

Published October 12th, 2022

The most important essay you will write for your college applications

By Elizabeth LaScala



Doing College and Beyond College and Graduate School Admissions Services 970 Dewing Avenue, Suite 202, Lafayette 925.385.0562 (office) 925.330.8801 (mobile) www.doingcollege.com Elizabeth@doingcollege.com Elizabeth LaScala, PhD, brings decades of admissions expertise to personally guide each student through applying to well-matched colleges, making each step more manageable and less stressful. She has placed hundreds of students in the most prestigious colleges and universities in the US. Elizabeth attends conferences, visits campuses and makes personal contacts with admissions networks to stay current on the evolving nature of college admissions. She and her professional team offer resume development, test preparation, academic tutoring, value analysis, merit and need-based scholarship search and more.

Notice the italicized words along with the twice used word 'specifics' and they even ask you to elaborate on how these specifics will enrich your time at Northwestern and beyond (meaning after graduation). Wow! You must pack a lot of punch into 300 words!

Next in line for what you should avoid doing is using overly emotional language. How many times have I read "I have wanted to attend MIT since I was in kindergarten, and it is my dream college."? Now I am not making fun of this type of response-I believe it is from the heart. But it is not going to get you into MIT.

Another important don't is making errors about the college's colors, mascot, and teams. And don't misspell the names of important people associated with the college or use the wrong names for libraries, departments, and research facilities. You may not think using the word 'department' instead of the word 'division' is important, but to those who are reading your application, errors like this are a red flag that show you didn't do your homework.

After the personal essay is done many students think the hardest part of their application is behind them. In my view, the personal essay is the easier part. In many ways and for many reasons, it is simpler to write about yourself than it is to write about a college and why you want to apply. In part because it is tough to write, the "Why Our College?" essay (and its many variations) is one of the most popular supplemental questions colleges ask. Colleges want to see how you handle this important question.

I implore my students to consider this type of question when they are selecting schools to apply to. I ask them to take careful notes as they research colleges, as well as take photos and make notes after they visit campuses. Then I ask them to make a document with two columns-one heading is "What I Want" and the other is "What the College Has." And complete this task for each school they plan to send an application. Unfortunately, human nature being what it is, students often neglect this important task. But it lies in wait, appearing as students are working on their applications. And the work still must be done before submission.

So, exactly what are schools looking for when they ask this prompt? First, let's look at what they don't want. They don't want to read about how the school's size, location, ranking and weather appeal to you. Why? Because most students write about those factors and so the admission readers are tired of reading about those things. Another reason is that colleges make the (not entirely absurd) assumption that a student plans to attend college for an education. Since colleges are in the business of delivering an education in the form of a bachelor's degree, it stands to reason that a strong Why Our College essay would emphasize academics and the campus community that supports it rather than the weather or size, at least as a top priority. Some colleges even go the extra mile and spell out for you exactly what they want you to write about. Want an example? Sure thing-here is Northwestern University's prompt this cycle:

"In 300 words or less, help us understand how you might engage specific resources, opportunities, and/or communities here. We are curious about what these specifics are, as well as how they may enrich your time at Northwestern and beyond."

So, what should you write about? As I mentioned above, academics make a good first start. But be careful- you should not try to lift what you write about one college's academic programs and opportunities and insert it into another college's essay. That would be another red flag and show the admission folks that you have not done sufficient research. Schools are unique in their offerings, and you need to show them you understand the ways in which they are unique. That will make them feel special! And don't we all love feeling special?

Another set of factors to research and write about are specific classes, professors, clubs and activities that you would be truly excited to be part of. And show how the academics and these activities are a perfect match to your needs and interests. I recently read an essay that included a reference to the student's excitement about a photo journalism contest at Stanford. And it just so happens that the student is an amateur photographer as well as senior staff writer for her high school's newspaper. Pure genius to tie the two together!

So when you tackle these kinds of prompts, try putting yourself in the place of the admission reader and think what would they want to read about? It's very easy for a college reader to determine which students have put in the effort on this kind of essay. So it is worth taking the time to perfect it.

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