100 Successful College Essays
“Advice from the inside”: by Fred Hargadon, Dean of Admissions, Princeton University

1. **Relax.** Write your essay for **yourself** or for a favorite **relative**, **not** for some imaginary **admissions officer** or faculty member at the other end.

2. Consider simply **telling a story.** **Stories** do not need to be long to be effective. What is left out is often what draws the reader in.

3. Invest some time in **reading some good writing** before sitting down to write your essay. This can ignite similar skills in the reader and can put you in an appropriate **frame of mind** for embarking on your essay.

4. Be sure that your essay reflects **you** and not some **idealized** version of yourself that you think the admissions officer will favor. In other words, make sure that your essay “**fits**” your application. Essays that appear **contrived**, either in substance or style, can stand out and end up working against an otherwise **attractive applicant**.

5. Don’t ask your essay to carry too heavy a load. Don’t use the essay to do the following:
   - **Drop names**
   - Remind the college that your **parents** are **alumni**
   - **justify** a low grade, low test score, or lost **election**

6. Resist the temptation to write the **all-purpose** essay to which you make small **adjustments** in order to use for all your college applications, no matter how different the **topics** or **questions** may be.

7. Sort and sift any **advice** you may receive and settle only on what intuitively makes **sense** to you.

“The Question of the Essay”: by Delsie Z. Phillips, Director of Admission, Haverford College

What exactly do admissions officers want to know when they ask you to write the college essay?

1. No matter the question, they are asking what is really **important** to you, who you **are**, and how you **arrived** where you are. The whole college application process is really a **self-exploration**, and the essay is a way to put your **personal adventure** into words. So write with descriptive details that invite the reader on your journey.

2. They want you to be **honest, genuine**, and **forthright**. They want you to give a piece of yourself and to **grow** in the process. The best essays shine with the **personality** of the writer and give **depth** and **credibility** to the person described in the application.

3. The admissions officers expect that you will have several **issues** or **experiences** that are important to you. If you have done **self-exploration** during the process, you should be able to generate a list of topics and ideas.
“What Not to Do … and Why”: by William K. Poirot, Former College Counselor, Brooks School, North Andover, MA

1. Don’t write an essay that any one of a thousand other seniors could write, because they probably will. If you think the college might receive even one other essay like yours, rewrite it!

2. While you definitely must risk something personally in order to write an effective essay, you should avoid writing an essay that will embarrass the reader (aka admissions officer). The reader is not your therapist, not your confessor, and not your close friend.

3. Don’t try to sell yourself. Rather than trying to persuading the college that you are great, just show them who you are, what you care about, what moves you to anger and passion, what the pivotal points in your life have been so far.

4. Don’t try to write an important essay. These can come across as pompous and tend to be written from a detached, objective point of view, exactly the opposite of what most college people are looking for in an applicant’s essay.

5. Don’t set out to write the perfect essay, the one with a huge impact, the one that will blow the doors to the college open for you. That is largely a fantasy, and you will put enormous pressure on yourself. Instead, give the reader a sample of yourself, a slice of the real you, a snapshot in words.

6. Don’t have others edit and correct it until you cannot hear you own voice anymore. Remember that the only reason this essay has for existing is to show the reader who you are.

7. Relax. Pick something you feel strongly about, for that will give the reader a window into you heart, and just write it.