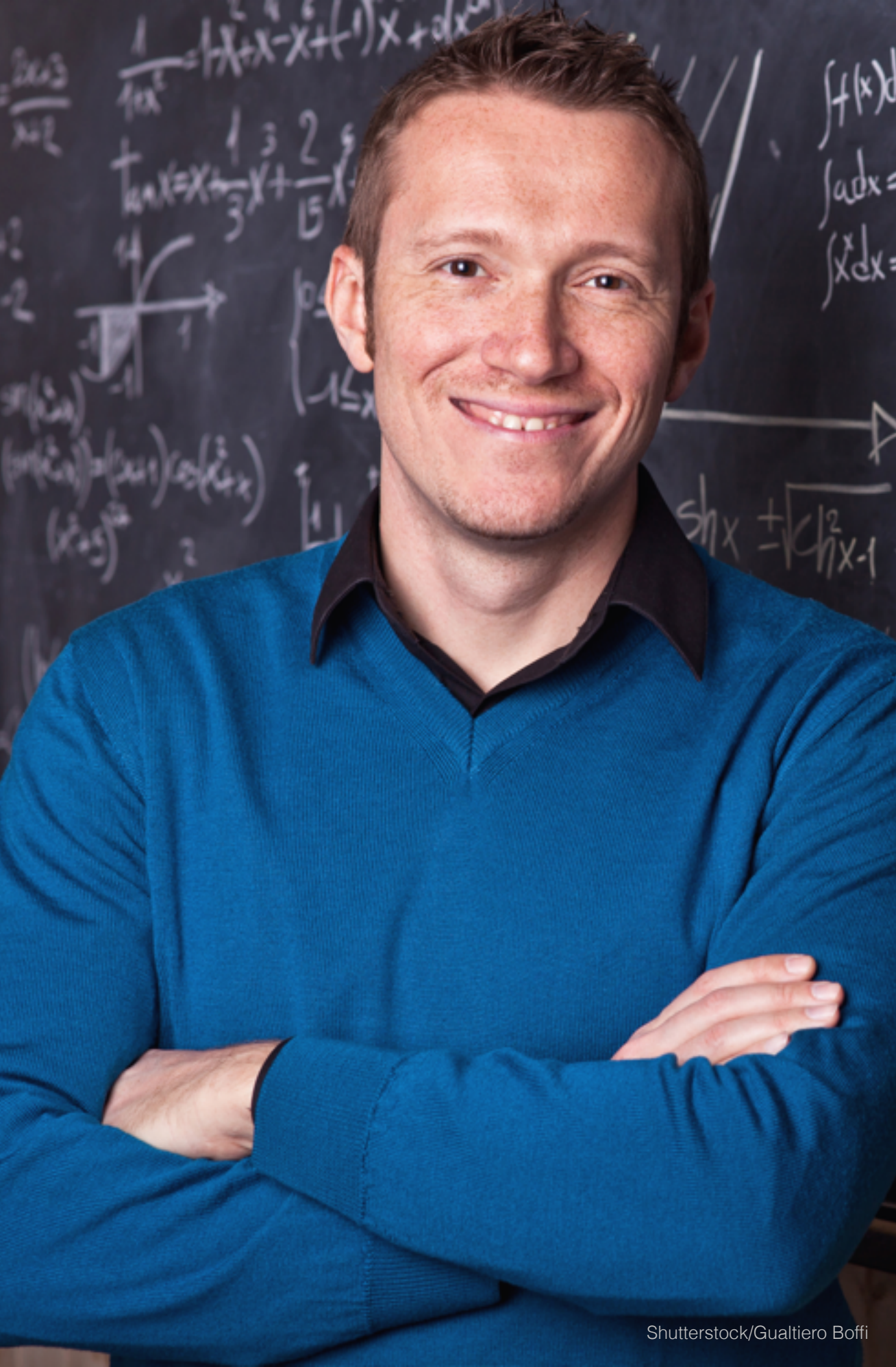
At this point, share your essay with a guidance counselor and/or teacher for feedback. You might provide your reviewers with the revision and copyediting checklists in this chapter for guidance,

but they most likely have played the role of essay reviewer many times before. Ask them to be specific in their feedback and not to hold back. Don't be afraid to ask for pointed feedback about anything in particular that you are struggling with. If you receive the feedback verbally rather than in writing, be sure to take notes.

Accepting feedback on your writing is not always easy, particularly when you are writing about yourself. Hear and/or read all the comments without interruption, and try not to be defensive. You might even take a break from the essay for a day or two to let the advice sink in, rather than incorporating the changes right away. Having a little distance on the project will help you consider the suggested changes more dispassionately. You don't have to accept every suggestion, but consider each one carefully. Also, don't be afraid to follow up with additional questions if needed.







## ACTIVITY: SELECTING REVIEWERS

In your journal, brainstorm a list of possible reviewers for your essay. List one or two more than you will actually need, in case your top choices aren't available. Look up their contact information, and write an email to them asking for their help. Use a professional style for your email, showing that you are a mature person who is worthy of their assistance. Let them know when your essay will be ready for review, and what date you will need it back from them. Don't wait until the last minute; allow them enough time to do a good job, and consider how many other students may be making similar requests at the same time. School faculty and staff tend to be very busy people, and your lack of planning should not become their crisis. Also allow plenty of time on your calendar for reviewing their feedback, making changes, and doing a final proof of the essay.

**“Don't wait to ask a teacher at last minute to review an essay. I cannot tell you how many times this happens. 'When do you need this?' 'Can I come in after school? My application is due tomorrow.' This does not bode well, as most teachers are already swamped with grading their students' regular assignments.”**

**– High school English teacher,  
Iowa City, Iowa**

# PROOFREADING

Once you have incorporated the reviewer(s) suggestions, you are ready to proofread. As stated previously, proofreading is when you give the essay a final read to make sure it is the best it can be. When you are ready to proofread your work, print out the essay and read it in hard copy. You will catch more mistakes that way than by reading on a computer screen. Let the following checklist be your guide.

From

## Candidate for a Pullet Surprise by Mark Eckman and Jerrold H. Zar

I have a spelling checker,  
It came with my PC.  
It plane lee marks four my revue  
Miss steaks aye can knot sea.

Eye ran this poem threw it,  
Your sure reel glad two no.  
Its vary polished in it's weigh.  
My checker tolled me sew.

# PROOFREADING CHECKLIST

- **Again, check the writing for standard English grammar, punctuation, capitalization, spelling, and usage.**
- **Check for awkward phrasings and unnecessary repetition.**
- **Have someone proofread your writing for you.** It's very difficult to proofread your own work without letting errors slip through. A second set of eyes is essential. An English teacher or another adult or fellow student with crack grammar and composition skills is an ideal choice for a proofreader.
- **Read the essay backward.** Once you have incorporated changes from the proofreader, you will have read over the same text many times. Your mind is likely to read over some errors, filling in what it expects to be there, rather than what's actually on the page. The old proofreader's trick of reading the sentences in reverse order forces your mind to a higher level of attention. Don't read the sentences themselves backward; just start with the last sentence and read each sentence one at a time from the end of the essay to the beginning. You're more likely to catch every error this way.
- **Spell check!** Don't send your piece out the door without running it through a final electronic spell check. Yet beware of relying solely on electronic spelling and grammar checkers to review your writing. Spell checkers cannot help you with the spelling of proper nouns or the improper use of homonyms, such as *it's* and *its*. Grammar checkers can miss errors and also flag text that is perfectly correct.
- **Give your essay a final review.** Is everything exactly as you want it to be?





## ACTIVITY: SELECTING A PROOFREADER

Decide on a proofreader for your essay. As with reviewers, write an email to the proofreader asking for help. Use a professional, mature style for your email. Let the person know when your essay will be ready for proofreading and what date you will need it back. Allow plenty of time for them to do the task and for you to review and incorporate their changes and complete a final proof.

**Art is never finished,  
only abandoned.**  
— Leonardo da Vinci

## WHEN “DONE IS BETTER THAN PERFECT”

No piece of writing is ever truly finished — the possibilities for revising and editing are infinite. It’s also entirely possible to overdo it. Extensive editing can result in writing that is overly polished — stiff and lacking an authentic voice. Avoid overthinking if you want to keep your writing fresh.

As the deadline for submitting your essay nears, there comes a time when you must call an end to perfectionism and just *let it go*. Remember, an essay submitted late is as good as no essay at all. Eventually, you have to accept that you have done your best within the time allotted, and then go ahead and press “Send.”

# YOU'RE ON YOUR WAY

Give yourself a pat on the back. If you've followed the advice in this book, you should be well on your way to producing an exceptional college admissions essay.

**I think I did pretty well, considering I started out with nothing but a bunch of blank paper. —Steve Martin, author and comedian**

With the hundreds of colleges and universities throughout the country, each is going to have its own unique requirements for the entrance essay. The suggestions provided here will help you to meet whatever writing challenges are thrown your way. Very soon, doors will be opening to your collegiate life.

We wish you luck and a future filled with opportunities to achieve your goals and dreams.





## About Doorway to College Foundation

Doorway to College Foundation strives to demystify the college application process in its many forms. We give parents and students the information needed to be fully informed and prepared for the challenges and changes that lie on the horizon. For more information about products and services from Doorway to College, including college admissions support and test prep, visit us at [www.doorwaytocollege.com](http://www.doorwaytocollege.com).



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Kerri S. Mabee is a veteran teacher of English and creative writing in the San Diego, California, area. In 1998, she left teaching to pursue a career as a professional writer. Since that time, she has written and edited content for news outlets, magazines, educational publications, and online journals and has completed two novels and several children's books.

Mabee is the managing editor at EducatedWriter.com and founder and CEO of Breeze Media & Communications, a writing and public relations firm. She continues to hone her craft as a freelance journalist for magazines nationwide and is the former managing editor at SWRNN.com, a competitive online news website. Mabee received her Bachelor of Arts in English from San Diego State University in 1990.

