Your college essay in 10 simple steps

Content

Step 1
Understand the Prompt and Purpose

Before choosing a topic, be sure you understand what the prompt is asking and how the essay fits into the application. Think about what readers already know about you and what your application doesn't show yet.

Step 2
Brainstorm Ideas

Consider multiple topics. For each one, balance three key elements: the story idea, the prompt, and what readers will learn about you. You might be surprised by which one you choose.

Step 3
Focus on Theme

Every essay needs a clear theme. The theme has two parts: 1) "What happened?" (What will you write about?) and 2) "Why does it matter?" (What will readers learn about you?)

Step 4
Free Write for Details

Once the theme is clear, it's time to get some words on the page. It doesn't matter what those words are or how many you write. Just capture details, focusing on the "What happened?" aspect of your theme.

Step 5
Write Content Draft

Content comes first. We suggest writing more than the word limit so you don't overthink the first draft or try to make it perfect. You'll have plenty of time for structure and polish later.

Step 6
Review Prompt and Theme

In Step 6, we read the first draft with the prompt and theme in mind, then provide writing exercises to help focus the essay and add details. This review is for content only.

Structure

Step 7
Write Content / Structure Draft(s)

Step back and review your work so far: theme, free writes, draft 1 and Step 6 feedback. Then write a new draft, this time paying attention to both content and structure.

Step 8
Review Content and Structure

In Step 8, we read the essay with content and structure in mind, pointing out what works and where the essay could be improved. We share questions and observations, so the student can make strong editorial decisions during revision.

Polish

Step 9
Revise and Polish

Step back again and read the essay with fresh eyes. The goal is to tie up any loose ends and make sure the essay is clean, but not to rewrite it beyond recognition.

Step 10
Final Review and Proofread

The final review is for clarity and consistency only, with an emphasis on grammar, spelling and punctuation. Perfection is not the goal. You are a high school student and should sound like one.

What most people do with college essays

Content

Step 1
Understand the Prompt and Purpose

Step 2
Brainstorm Ideas

they start here

Step 3
Focus on Theme

Step 4
Free Write for Details

Step 5
Write Content Draft

then jump here

Step 6
Review Prompt and Theme

Structure

Step 7
Write Content / Structure Draft(s)

Step 8
Review Content and Structure

then revise with a disorganized mash-up of Steps 8-10

Polish

Step 9
Revise and Polish

Step 10
Final Review and Proofread