



BYHS College Planning and Placement

Writing the Personal Essay

The Personal Essay may be the most frightening piece of writing that most high school students face. Just because your whole future is at stake is no reason to panic! Take an orderly approach to the task, and all will be well.

The admissions office wants a personal essay because it indicates how well you can express yourself in writing, and it gives them some indication of what kind of person you are. Of course, you could lie in the essay, or you could even have someone else write it for you, so the essay has to be a part of the larger picture which includes your test scores, grades, and what other people think of you.

This is your opportunity to either emphasize the skills and characteristics that show up to your benefit in the other parts of your application, or to distract the admissions people from scores or comments that may not reflect so well on you.

Remember that this essay is NOT a dispassionate, objective document. It is a piece of persuasive literature. It is carefully targeted direct-mail marketing. Your test scores and grades appeal to the intellect; your personal essay must strike at the emotions.

Some things are like any other essay:

A. FOLLOW THE DIRECTIONS!!!

1. If the instructions say something like, "In the space below. . .," they DO NOT mean "Attach extra pages."
 2. "About 400 words" means between 350 and 450 words. Closer to the target is better, but "about" does not mean "exactly." It also does not mean half as many or twice as many.
 3. "A page," usually means double-spaced, standard-sized typewriter type, with one-inch margins. You may be able to fudge a bit on the line spacing, and perhaps on the margins, but NEVER by using an extra-large or extra-small type size.
 4. "In your own handwriting" means cursive, not block letters.
- B. Choose a topic that you can write about, and limit its scope so that you can do it justice in the allotted space. If the instructions include the topic, you still

have a great deal of latitude in how you interpret it.

- C. Do your pre-writing: Brainstorm. Write down all of your thoughts on the subject, then select, organize and refine them.
- D. Write a first draft.
- E. Go back and construct an introduction that will grab the reader's attention.
- F. Make sure that the essay supports the topic sentence, and that the conclusion is logically related to the introduction.
- G. Revise.
- H. Proof-read.
- I. Have someone else proof-read.
- J. Proof-read again.

The personal essay also gives you some new worries and some new freedoms:

- A. The rules of spelling, punctuation, and grammar still apply, but this is an informal essay; rules can be broken if there is good reason.
- B. "I," "me," "my," and "mine" are not bad words. They belong in personal essays.
- C. Personal opinions are not assertions of fact; they need not be supported by documentation, logic, or evidence. On the other hand, generalities are usually weak. Use specific examples.
- D. DO NOT WAFFLE! A lot of qualifiers make you look like you have no convictions. Don't be afraid to make bold statements.
- E. Some people are naturally original and creative. If you are one of those, the personal essay is the place to show it. If you are not, this is a bad place to try to force it. "Cutesy" is the kiss of death.
- F. In your proof-reading and revising, be sure that your essay ends up "sounding" like you. Ask a friend or a teacher who knows you very well to read it just for general impressions.