



College Essay Tips: What to Do and What to Avoid

A quick reference guide for what makes essays stand out (and what holds them back)

Overview

Admissions officers read thousands of essays. The ones that stand out tell a clear story, reflect honestly, and sound like the writer actually cared. These tips help you cut the boring stuff and write something you're proud of.

✓ What Works

- **Start strong:** Open with mystery or vivid imagery. Example: "The ceiling fan spun like a lazy clock."
- **Tell a real story:** Show a clear beginning, middle, and end with personal growth.
- **Reflect:** Ask yourself, "Why does this story matter to who I am now?"
- **Use past tense:** For past events. Example: "I walked into the room," not "I walk into the room."
- **Use active voice:** The subject does the action.
 - Example: "I wrote the speech," not "The speech was written by me."
- **Vary sentence length:** Mix short and long. No sentence should go over 3 lines.
- **Keep paragraphs short:** Max 7–8 sentences.
 - Long paragraphs should include at least one short sentence for rhythm.
- **Be consistent:** Choose 1 version of words like "mom" vs. "mother," or "10" vs. "ten," and stick to it.
- **Use smooth transitions:** Link ideas clearly between paragraphs.
- **Fix grammar and punctuation:** Use commas correctly. Don't splice two sentences with a comma.

✗ What to Avoid

- **Too much about others:** No more than 1/3 of your essay should focus on someone else.
- **Generic value statements:** Don't say "I learned leadership" — show us how you led.
- **Flat storytelling:** A story without change or reflection doesn't move the reader.
- **Disconnected anecdotes:** Avoid stringing together random short stories without a clear point.
- **Overloaded activity lists:** This is not your resume. Only include details that support the story.
- **Repetition:** Don't start multiple paragraphs with the same word or reuse phrases.
- **Too many rhetorical questions:** One (or none) is enough.
- **Rants or complaints:** Avoid blaming parents, teachers, or systems — it weakens your tone.
- **Explaining low grades:** Save that for the "Additional Info" section, not your main essay.