

# LESSON 4



## Essays, Interviews, and Campus Visits



### Quick Write

Write a paragraph about yourself that would be suitable to submit to a college admissions officer. What are your strong points? What are your ambitions? Why do you want to go to college?



### Learn About

- the personal side of the college application process
- writing a college application essay
- how to have a successful interview
- campus visits

*“College [application] essays are essentially columns, little bits of persuasive prose designed to be both personal and instructive, without too much wear-and-tear on the reader.”*

Jay Mathews, education columnist, *Washington Post*

### The Personal Side of the College Application Process

As you are finding out, applying to college is a multistep process. You must decide which criteria are most important to you and make a list of schools that meet those criteria.

Then you must prepare for and take college entrance exams and other tests. Finally, you must deal with the personal side of college applications. That’s what this lesson is about.

The personal side of the application process is important because most colleges want to know more about you than just your test results and high school records. They want to get to know you as a person. To do this, they rely on two main things: 1) an essay that you include with your written application; and 2) what they learn about you during an interview. The interview, along with a third element, the campus visit, also provides you an opportunity to learn more about the college.

### Writing a College Application Essay

Most colleges require that prospective students submit an essay with their applications. By reading your essay, an **admissions officer**, or a *person who helps decide whom to admit to a college*, can discover how you think and what is important to you. Reading the essay also enables the admissions officer to determine how you organize and express your thoughts.



## Vocabulary

- admissions officer
- transcript
- itinerary
- teaching assistant

This information helps the admissions officer decide why the college should, or should not, admit you.

If you are not a good writer, get guidance in advance from your English teacher, your parents, guardian, or a tutor as you write your essay. If your English teacher has read and graded several papers you've written, ask for specific tips on how to improve your style.

Write a draft, edit it, put it aside a day or two, and then look at it again. You may have to write several drafts before you become satisfied. Remember, this is an important piece of work. It is not a routine homework assignment. One or more of the college admissions staff will examine it carefully for spelling and grammar, as well as for content and style.

If the college specifies a length, stick to it. Even if the college places no limits on length, you should keep the essay as short as possible, while still covering the topic completely. If the reader sees you can make a point clearly and succinctly, it's a definite plus.

## Essay Questions

Many colleges have their own application forms, while others use a common form. You can download an example of the common form from <https://www.commonapp.org/CommonApp/DownloadForms.aspx>.

The essay topics on this form are good examples of the types of questions colleges ask applicants to write about. Some examples include:

- "Evaluate a significant experience, achievement or risk that you have taken and its impact on you."
- "Discuss some issue of personal, local, or national concern and its importance to you."
- "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence."



Sometimes a college application essay will ask you to choose your own topic to discuss. Choose it with care. If you think of a topic too quickly, like “The Big Game,” chances are many of your peers will have the same idea. Select a topic that distinguishes you from other students, maybe a personally moving experience, or an issue that you had to solve within your class, peer group or among those close to you.

- “Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you.”
- “Describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in a college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.”

“Notice that the common theme in all these questions is you,” writes Madeleine R. Eagon, Vice President, Strategic Communications and Financial Aid at DePauw University in Indiana. “Regardless of your choice of topic, your essay should provide the reader insight into who you are, how you think and what matters in your life.”

## Tips on Writing a Great Essay

The Cambridge Essay Service gives the following general tips for writing any type of essay:

### 1. Don't Strive for Perfection

Writing a college application essay is not like competing in an Olympic diving match. You don't start with a perfect score and then lose points for every error. The admissions officers who read these essays are not tyrants with red pencils. They are smart, busy people who know their colleges well and who want to learn whether you'd be a good fit. They are looking for an impression. That impression is mostly emotional. Their goal is to reach a conclusion about you, not about the intellectual content of your essay. The best conclusion that a reader can reach is, “I really like this kid.”

### 2. Focus on One Great Idea

The person who reads your essay will want to get the gist of what you have to say quickly. Focus your essay on one point and express your ideas clearly. If you have more than one point, or if you try to be too complex, the reader might get confused.

### 3. Keep It Personal

Avoid big topics. This is not the place to set forth your ideas on global warming or peace in the Middle East. Don't introduce heavy-duty moral principles. If you must have a moral, make it fresh and right for you.

#### 4. Be Yourself

On hearing that you have to write an essay, someone may say, “Don’t worry—just be yourself.” That may sound like good advice, but it’s not realistic. Just who is “yourself”? You have several selves—one for your family, one for friends, one for formal occasions, one for when you’re alone. Should you tell the admissions officer about yourself alone or as part of a group? Think about this carefully. Then pick the “self” that is honest and that presents you in the best possible light—the self that can present you as unique and passionate about something important.



**Your essay should provide insight into who you are and what matters in your life.**

*Courtesy of Supri Suharjoto/Shutterstock*

#### 5. Be Upbeat

If you have a choice of topics, select something upbeat. Write about a passion, not a doubt. Teen anxiety and cynicism are tiresome to admissions officers. If you love something or someone and can convey that love with detail and conviction, do it.

#### 6. Use Dialogue

If it’s appropriate for your topic, use dialogue instead of a third-person narrative. Dialogue is livelier and more direct, and will demonstrate a higher level of writing skill. Suppose, for example, that you were writing about Ms. Von Crabbe, your beloved childhood piano teacher. Which of the following passages is more effective?

- Ms. Von Crabbe, my piano teacher, taught me more than just how to play the piano. Her lessons were filled with advice that one could use in life. Even though her English was often just a little off, and her manner seemed odd, she will always be memorable to me.
- “Alex,” Ms. Von Crabbe would say, “the concert is starting even before you sit down on the bench.” She had warned us the first day, “Never call me ‘Ms. Von Crabapple,’ even if my back is turned to you.” At first, we were too afraid to try to call her that. Then, we came to love her teaching too much to do so.

The second essay is rich in quotation and detail. It helps the reader identify with Alex, the writer, and like him. Making the reader like you is an important goal of a college essay. The second essay also demonstrates an important principle of good writing: “Show, don’t tell.” While the first essay *tells* the reader that Ms. Von Crabbe’s English was a little off and her manner odd, the second essay *shows* both mannerisms by quoting Ms. Von Crabbe in her own words.

## 7. Use Details

Journalists and other good writers know the importance of detail. Details create sharp, memorable images. Which of these sentences is more memorable?

- I live in a suburb outside a big city where half the property is conservation land, and the other half is large plot houses.
- I live in Lincoln, Massachusetts, a small town 15 miles west of Boston, where half the property is conservation evergreen forests and the other is large houses on small lots.

The second sentence is better than the first because it has more detail. It also helps the reader see you in a real place. In the process, you become a real person. Notice that these details don't make the sentence significantly longer, even though they do make it much more interesting. Choose each word with care, especially if the number of words you can write is limited.

There are several online sources that will help you in writing your application essay:

- At <http://www.college-admission-essay.com/> you will find information about writing a good essay, application assistance, school reviews, and other information.
- Peterson's College Search site at <http://www.petersons.com/college-search/writing-college-application-essay.aspx> also provides some good guidance.
- The College Board has tips at <http://collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills/109.html> with video segments about the application process and what admissions officers say they are looking for at <http://www.collegeboard.com/student/apply/essay-skills9406.html>.

## Use Social Media to Show Your Best Side to Colleges



**Social media help colleges get to know prospective students.**

*Courtesy of moodboard/Corbis Images*

Social media tools and networking systems are making it more possible than ever for anyone who wants to find out about you to do so with a basic Internet search. According to a 2011 survey of admissions officers at 359 colleges and universities, the use of social media as part of the admissions process is on the rise. This annual report found that “nearly a quarter (24 percent) of respondents from the schools surveyed have gone to an applicant’s Facebook® or other social networking page to learn more about them, while 20 percent have Googled® them.”

## Tips for Prospective Students

- **Do a little housekeeping**—Google your name and see what comes up on the results page. Are there pictures or posts you need to delete?
- **Check your settings**—What you thought was private may now be public, as platforms continue to update their terms of service and setting options. To protect your privacy, periodically go into each of your accounts to review these terms and confirm your settings.
- **Consider your audience**—It may be larger than you think. What things do you want your audience, particularly college recruiters and admissions counselors, to know about you?
- **Participate in conversations with your favorite schools!**—Once you find these schools online and active in social media, don't stop there. Engage in ongoing conversations taking place in discussion forums and live chat sessions.

These numbers show an increase from the 10 percent of schools reviewing applicants' online profiles in 2008. It is extremely important for you to be careful how you come across on the Web! While your first thought is often about how social media profiles can be full of negative information, keep in mind that these searches can be a positive thing, bringing an applicant's qualifications and potential to the attention of college recruiters and application reviewers.

### It's a Two-way Street

You can find out more about the schools you are considering via social media as they become more active with their own social media accounts. Colleges today are increasingly active in promoting their school programs and reaching out to prospective, current, and former students. According to the Kaplan Test Prep Report, Facebook® (85 percent) and YouTube (66 percent) are two of the most popular tools schools are using to build virtual communities and make these connections. For you, the applicant, reviewing the social media profiles of colleges and universities can be a time saver, providing answers to frequently asked questions about the school and the admission process. According to a 2010 survey of 1,000 college-bound high school students conducted by the higher education consulting firm Noel-Levitz, online access to information is very important to prospective students. This study found that 76 percent of students used Facebook® and the same percentage "supported schools creating their own private social networks for prospective students." There is a growing expectation that schools will have a presence online, not only with websites and videos, but also in social networking systems.

## How to Have a Successful Interview

Your essay shows how you think and how well you express yourself in writing. But it is one-way communication. An essay is not interactive. An interview is your chance to interact with a representative of a college. It's an exchange of information: You learn about the college, and the college learns about you. Many colleges require interviews. But even if a college doesn't require one, it should be willing to set one up at your request.

A face-to-face meeting with an admissions officer benefits both you and the college. The interview will give you a chance to broach issues regarding your application and background more effectively than you could in writing or on the phone. Some of these may involve your **transcript**, or *official record of your grades*. The interview will also give the college admissions officer a chance to ask an in-depth question on something that you've said in your essay or your application.

Here are some things the College Board suggests you do before the interview:

- Make an interview appointment with one of the colleges you want to attend
- Mark the date and time on my calendar (this is not something you want to forget)
- Research the college by checking out its website, brochures, and catalog
- Make notes about why you want to attend this college
- Make notes about your life outside the classroom, including activities, community service, and hobbies
- Get familiar with common interview questions and do some practice interviews with a friend or family member
- Prepare questions about the school to ask the interviewer
- Get directions to the interview.

Gather documents you may need, such as test scores and a high school transcript. Practicing with a friend who is also applying to college can be especially helpful. Ask each other questions, taking turns playing the roles of student and interviewer. It might even help to have someone sit in on these sessions and then offer feedback.

### are you **AWARE**?

*Alumnus* is the singular of the Latin word, *alumni*, which you learned in a previous lesson means graduates of a school (or college).

Most interviews don't last more than an hour. The interviewer will most likely be an admissions officer but could also be a faculty member, a college *alumnus*, or a student.

The interview might even be a group session with admissions staff and current students. If your college requires an interview, and you can't afford a trip to campus, the college may arrange for one of its representatives or alumni to interview you in your home town.

Also, think back about other interviews you may have had—perhaps for a summer job or internship. How could you have handled yourself better during that session? What did you do well?

## Interview Day Etiquette

### Dress

Wear comfortable clothes, but look neat and well groomed. Guys don't need to wear a suit. Pants with a dress shirt or sweater are fine. Girls may choose a dress, suit, or well-coordinated skirt and top. Wear dress shoes instead of sneakers, and leave your baseball cap in the car. Don't wear jeans or denim.

### Introductions

Make sure you get to the interview office with plenty of time to spare. Make eye contact as you greet the interviewer. Have a firm handshake. Introduce those who have accompanied you. Let them ask any questions they may have. They should not, however, participate in the actual interview.

### Body Language and Demeanor

It's natural to be somewhat nervous during an interview, no matter how well you have prepared. The interviewer will not count that against you. Do your best, however, not to slouch, fidget, or cross your arms tightly. The interviewer might interpret this body language as a lack of confidence. Speak clearly and maintain eye contact. Try to "read" the interviewer's reaction to what you're saying and adjust your remarks accordingly.

## The Interview Process

Each interviewer and interview is different. Some interviews are structured. The interviewer will have a list of questions and choose those most relevant to you. But a good interviewer will give you plenty of leeway in the conversation, too. That means you'll have to be prepared to ask questions as well as answer them.



**Each interview is different. Some colleges use a group session with admissions staff and current students.**

*Courtesy of Ryan Smith/Corbis Images*

### success TIP



If you plan to interview with several colleges, begin with those that are not your top choices. That way, when you arrive at the colleges high on your list, you'll have well-polished interviewing skills to improve your chances of acceptance.



## College Interview DOs and DON'Ts

### Interview DOs

1. Do take the interview process seriously.
2. Do be prepared for the interview. Research the school prior to arriving on campus—look at its website.
3. Do dress appropriately—you never get a second chance to make a first impression.
4. Do arrive on time.
5. Do bring a résumé of your activities and leadership projects to give to the admissions officer.
6. Do bring a list of questions you would like to ask during the interview.
7. Do be ready to actively engage in a conversation.
8. Do be yourself—the admissions staff is trying to get to know who you are and how you will fit into the school.
9. Do enjoy the interview.
10. Do say thank you to the interviewer and send a thank-you note.

### Asking Questions

Don't interrupt your interviewer or try to take the lead in the conversation. But do take an active role in it. This will help you steer the conversation in the direction you want. You'll be able to get answers to any questions that the materials you've read haven't answered. Your ability to participate in the interview is also an indication of your interest and initiative.

If you want to ask good questions, do your homework. Read the college catalog and website carefully, and don't ask questions that these sources answer. Instead, use such information sources as a springboard for in-depth questions. For example, suppose you're thinking about majoring in chemistry. Ask questions such as, "I noticed that Dr. Laura Brown is head of the chemistry department. Is she doing any research, and are students involved in it?" Another good question might be, "Where have some recent chemistry graduates found employment?"

### Interview DON'Ts

1. Don't say you came to the interview because your parent(s) made you.
2. Don't mumble or speak unclearly—this is your opportunity to convey information that might not be asked again on the application.
3. Don't give one-word answers, even if you are shy.
4. Don't be afraid to talk about yourself or your accomplishments.
5. Don't forget that this is your opportunity to make a great impression.
6. Don't be afraid that you might give the wrong answers—there are no wrong answers and the admissions staff is only trying to get to know you and your interests.
7. Don't make excuses for poor performance.
8. Don't be arrogant or obnoxious, even if you are nervous.
9. Don't forget to ask questions—this is your interview with a school, not just the school's interview with you. Get everything out of the interview that you need to make your decision about the school.
10. Don't use profanity or inappropriate language.
11. Don't chew gum during your interview.

### Answering Questions

Although you will want to have questions to ask, chances are you will spend most of the time during the interview answering questions. Be prepared to do some hard thinking. The interviewer does not want to grill you or make you feel uncomfortable; he or she does, however, want to see how you think and how you express yourself.

The interviewer will want to find out how you respond to predictable questions, as well as how you think on your feet. He or she will want to make sure that you can speak intelligently, not only about your grades, career plans, and test scores, but also about a variety of other topics. Don't be too quick to start a response. Think through your response so you don't appear nervous and remember to communicate confidence.

Typical interview questions include the following:

- Which courses have you enjoyed most in high school?
- Do you think your grades reflect your potential?
- Other than your studies, which school activities have been important to you and why?
- How did you spend last summer?
- Have you had a mentor? Who is it? How has this person influenced you?
- What has been your toughest challenge in life and how did you overcome it?
- What was your proudest achievement?
- What would you add to campus life at this college?
- Which other colleges are you considering?

The interviewer may even throw in some questions about topics of the day or ask your opinion on an important world issue. Answer these questions as knowledgeably as you can, but don't express any radical, hotheaded opinions. Support your ideas with facts.

The interviewer might ask you about the best book you've ever read. Don't try to bluff it. Don't pick an impressive title unless you can speak about the book in an intelligent way. Pick a book you know well.

Above all, don't get flustered if you get an unexpected question and find yourself tongue-tied. Simply say you'd like some time to think about the question and ask if you can send in a written answer later. If you don't know something, don't pretend that you do.

Before you end the conversation, ask the college to mail you any other helpful information, such as an activities calendar.

### Interview Follow-Up

Make notes about the interview, and within a day or so of returning home, send a thank-you note to your interviewer. Mention a few highlights of the interview. Stress how much you are interested in the school. Without overdoing it, emphasize why you think you would be an asset to the campus. If you forgot to mention something about yourself during the interview, say it in your thank-you note. If you promised to write an answer to an interview question, include this also. File away any business cards with contact information that the interviewer and other admission staff offer.

There is a lot to remember when it comes to college interviews. Figure 4.1 covers some of the main things.

**BEFORE**

- Research colleges through brochures, course catalogs, and the Web.
- Make an appointment.
- Get directions to the campus and admissions office.
- Practice answering the following sample questions.

**DURING**

Be prepared to answer...

- Why do you want to attend this school?
- What do you think will be your major? Why?
- How would you describe yourself to a stranger?
- What is your greatest accomplishment?
- What is the most significant contribution you've made to your school or community?
- What do you see yourself doing in the future? In five years? In 10 years?
- What is your favorite book? Who's your favorite author?
- Tell me about your family.
- What extracurricular activities are important to you?
- What is your strongest/weakest point?
- If you could have lunch with one special person (dead or alive) who would it be?  
What would be your first question?
- Who are your heroes and why?
- How would you spend \$1 million in 24 hours?

**ASK**

Ask at least three questions that can't be answered in the school's brochures ...

- Why would you recommend this school?
- How would you describe college life at this school?
- Do you have any advice for me?

**FIGURE 4.1****College Interview Checklist**

## Campus Visits

Most colleges strongly encourage applicants to visit their campuses during the search process. Nothing beats seeing a college campus for yourself and talking with the faculty and students there. Many colleges will arrange for prospective students to visit overnight. You should plan to visit colleges before applying, if possible. That way, if you find after visiting that a college doesn't appeal to you, you can cross it off your list. If you wish, you can schedule your interview during your campus visit.

### Planning the Visit

Once you have finalized your list of possible colleges, start planning an **itinerary**, or *travel schedule*, that leaves time to explore each school, as well as time to get from one to the other.

Set up appointments. Call the admissions office at least three weeks before your planned trip. Try to find a mutually convenient time for an interview. If you have a choice, it is better to have the interview toward the end of your visit rather than at the beginning. By that time, you will be more familiar with the campus and have better questions to ask. Also, ask about campus tours. If one is occurring during your visit, sign up. Finally, ask whether you need to bring anything with you to the interview. Plan to bring your family on your trip. Although it's ultimately up to you to select the college that you will attend, family members' input can help you make the decision. They know you best, and they can help you sort through your choices. Seeing the campus will help them decide what college they think is best for you, and their opinions should factor into this important decision.



**Nothing beats seeing a campus for yourself. If you can, bring your family along and get their input.**

*Courtesy of Ed Kashi/Corbis Images*

### What to Do on Campus

Try to begin your visit by taking the official campus tour. Then get a campus map and go off on your own to places that interest you most. Go inside the buildings and look around. Sit in on classes, if allowed. Talk to professors and students. Classrooms and labs are important, but don't overlook the student union. Talk to students there. Try to see what they think of the school. Ask them what advice they'd give an incoming freshman.

In addition, you might want to:

- Read the bulletin boards for events and other activities.
- Stop by the bookstore. Are the textbooks exciting? What other items do they have on sale?
- Tour the library and the computer and science labs. Do they look modern and well-equipped? Well staffed? Are they busy? Are students actively engaged?
- Spend time in the cafeteria. Eat at least one meal. How is the food? What are the choices? If you are a vegetarian, are there choices for you?
- Visit entertainment areas, such as the stadium, auditorium, theater, art center, or dance studio. Are they spacious and well maintained?
- Read the student newspaper. Look at accounts of recent campus news and activities. Also, read the editorials and letters to the editor. Do you care about the same issues as the current students?

Throughout the visit, take notes. Take photographs, too, if you want. Once you've seen several campuses, you can use the photos to jog your memory.

### Questions to Ask When Visiting a Campus

You should prepare for your campus visit as carefully as you do for your interview. While on campus, you should seek answers to the following questions, among others:

- What is the student/faculty ratio? The average class size? The retention rate?
- Are most classes taught by professors or by teaching assistants? (A **teaching assistant** is a graduate student who is specializing in the course topic. The college pays teaching assistants to teach introductory courses while they are studying for their graduate degrees.)
- What housing options are available? If you live in a dorm, can you choose your roommate?
- Are there fraternities and sororities on campus? What other student activities are there?
- Are the student facilities, such as the library, health center, and gym adequate?
- What student employment is available on and off campus?
- Do you need a car? Do many students bring cars? Is adequate parking available?

## Alternatives to a Campus Visit

If you can't visit one or all of the colleges on your list, make especially good use of the colleges' websites and written materials. Pick up information at college fairs. Find out from your guidance counselor whether a representative from the college will be making a recruitment visit to your high school. In addition, many colleges produce their own videos, CDs, and DVDs. Ask about such materials in your high school guidance office or school library.

## ✓ CHECKPOINTS

### Lesson 4 Review

Using complete sentences, answer the following questions on a sheet of paper.

1. Give some examples of the types of essay questions colleges will ask on their application forms.
2. List two overall guidelines for writing a good essay.
3. Why is an interview a good idea for both you and the college to which you're applying?
4. What are three things you should definitely do, and three things you should not do during a college interview?
5. What are the main things you should look for when visiting a college campus?
6. Why is it a good idea to have your family take part in college visits?

#### APPLYING ESSAY, INTERVIEW, AND CAMPUS VISIT SKILLS

7. Imagine that a college essay question is, "What are your career goals, and why does this college fit into them?" Outline the main points you will include in the essay. Then draft the essay itself, using the points in this lesson.
8. Practice a college interview with a friend or fellow student. Take turns being the interviewer and the student. Ask each other some tough questions.