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ADMITIFY

# US College Essay

## Handbook

Admitify

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# Tips on writing essays

## How to Write a Standout College Essay

Writing a great college essay is very different from typical academic writing. You need to respond to a prompt clearly, tell a compelling story, and stand out—all within a tight word limit. With each university offering unique supplemental prompts on top of the Common App essay, it's easy to feel overwhelmed.

Here are some proven strategies we recommend to our students:

1. Answer the prompt directly.
Stay focused. If a school asks about an extracurricular or your favorite book, make sure you clearly respond to the question without getting sidetracked by unrelated background.

2. Use specific details.
Mention names, places, and experiences that matter to you. Specifics make your story more personal and help admissions officers remember you.

3. Tell a story.
Structure your essay like a narrative, with a hook and clear progression. Use anecdotes and themes to keep the reader engaged.

4. Reuse and adapt essays.
Many supplemental prompts overlap. With smart editing, one essay can work for multiple schools—just make sure each version still answers the prompt and reflects the school's values.

5. Show fit.
Demonstrate why the school is right for you and vice versa. Mention specific courses, programs, or opportunities that align with your goals.

6. Think like an admissions reader.
Avoid clichés. Focus less on what happened and more on how you write about it. Show insight and originality.

7. Be mindful of tone and voice.
Your tone should match your topic—reflective, sincere, maybe even humorous. Your voice should be authentic and consistent with how you speak.

8. Start early and revise.
Strong essays are rarely written in one sitting. Begin early to give yourself time to reflect, revise, and improve.

9. Show emotion, not drama.
Vulnerability makes your writing more human. Be honest and let your emotions show—whether it's joy, fear, or growth—but don't exaggerate for effect.

**Our team has helped thousands of students craft essays that led to offers from top universities. With the right approach and guidance, your story can stand out, too.**

# #1 Essay

## Harvard Essay

This past summer, I had the privilege of participating in the University of Notre Dame's Research Experience for Undergraduates (REU) program . Under the mentorship of Professor Wendy Bozeman and Professor Georgia Lebedev from the department of Biological Sciences, my goal this summer was to research the effects of cobalt iron oxide cored ($CoFe_2O_3$) titanium dioxide ($TiO_2$) nanoparticles as a scaffold for drug delivery, specifically in the delivery of a compound known as curcumin, a flavonoid known for its anti-inflammatory effects. As a high school student trying to find a research opportunity, it was very difficult to find a place that was willing to take me in, but after many months of trying, I sought the help of my high school biology teacher, who used his resources to help me obtain a position in the program.

Using equipment that a high school student could only dream of using, I was able to map apoptosis (programmed cell death) versus necrosis (cell death due to damage) in HeLa cells, a cervical cancer line, after treating them with curcumin-bound nanoparticles. Using flow cytometry to excite each individually suspended cell with a laser, the scattered light from the cells helped to determine which cells were living, had died from apoptosis or had died from necrosis. Using this collected data, it was possible to determine if the curcumin and/or the nanoparticles had played any significant role on the cervical cancer cells. Later, I was able to image cells in 4D through con-focal microscopy. From growing HeLa cells to trying to kill them with different compounds, I was able to gain the hands-on experience necessary for me to realize once again why I love science.

Living on the Notre Dame campus with other REU students, UND athletes, and other summer school students was a whole other experience that prepared me for the world beyond high school. For 9 weeks, I worked, played and bonded with the other students, and had the opportunity to live the life of an independent college student.

Along with the individually tailored research projects and the housing opportunity, there were seminars on public speaking, trips to the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory, and one-on-one writing seminars for the end of the summer research papers we were each required to write. By the end of the summer, I wasn't ready to leave the research that I was doing. While my research didn't yield definitive results for the effects of curcumin on cervical cancer cells, my research on curcumin-functionalized $CoFe_2O_4/TiO_2$ core-shell nanoconjugates indicated that there were many unknown factors affecting the HeLa cells, and spurred the lab to expand their research into determining whether or not the timing of the drug delivery mattered and whether or not the position of the binding site of the drugs would alter the results. Through this summer experience, I realized my ambition to pursue a career in research. I always knew that I would want to pursue a future in science, but the exciting world of research where the discoveries are limitless has captured my heart. This school year, the REU program has offered me a year-long job, and despite my obligations as a high school senior preparing for college, I couldn't give up this offer, and so during this school year, I will be able to further both my research and interest in nanotechnology.

# #2 Essay

# University of Pennsylvania Essay

When I was thirteen and visiting Liberia, I contracted what turned out to be yellow fever. I met with the local doctor, but he couldn't make a diagnosis simply because he didn't have access to blood tests and because symptoms such as "My skin feels like it's on fire" matched many tropical diseases. Luckily, my family managed to drive me several hours away to an urban hospital, where I was treated. Yellow fever shouldn't be fatal, but in Africa it often is. I couldn't believe that such a solvable issue could be so severe at the time—so I began to explore.

The exploration led me to the African Disease Prevention Project (ADPP), a non-profit organization associated with several universities. I decided to create the first high school branch of the organization; I liked its unique way of approaching health and social issues. Rather than just raising money and channeling it through third parties, each branch "adopts" one village and travels there to provide for its basic needs. As branch president, I organize events from small stands at public gatherings to 60-person dinner fundraisers in order to raise both money and awareness. I've learned how to encourage my peers to meet deadlines, to work around 30 different schedules at once, and to give presentations convincing people why my organization is worth their donation. But overall, ADPP has taught me that small changes can have immense impacts. My branch has helped raise almost $3,000 to build water sanitation plants, construct medical clinics, and develop health education programs in the small village of Zwedru. And the effect doesn't stop there—by improving one area, our efforts permeate into neighboring villages as they mimic the lifestyle changes that they observe nearby—simple things, like making soap available—can have a big effect. The difference between ADPP and most other organizations is its emphasis on the basics and making changes that last. Working towards those changes to solve real life problems is what excites me.

I found that the same idea of change through simple solutions also rang true during my recent summer internship at Dr. Martin Warner's lab at UCLA. Dr. Martin's vision involves using already available digital technologies to improve the individualization of healthcare. By using a person's genome to tailor a treatment for them or using someone's personal smartphone as a mobile-monitor to remotely diagnose symptoms, everyday technology is harnessed to make significant strides forward. At the lab, I focused on parsing through medical databases and writing programs that analyze cancerous genomes to find relationships between certain cancers and drugs. My analysis resulted in a database of information that physicians can use to prescribe treatments for their patients' unique cancerous mutations. Now, a pancreatic cancer patient does not need to be the "guinea-pig" for a prototype drug to have a shot at survival: a doctor can choose the best treatment by examining the patient individually instead of relying on population-wide trends. For the first time in my science career, my passion was going to have an immediate effect on other people, and to me, that was enthralling. Dr. Martin's lab and his book, Digital Healthcare: A New Age of Medicine, have shown me that changing something as simple as how we treat a disease can have a huge impact. I have found that the search for the holy grail of a "cure for cancer" is problematic as nobody knows exactly what it is or where to look—but we can still move forward without it.

Working with Project ADPP and participating in medical research have taught me to approach problems in a new way. Whether it's a complex genetic disease or a tropical fever, I've found that taking small steps often is the best approach. Finding those steps and achieving them is what gets me excited and hungry to explore new solutions in the future

# #3 Essay

# UC Berkeley Essay

The phenomenon of interdependency, man depending on man for survival, has shaped centuries of human civilization. However, I feel, the youth of today are slowly disconnecting from their community. For the past few years, human connection has intrigued me and witnessing the apathy of my peers has prompted me to engage in various leadership positions in order to motivate them to complete community service and become active members of society.

Less than a year before ninth grade began, my cousin and close friend passed away from cancer, and in the hodge-podge of feelings, I did not emotionally deal with either death. However, a simple tale helped me deal with these deaths and take action.

I was never fully aware of how closely humans rely upon each other until I read The Fall of Freddy the Leaf by Leo Buscaglia in freshman year. The allegory is about a leaf that changes with the seasons, finally dying in the winter, realizing that his purpose was to help the tree thrive. After reading it, I was enlightened on the cycle of life and realized the tremendous impact my actions had on others.

Last year, I joined the American Cancer Society's Relay for Life, a twenty-four-hour relay walk-a-thon designed to raise funds for cancer research and create awareness about its early detection. I started a team at school, gathered thirty students and chaperones, and raised $800 for the cause. I watched as each student created friendships with other students on our team and members of the Phoenix community. This year, I led a team in the relay for life again with the schoolwide team of 95 members, and we raised $2,900 for the cure for cancer. At first the group leader ship consisted of only my advisor in me; however, I gained the support of the administrators. I spent well over an hour a day preparing for the event, and it was all worth it!

The Sonora Eagles were students of different grade levels, ethnicities, socioeconomic backgrounds, and educational ability. We joked and played football while volunteering. The most important moment occurred during the night's luminaria ceremony, during which cancer patients of the past and present were commemorated. Our whole team gathered around, and I asked people to share how they have been affected by cancer. As I went through the crowd, their faces illuminated by candlelight, their cheeks were wet with cleansing tears, I realize the impact I had on them, the purpose I was fulfilling; but most importantly, I realized the impact they had had on me. The Sonora Eagles were my means for dealing with the death of my loved ones to cancer.

The theme for relay for life is a hope for a cure. Through this experience as a leader, I have come to realize, as a community, we hope together, we dream together, we work together, and we succeed together. This is the phenomenon of interdependency, the interconnectedness of life, the pivotal reason for human existence. I have continued this momentum by starting a Sonora High School chapter of American Cancer Society Youth, a club dedicated to youth involvement and several aspects of the American Cancer Society, including the recent Arizona Proposition 45.

Each one of us leaves behind a legacy as we fulfill our purpose in life. I believe my purpose as a student is to encourage others to become active community members and motivate them to reach new heights. As a student of the University of California, I will contribute my understanding of the human condition and student motivation to help strengthen student relationships within the campus and throughout the community.

# #4 Essay

# John Hopkins University

The splash of color that engulfed the wooden tables and bar stools first lured me into a local art studio next to my parents' favorite supermarket. At seven years old, even I could read the big red sign: "Painting Lessons." I peered through the studio's glass windows and watched students smear turpentine across blank canvases, create initial sketches in vibrant base coats, and add finishing details with miniature brushes. I was hooked.
After starting the class myself, I fell in love with this meticulous but gratifying process. Eventually, painting and drawing consumed my spare time—I was committed to replicating the shapes and colors I observed in animals, people, landscapes, and objects on canvas. In those early years, I loved every moment and teachers praised my rapid progression. I didn't know then that my aspirations to perfect my skills in this craft would lead me down many roads of frustration.

I remember the struggle vividly: as I stared blankly at that wooden model of a hand for what felt like forever, feelings of frustration, disappointment, and desperation blocked any efforts to continue manipulating the shadows, highlights, and shapes on my paper. I'd spent hours trying to successfully depict this hand model, but my hard work felt meaningless. That day, I left class unsatisfied with my abilities, and distraught by this challenge. Never before had art been a source of such distress, and at a young age I didn't know how to grapple with these feelings.

After taking a break for a couple days, I found myself curious to try again. This time I accepted that what I was striving to convey on paper might not manifest itself on the first, second, or maybe even third attempt. After struggling with several different versions of this drawing over weeks, I finally felt satisfied with my depiction of the human hand. Not because it was the best demonstration of my artistic ability, but rather because tackling a skill that challenged me so thoroughly gave me pride unparalleled by my other works. It became one of my favorite pieces.

The hurdle I needed to overcome was not the task itself; it was being able to continue working at something that didn't come easily. My struggle to illustrate a hand was not a test of my abilities, but rather of my patience and perseverance.

This past summer, I audited a data science class at UC Berkeley while I interned for a graduate researcher. The only high schooler surrounded by college engineers, I was stretched beyond anything I'd delved into in high school: math concepts I had never seen before, a new computer programming language. When I first started tackling the problem sets, I often found myself staring at the page for hours. I started to get frustrated that I was not grasping new concepts fast enough to efficiently work through the course.
But I reminded myself it was not the first time I found myself challenged by something I was passionate about. As with many art pieces in the past, I continued working on the labs with the understanding that they were likely not going to successfully run after my first few—or many—attempts. After completing a few more labs, problems started to become more familiar and easier to handle, and eventually, I started applying the skills I developed in the course to create real data sets that tracked boat emissions in the Bay Area.

This work challenged me more than any math or science class had ever challenged me in my academic career, and as a result the work was that much more rewarding. As frustrating as these challenges are, I am inspired to leap towards them, because they have instilled in me the confidence to view challenges as opportunities for growth.

# Where our students end up:

## Admitify Alumni

**Weill Cornell Qatar**
Ahmed Fahd

**University of Waterloo, Canada**
Omar Salim

**University of Bristol**
Hafza Sadat

**University of California, San Diego**
Alamjeet Singh

**Georgia Tech, US**
Aditya Kumar

**University College London**
Sheref Abdo

**Emory University, US**
Ella Hampton

**Qatar University, Medicine**
Imran Rasul

**Ain Shams, Cairo**
Mohamed Ashraf

**NYU, Abu Dhabi**
Shahida Ahmed

**Boston University**
Raya Hussain

**Qatar University, Medicine**
Moez Shams

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Australia and NZ

Arabic Countries

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- AP
- IB

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