



College Admissions Essay: Dos and Don'ts

A phenomenal Common Application Personal Statement, aka “College Essay,” tells a story that reveals a student’s deepest passions and shows a life lesson a student has learned. Here are Ivy Method’s top Dos and Don’ts for the Common Application Personal Statement:

- DO: Write about YOURSELF, not a parent, friend, or sibling. A good Common App personal statement is focused on you, the applicant — not someone else in your life. (If you want to write about your *relationship* with someone else, great! But make sure the focus is on how that person *affected you* — not just a character study of that other person.)
- DON'T: Worry about the prompt! Pick the most interesting story, regardless of the prompts; Common App prompt #7 allows you to write on any topic you want.
- DO: Make every word count! Sprinkle in little details about yourself in every place you can.
- DON'T: Write something clichéd. College admissions officers have seen a zillion essays about winning/losing the big sports game, building houses in Africa, and the death of a grandparent. Find something in your experience that’s different, unusual, or quirky. Are you an avid birder? An amateur pastry chef? A hobbyist board gamer? A hardcore jazz fan? Write about it!
- DO: Write to your audience. College Admissions officers are not old stodgy people who wear elbow patch jackets and smoke pipes. Many are young — in their 20s and 30s. They know who Drake is and what TikTok is. You don’t have to be overly formal, but you also shouldn’t treat this like a diary entry either. Your goal? Personal — but thoughtful.
- DON'T: Try to be overly literary or fancy schmancy with your prose. Everyone loves a well-placed metaphor, but this essay is NOT the place to indulge your inner F. Scott Fitzgerald. You want to have a clearly written essay that communicates who YOU are — not 650 words of extended metaphor that compares playing soccer to dancing in a ballet. College admissions officers roll their eyes at that kind of purple prose. Try to write in YOUR voice, not someone else’s.
- DO: Use imagery, descriptive nouns, and interesting strong verbs! Vivid nouns and verbs are great ways to bring your reader into your story.
- DON'T: Overuse adjectives and adverbs. A few adjectives and adverbs are OK, but having TONS of them makes a story feel very overwritten. They’re like hot sauce: a little goes a long way.
- DON'T: Simply rehash your résumé. They have that on file. They want to get to know the person behind the numbers and activities sheets.
- DO: Get personal! The story you tell should show us something about yourself we wouldn’t otherwise know — a life lesson you learned, a new perspective you gained, or a passion you discovered. In the words of a Harvard Admissions Officer, the best essays are those that reveal authentic “personal qualities.”

- DON'T: Be super negative about anyone or anything. Deep negativity is a surefire way to turn a reader off. (Put another way: thoughtful criticism can work great in a college essay, but flat-out bashing someone or something is never a good look.)
- DO: Be funny! If you're the type of person who loves making (contextually appropriate!) jokes, go for it. If you can make an admissions officer laugh, they are WAY more likely to remember you.
- DO: Start EARLY. It takes dozens if not hundreds of drafts and frequently several false starts to write a great college essay. We strongly recommend students start during the summer before Senior Year, in late June/early July, so that they get a jump start on essays before senior year starts.
- DO: Ask for feedback — but not too much, too fast. We recommend picking no more than one or two trusted teachers, mentors, or tutors to give you feedback on your early drafts. Once you have a polished draft, you can then ask for feedback from other people. Asking for feedback from too many people at once can muddy the process and leave you feeling confused.
- DO: Reach out to us if you need any support. We've guided hundreds of students to success on the college essay, and we're happy to guide you through every step of the process.