

Writing Application Essays

Although writing application essays can be daunting, you do not have to have saved the world or cured cancer to write a good personal statement. As long as you have passion and show you have developed and experienced personal growth, you have a story to tell. A good application essay takes into account the following questions:

What is the prompt asking?

How many parts are there? Does the question naturally suggest a structure for the essay? Make sure you understand what is to be covered.

For whom am I writing?

Ask yourself who will be reading the prompt and what they may be looking for. For example, if you are writing for a scholarship, learn about the person for whom that scholarship is named, and consider how your merits may be a good match for the award.

How will this opportunity help me get where I want to go?

Why should the committee select you? Try to show how events in your life have led you to pursue this step and how it will help you further your personal and professional goals.

TIPS:

- Use an arresting image or phrase to make the first few sentences attractive to the reader.
- Try the “formative, transformative” moment structure. Take two significant events and describe them in detail. The formative event describes how you became interested in the opportunity and the transformative one describes what gave you the extra motivation or experience to apply and commit to the project.
- Make the most of a limited amount of space. Focus on your main ideas and cut out filler words and description that is not central to understanding your story.
- Write about moments or activities not explained in other parts of your application. This is your chance to provide new information.
- Remember that this is an essay about *you*, not your parents or teachers. Your essay should present *you* in a positive light and highlight your energy and passion for whatever opportunity you are seeking.
- Steer clear of clichéd phrases like “This scholarship will help me pursue my dream of...”
- Ask a trusted adviser, peer, or writing consultant to look over your essay for clarity and general appeal. Proofread it several times for both grammar and organization.

This handout was adapted from the Vanderbilt Office of Honors Scholarships, DePauw and Duke University Writing Centers, and scholarshiphelp.org.