

Tips for Writing a College Essay

Pierce Coughter, Assistant Dean of Admission, University of Virginia

- Above all else: Be Yourself. We want to hear about what makes you...*you*. Don't worry about thinking of the secret answer to the prompt – there isn't one.
- There is no preference in which prompt to answer, or how to answer any of those prompts. We're not looking for right or wrong – we're looking for a voice.
- This isn't the place to rehash the previous parts of your application. Writing about your strong grades, taking AP courses, or activities we've already seen listed won't add to the depth of your application.
- Does it sound like you? If your friend found this essay – without your name on it – would they recognize that you wrote it? How about your teacher? If you read over the essay and the answer to these seems like "yes," then that's a strong essay!
- We don't need your standard AP English term paper style of essay (thesis statement, point, evidence, point, evidence, etc..., conclusion). We'll see your academic strength on your transcript and in your letters of recommendation. Write like you want us to know about you.
- Avoid the "McEssay." My colleague likes to describe the majority of essays we read like a Big Mac. Anywhere you go in the world, you can find a McDonald's and get a Big Mac. A Big Mac in Charlottesville tastes just like one in Toronto – just as it would one in Los Angeles. It's not necessarily a bad thing – if I'm hungry, a Big Mac will do the job, but it won't be a memorable standout experience. We read a ton of the standard essays about any standard topic – and they all tend to sound the same:
 - *From my time on the field hockey team, I learned time management skills, leadership skills, and perseverance...*
 - *From my time working at Best Buy, I learned time management skills, dedication, and customer service skills...*
 - *From my mission trip to South America, I learned a sense of selflessness, leadership skills, and perseverance...*

Those don't stand out from each other much, do they? Very different topics, but they're the same essay essentially. Writing a McEssay won't hurt your application, but it won't be a strength for it either. **It's not the topic that makes an essay standout, it's the writing.** Write with your voice. Show us what you're like – not how well you use a thesaurus. If you're poetic, make an essay poetic. If you're funny, write a funny one. Feel free to take a chance (within reason, of course).

- Don't placate us. We don't want to read about how much you love Thomas Jefferson. We don't need you to focus on how much you love honor codes.
- Proof read! If your essay is riddled with errors, we'll think you're not taking this process seriously. That would make us sad ☹. Sad admissions officers are not what you want.
- Don't stress. Let's reiterate: it's not the topic that stands out to us. Go with your gut reaction to the question. Whatever pops in your head when you read it – use that as your answer and go for it!