INNOVATIVE COLLEGE PREP

GUIDE

College Essay Writing Guide

Brainstorming, authentic storytelling, drafting, revising and avoiding generic essays

For: Juniors, seniors, counselors and English teachers

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Revised November 2026. General guidance only. Admissions policies and deadlines vary by college and change; always confirm with each institution.

Let a reader meet you

Your application shows grades, courses and activities. The essay is where a reader hears your voice. The best essays are specific, reflective and unmistakably yours; they are not a list of achievements or an attempt to sound impressive.

> **Know the rules.** Prompts, word limits and requirements change by college and year. Check the current prompts and word limits on commonapp.org and on each college's application pages.

1. Brainstorm

- List moments, not topics: a conversation, a failure, a routine, a place, a decision, a responsibility.
- Ask: *What changed in how I think? What do I care about? What would a friend say I am like?*
- Look at ordinary details. A small story told well beats a dramatic one told generally.
- Pick a topic only you can write. If three other students could write it, keep looking.

Prompt to try	My notes
A time I changed my mind	
A responsibility I take seriously and why	
Something I do that nobody asked me to	
A place or community that shaped me	
A problem I want to understand or solve	

2. Draft

- **Start with a scene or a specific moment,** then widen to what it means.
- **Show, then reflect.** Use concrete details such as sounds, words and actions. Then say what you learned or how you changed.
- **Write the way you speak at your best.** Avoid thesaurus words and clichés.
- **Write a rough first draft quickly,** even if it is messy. You can fix it later.

3. Revise

- ☐ Does it sound like me? Read it aloud.
- ☐ Is the opening specific rather than a general statement about life?
- ☐ Does each paragraph move the story or add insight?
- ☐ Do I show growth or what I value, rather than only listing achievements?
- ☐ Have I cut repeated ideas and filler words?

Avoid generic essays

Common problem	Better approach
A broad theme (“I love helping people”) with no scene	Tell one specific moment that shows it
A résumé in paragraph form	Choose one thing and go deeper, since the activity list already has the rest
Sounding like the “ideal applicant”	Be honest, curious and a little imperfect
Ending with a large lesson about the world	End with a small, true insight about you
Reusing a “Why us?” essay with another name	Mention real programs, courses, people or experiences you researched

Supplemental essays

- Read each prompt carefully. Short answers deserve careful writing.
- For “Why this college?” essays, point to specifics: courses, research, community, traditions or opportunities that connect to your goals.
- Keep a document of drafts, and double-check every college name before submitting.

Get useful feedback

- Ask one or two trusted readers (a teacher, counselor or family member) rather than many.
- Tell them what you want: Is it clear? Does it sound like me? Where did you lose interest?
- Keep the final voice yours. Take advice about clarity, not wholesale rewrites.
- Set aside a draft for a few days, then read it again with fresh eyes.

Suggested pace	Task
Spring of junior year	Brainstorm and write several rough stories
Summer	Choose a topic and write a full draft
Early fall of senior year	Revise, get feedback and finalize the main essay
Fall	Write supplements for each college, allowing time to proofread

Integrity

Essays must be your own work. Asking for feedback is wise; having someone else write or heavily rewrite your essay is not.

Generative AI. Policies differ and change. The Common App's fraud policy treats submitting the substantive content or output of an AI tool as your own work as misrepresentation. Colleges draw the line in different places: some allow limited help such as spelling and grammar checks or topic ideas, while others restrict nearly all use. Before using any AI tool, read the current policy of each platform and college you apply to; for an essay sent to several colleges, follow the strictest of their policies. Never submit text that an AI wrote or rewrote for you: the content and wording must be your own. Your own imperfect sentences are more convincing than polished, generic ones.

Official sources: Common App essay information · ICP Essay Writing 101

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