

THE LOW-INCOME ADVANTAGE

ESSAY-WRITING ADVICE FOR LOW-INCOME STUDENTS

The essay is the part of the college application that allows students to tell their stories, enabling admissions officers to differentiate between applicants with similar test scores and grades. The essay is especially important for low-income students whose accomplishments don't fit a standardized format. Below is essay-writing advice to help you communicate your achievements.

- **Convey your individuality.** College applicants need to set themselves apart from other qualified students to secure admission to elite colleges, and students often are at a loss on how to do so. As a low-income applicant, you possess an important advantage in this area, because you probably already have an exceptional story that sets you apart from other students: a story of financial difficulties, of obstacles, and of successes in the face of these challenges.
 - **Choose a topic that only you can write about.** Brainstorm topics that reveal something unique and central about your personality or background. For example, QuestBridge applicants in the past have written about working to support their siblings, surviving abusive home environments, and immigrating to the U.S. Tell *your* story.
 - **Be candid and personal.** The most effective essays are sincere and self-reflective. Write what you know: your thoughts, motivations, and feelings, as well as the sights and sounds that occupy your life. You may have had experiences in your life that were painful or embarrassing, such as being evicted from your home, or having a parent in prison. Don't hide these stories! Your goal should be to capture the best of your true self, rather than to tell the story you think the reader wants to hear.
- **Resist the urge to fit in:** When you come from a low-income background and feel different from other students, it is natural to want to seem like everyone else. However, your college essay is not the place for conformity. Do not mold your essay to emulate a typical elite college student's story.
 - **Avoid common topics.** It is in your best interest to avoid common essay topics unless you are absolutely sure you can write about one of them in a distinctive and creative way. Admissions officers have read many essays on these topics, so it will be difficult to make your essay unique and not a cliché. As a low-income student, you likely have an exceptional story of how you achieved success in the face of adversity—don't shortchange yourself by writing on a common essay topic that makes you look like everybody else! Here is a list of some topics that appear frequently in college essays.¹:
 1. Tales of My Success (being class president and yearbook editor, i.e., your activities list)
 2. My Trip to _____ Changed My Life.
 3. My Room and What It Says About Me
 4. The Big Issue (such as world peace)
 5. The Autobiography ("I was born on May 3rd...")
 6. Historical Figure
- **Focus on the speed at which you've progressed, not on the list of your attributes today.** This is crucial for low-income students who have not had the opportunities and resources available to other students, and whose test scores and other credentials consequently may not be as strong as they could be. Provide a context for your academic achievements, and demonstrate how far you have come considering where you started.

¹ This list of common topics comes from Harry Bauld's book *On Writing the College Application Essay*.



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- **Be specific in describing the difficulties you have overcome:** For example, perhaps you commuted by bus for hours every day to attend a better school, or perhaps your parents don't value education and have pressured you to leave school and get a job to help support the family. Telling such stories can help to communicate your drive and determination.
- **Avoid conveying a dark or negative tone** when writing about difficult or emotional topics. Try to address problems in your life in a mature, composed tone, and demonstrate how you have overcome adverse circumstances through strength and resilience.

General Essay Advice

- **Write about something meaningful to you.** If you feel passionate about your topic, you will write more vividly. However, you do not need to identify one deep, macrocosmic event that altered the course of your whole life. Most people do not experience such events, and pinpointing one may sound forced and artificial. You can write powerfully about one of the many places, experiences or people that have shaped you.
- **Focus your essay.** Many students choose to use a narrative form. Others may anchor the essay with a description of a scene or a piece of art. Whatever form you choose, make it concrete and specific. Don't try to cover absolutely everything. Sharp, colorful details paint a more memorable, definite picture.
- **Give it a beginning, middle, and end.** The most compelling essays tell a story to help engage the reader. Some literally narrate a single event, while others string together anecdotes to describe a longer process of development. Focus on writing an introduction that draws the reader in (especially a first sentence that "hooks" the reader and makes them want to keep reading) and a conclusion that leaves a positive final impression.
- **Be professional.** Spelling, grammar, punctuation, and formatting should all be flawless. If your essay appears unprofessional, this says to the reader that you have not taken your college application seriously.
- **Be concise.** Use as few words as possible to convey each idea effectively. This sharpens your writing and makes efficient use of limited space.
- **Choose words that feel natural.** Avoid using big words just because you think they sound impressive. Instead, select the words that communicate your ideas most effectively.
- **Use sophisticated style and structure.** Choose active rather than passive verbs, and vary the length and structure of your sentences. Use transitions and topic sentences to guide your reader through your story.
- **Follow the guidelines for each essay's suggested length.** Your challenge should be paring down an essay to fit in the space provided. If the first draft of your essay fits easily within the word limit, make sure you have delved deep enough and provided enough detail to make your essay revealing and personal.
- **Ask family members, close friends, teachers, and others who know you well to critique your essay.** In addition to helping you with elements like style and grammar, your readers can also tell you whether they hear your voice in the essay.
- **Plan ahead.** Perfecting your essay will require many drafts. Give yourself plenty of time to experiment and revise.

