Advice for College Application Essays
Effective Writing

SAMPLE COLLEGE ESSAY QUESTIONS
Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

Generally, there are three types of questions: The "you," the "why us," and the "creative." Here are tips and actual sample questions for each type. Don't assume that the questions are currently being used by a college (most colleges adjust questions annually).

The "You" Question
Many colleges ask for an essay that boils down to, "Tell us about yourself." The school just wants to know you better and see how you'll introduce yourself. For example:

- "Please complete a one-page personal statement and submit it with your application." (James Madison University)
- "How would you describe yourself as a human being? What quality do you like best in yourself and what do you like least? What quality would you most like to see flourish and which would you like to see wither?" (Bates College)
- “Describe any interesting experience you have had during your college admission search.” (Juniata College)
- Creative people state that taking risks often promotes important discoveries in their lives or their work. Discuss a risk that has led to a significant change (positive or negative) in your personal or intellectual life.” (Simmons College)
- “Describe the most challenging obstacle you have had to overcome; discuss its impact, and tell what you have learned from the experience.” (Guilford College)
- “To learn to think is to learn to question. Discuss a matter you once thought you knew ‘for sure’ that you have since learned to question.” (Bryn Mawr College)
- Please provide any additional information that can help us evaluate this application. If you are aware of personal characteristics or circumstances (e. g. work experiences, leadership qualities, motivations, community service, special talents, evidence of socio-economic disadvantage, etc.) that may help us make a more informed admission decision, please let us know. (UW System Common Essay)

Your Approach
This direct question offers a chance to reveal your personality, insight, and commitment. The danger is that it's open-ended, so you need to focus. Find just one or two things that will reveal your best qualities, and avoid the urge to spill everything.

The "Why Us" Question
Some schools ask for an essay about your choice of a school or career. They're looking for information about your goals, and about how serious your commitment is to this particular school. For example:

- "Why is UVM a good college choice for you?" (University of Vermont)
- "Please tell us about your career goals and any plans you may have for graduate study." (Westfield State College)
- “Tell us about yourself, your reasons for applying to USF, and your reasons for seeking a college education.” (University of San Francisco)
- “Describe your reasons for selecting Loyola College and your personal and professional goals and plans for after college.” (Loyola College MD)
- “We would like to know…what experiences have led you to select your professional field and objective.” (Boston University)
- Please relate your interest in studying at Georgetown University to your future goals.” (Georgetown University)
- The statement of purpose is a personal essay that provides insight into your specific reasons for applying to SAIC. In the statement of purpose, you should discuss your interests, creative influences, educational goals, and anything else that is important for us to know regarding your interest in art, design, and visual culture. Through your statement of purpose the Undergraduate Committee on Admissions is interested in finding out more about you as an individual and how you represent yourself in a written format. (The School of the Art Institute of Chicago)

Your Approach
The focus is provided: Why did you choose this school or path? This should be pretty clear to you, since you probably went through some kind of selection process. Make sure you know your subject well. For example, if you say you want to attend Carleton College to major in agriculture, the school will be able to tell how carefully you've chosen (Carleton doesn't have an agriculture major).

The "Creative" Question
Some colleges evaluate you through your choice of some tangential item: a national issue, a famous person, what you would put in a time capsule, a photograph. Here the school is looking at your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge and education. For example:

- "Do you believe there's a generation gap? Describe the differences between your generation and others." (Denison University)
- "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence." (Common Application)
- Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.” (Common Application)
- “In your opinion, what is the greatest challenge that your generation will face? What ideas do you have for dealing with this issue?” (College of the Holy Cross)
- What is the value and importance of community service in our society and tell us what it means to you.” (Ohio Wesleyan University)
- “John Keats said, ‘Even a proverb is no proverb to you until your life has illustrated it.’ Please tell us about an experience in your own life which illustrated a proverb, maxim, or quote that has special meaning for you.” (Duke University)
- “You have just completed your 300-page autobiography. Please submit page 217.” (University of Pennsylvania)
- “For some prognosticators the end of the world was in sight by the year 1000. How do you foresee your world of 2020?” (Dickinson College)
Your approach
Again, you have something to react to, a way to show yourself and write about your real views. Just don't forget
the importance of writing an informed essay. For example, don't write about a fantasy lunch with a famous
writer and get the titles of her novels wrong. Also, when thinking about how creative to get, use common sense.
Being creative to the point of wacky is a risk you may not want to take.

RECIPE FOR A DRAFT
Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

Sometimes the hardest part of writing a college admissions essay is just getting started. Here's a quick exercise
to get pen to paper (or keyboard to computer).

Step 1: Think about yourself
What are your strengths and weaknesses? What are your best qualities? Are you a plugger? An intellectual? A
creative type? Curious? Passionate? Determined?

Step 2: Choose a positive quality you'd like to convey to the admissions committee
Don't pick an event or something you've done. President of the Nuclear Awareness Club is not a personal
quality. Focus on a quality of your mind or of your character. Complete this sentence: "I am a very _________
person."

Step 3: Tell a story
Set a timer for 20 minutes. Pretend you're taking an exam at high school and responding to, "Tell a story about
an experience or time when you showed you were a very _________ person." Use the characteristic you
identified in Step 2. Write or type non-stop for 20 minutes; force yourself to keep telling the story and what it
reveals until the timer goes off.

You're Done
Okay. That's it. You've got a rough draft for your college application essay. Look at the college application
forms and see what questions they ask. No matter what the questions are, you've already identified the important
characteristic you want to convey to each college.

THREE STEPS TO A GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY
Based on information found in The College Application Essay, by Sarah Myers McGinty.

The college application essay is a chance to explain yourself, to open your personality, charm, talents, vision,
and spirit to the admissions committee in 500 words or fewer. It's a chance to show you can think about things
and that you can write clearly about your thoughts. Don't let the chance disappear. Stand up straight and believe
in yourself!

The Essay Writing Process
Okay, boot up your computer and let's get to it. To write a college essay, use the exact same three-step process
you'd use to write an essay for class: first prewrite, then draft, and finally, edit. This process will help you
identify a focus for your essay, and gather the details you'll need to support it.

Prewriting
To begin, you must first collect and organize potential ideas for your essay's focus. Since all essay questions are
attempts to learn about you, begin with yourself.

- Brainstorm: Set a timer for 15 minutes and make a list of your strengths and outstanding characteristics.
  Focus on strengths of personality, not things you've done. For example, you are responsible (not an "Eagle

- Focus on
Scout") or committed (not "played basketball"). If you keep drifting toward events rather than characteristics, make a second list of the things you've done, places you've been, accomplishments you're proud of; use them for the activities section of your application.

- **Discover Your Strengths**: Do a little research about yourself: ask parents, friends, and teachers what your strengths are.

- **Create a Self-Outline**: Now, next to each trait, list five or six pieces of evidence from your life—things you've been or done—that prove your point.

- **Find Patterns and Connections**: Look for patterns in the material you've brainstormed. Group similar ideas and events together. For example, does your passion for numbers show up in your performance in the state math competition and your summer job at the computer store? Was basketball about sports or about friendships? When else have you stuck with the hard work to be with people who matter to you?

**Drafting**

Now it's time to get down to the actual writing. Write your essay in three basic parts: introduction, body, and conclusion.

- The introduction gives your reader an idea of your essay's content. It can shrink when you need to be concise. One vivid sentence might do: "The favorite science project was a complete failure."

- The body presents the evidence that supports your main idea. Use narration and incident to show rather than tell.

- The conclusion can be brief as well, a few sentences to nail down the meaning of the events and incidents you've described.

An application essay doesn't need to read like an essay about *The Bluest Eye* or the Congress of Vienna, but thinking in terms of these three traditional parts is a good way to organize your main points.

There are three basic essay styles you should consider:

- **Standard Essay**: Take two or three points from your self-outline, give a paragraph to each, and make sure you provide plenty of evidence. Choose things not apparent from the rest of your application or light up some of the activities and experiences listed there.

- **Less-Is-More Essay**: In this format, you focus on a single interesting point about yourself. It works well for brief essays of a paragraph or half a page.

- **Narrative Essay**: A narrative essay tells a short and vivid story. Omit the introduction, write one or two narrative paragraphs that grab and engage the reader's attention, then explain what this little tale reveals about you.

**Editing**

When you have a good draft, it's time to make final improvements to your draft, find and correct any errors, and get someone else to give you feedback. Remember, you are your best editor. No one can speak for you; your own words and ideas are your best bet.

- **Let It Cool**: Take a break from your work and come back to it in a few days. Does your main idea come across clearly? Do you prove your points with specific details? Is your essay easy to read aloud?

- **Feedback Time**: Have someone you like and trust (but someone likely to tell you the truth) read your essay. Ask them to tell you what they think you're trying to convey. Did they get it right?

- **Edit Down**: Your language should be simple, direct, and clear. This is a personal essay, not a term paper. Make every word count (e.g., if you wrote "in society today," consider changing that to "now").

- **Proofread Two More Times**: Careless spelling or grammatical errors, awkward language, or fuzzy logic will make your essay memorable—in a bad way.
Write an Effective Application Essay

A great application essay will present a vivid, personal, and compelling view of you to the admissions staff. It will round out the rest of your application and help you stand out from the other applicants. The essay is one of the only parts of your application over which you have complete control, so take the time to do a good job on it. Check out these tips before you begin.

**Dos**

**Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal**
Your essay must prove a single point or thesis. The reader must be able to find your main idea and follow it from beginning to end. Try having someone read just your introduction to see what he thinks your essay is about.

Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—instead, it's about showing them who you are.

**Prove It**
Develop your main idea with vivid and specific facts, events, quotations, examples, and reasons. There's a big difference between simply stating a point of view and letting an idea unfold in the details:

- **Okay:** "I like to be surrounded by people with a variety of backgrounds and interests"
- **Better:** "During that night, I sang the theme song from Casablanca with a baseball coach who thinks he's Bogie, discussed Marxism with a little old lady, and heard more than I ever wanted to know about some woman's gall bladder operation."

**Be Specific**
Avoid clichéd, generic, and predictable writing by using vivid and specific details.

- **Okay:** "I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family, I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."
- **Better:** "My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. I think that kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."

**Don'ts**

**Don't Tell Them What You Think They Want to Hear**
Most admissions officers read plenty of essays about the charms of their university, the evils of terrorism, and the personal commitment involved in being a doctor. Bring something new to the table, not just what you think they want to hear.

**Don't Write a Resume**
Don't include information that is found elsewhere in the application. Your essay will end up sounding like an autobiography, travelogue, or laundry list. Yawn.

- "During my junior year, I played first singles on the tennis team, served on the student council, maintained a B+ average, traveled to France, and worked at a cheese factory."
Don't Use 50 Words When Five Will Do
Eliminate unnecessary words.

- **Okay:** "Over the years it has been pointed out to me by my parents, friends, and teachers—and I have even noticed this about myself, as well—that I am not the neatest person in the world."
- **Better:** "I'm a slob."

Don't Forget to Proofread
Typos and spelling or grammatical errors can be interpreted as carelessness or just bad writing. Don't rely on your computer's spell check. It can miss spelling errors like the ones below.

- "After I graduate *form* high school, I plan to work for a nonprofit organization during the summer."
- "From that day on, Daniel was my best *fried*."

EXAMPLE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY
The Total Package by Lawrence Schlossman, October 31, 2004

Write a concise statement with any additional information that is important to convey to the admissions committee. Information that may be important might include your aspirations, work experience, creative talents, factors affecting your academic record, or why you are applying to UWMadison. You may wish to attach a separate page for your statement. This is an important part of your application.

I know University of Wisconsin-Madison is right for me. At a school like University of Wisconsin I can not only succeed and flourish as a student, but even help contribute. Wisconsin can also offer me everything that a serious yet excited student could ask for: academics and a social life.

When choosing a college, the first things that came to my mind were excellence in academic programs and reputation. Wisconsin offers a wide range of classes and majors, a distinctive reputation, and it is a place where I know I can succeed. As are many students my age, I am unsure of what I want to study as a major. Part of me loves psychology and the human mind, yet I am fascinated with history, and another part of me enjoys English and creative writing. Wisconsin, being a large University, offers a wide array of classes and by the time I graduate I will have a degree in a major that I truly love. As a student of Wisconsin I can bring the willingness and excitement to succeed. I feel strongly about my academics and have a desire to learn. Education and learning is never an area to cut yourself short on and doing the most challenging things are always worth the struggle in the end. Hopefully my willingness to learn and succeed will contribute to the campus environment and hopefully I can lead by example.

Academics aside, Wisconsin also offers it students an amazing social life. I am a huge sports fan, and the Big Ten conference offers some of the best college sports in the country. I can think of nothing better then rooting for the Badgers on the field or on the court; I want to be part of the sea of red. Wisconsin also has over 600 student organizations, and I know that I can find my niche. I have always been someone who likes to get involved on campus. In high school I had a wide variety of activities and leadership positions. I did everything from my high school's Latin Club, to varsity soccer to the political club. I tried to be a leader wherever I saw fit and I got others involved and excited. I know my leadership qualities and my wide array of interests will benefit Wisconsin and those around me. I also have done work to help others in worse positions then mine. Throughout my high school career I did volunteer work at my community's Center For Food Action. I feel it is a person's duty to help those less fortunate then themselves. It is my desire to help bring leadership, excitement, and compassion to Wisconsin. I want college to not only be a learning experience, but also a thrilling one. I know Wisconsin can provide all this and more.

Wisconsin is the total package. It has academics that serious students crave, but is also a place to enjoy the greatest years of your life. I know Wisconsin can serve as a vehicle to help provide the most desirable future available, but without sacrificing the present.