



The 5 Common College Essay Mistakes and How to Avoid Them

The personal statement, also known as the college essay or Common App essay, is a 650 word story written by students that is a part of the college admissions process in the US. It is your chance to show colleges who you are beyond the test scores and grades. Writing the college essay is one of the most intimidating parts of applying to college.

As a college admissions consultant, here are the top 5 mistakes I see constantly in college essays, and my quick tips for how to avoid them.

Mistake #1: Trying to sound impressive.

What Students Do: Using big words or dramatic quotes or language to sound intellectually deep.

Why It Doesn't Work: Admissions officers read thousands of essays. They don't want perfection. They want real.

What to Do Instead: Write the way you speak. Authenticity always wins.

Brainstorming Activity: Set a timer for five minutes. Write a paragraph about something you care about, but pretend you are speaking to a friend or a teacher. No trying to sound smart. Just talk like yourself.

Bonus: Voice record a minute long story about something weird or cool you love. Transcribe it. This is often where the real voice lives.

Elleanor Fitzgerald



Mistake #2: Asking the Wrong Question

What Students Do: I work with many students who will sit during our meetings and think, what do colleges want me to say?

Why It Doesn't Work: This leads to overthinking and sounding cliché and generic in your essay. Boring.

What to Do Instead: Think about what matters to you, or how you have changed or grown.

Brainstorming Activity: Imagine you are seated around a campfire. You have to tell a story about yourself. Write down three campfire story ideas using the chart below.

| | |
|---|--|
| Campfire Story Idea #1 | |
| Notes - What Happened | |
| What do I want readers to know about me? Why does it matter? | |
| Specific detail | |

Bonus: Make a list of values that you have as a human. How do they relate to these campfire stories?

Mistake #3: Writing about someone else or something generic.

What Students Do: Every cycle of applicants, I see students write an essay about someone else or about super common topics - like the death of a grandparent or the famous sports injury. While it is okay to include people in your college essay, the essay itself should be about you, not about them.

Why It Doesn't Work: College admissions officers want to know about you, not about your dad or grandma. They also get sick of reading the same essay hundreds of times.

What to Do Instead: Refocus the story onto yourself and what it conveys about you.

Brainstorming Activity: List three moments in your life that would be really hard for someone else to copy or write about.

Bonus: How do these three moments connect to other elements of your life?



Mistake #4: Focusing on the challenge and not the solution.

What Students Do: Many students write about a challenge they have faced, but for 650 words, they only write about the challenge.

Why It Doesn't Work: You don't get into college for facing a challenge. You get into college for showing what you've learned and how you've grown from the challenge.

What to Do Instead: Write about the challenge briefly, in one to two paragraphs. Then, focus on what you did about the challenge.

Brainstorming Activity: Answer the following questions about a challenge you've faced.

What happened? What was the situation or moment of friction? What choice did you face? Were you stuck, scared, confused, frustrated, or uncertain? What did you do about it? What action did you take – even if it felt small at the time? How did it change you? What did you realize about yourself, others, or the world?

Bonus: What might this say about who you are today? How does this experience connect to what you value, how you show up, or what you want next?

Mistake #5: Waiting until the last minute.

What Students Do: Teens tend to procrastinate out of not knowing what to write about or how to handle the college essay. It is often a freeze response rather than an issue of laziness.

Why It Doesn't Work: Writing is a process and requires time and space. If you wait until last minute to do your essay, it will not be good compared to the kids who have spent their summer writing it.

What to Do Instead: Reframe the way you approach this essay. Think Today is not about writing the perfect essay. It's about writing the wrong essay – fast.

Brainstorming Activity: Set a timer for 10 minutes and start with "If you really knew me, you'd know..." Don't worry about structure, grammar, or whether it's good.

Bonus: Highlight 1–2 sentences that feel real or surprising. That's the seed.

If you are still struggling to write your personal statement, or want additional support, sign up for a one-on-one brainstorming session with me. I've been coaching kids for years on college essays, and I can help you brainstorm ideas for a strong and compelling topic, strategically outline, or edit existing college essays. Use the QR code to sign up for a session today.



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