**College Application Essay**

**How important is the essay?**

The National Association for College Admission Counseling’s 2011 *State of College Admission* report found that while grades, strength of curriculum and admission test scores are the top factors in the college admission decision, a majority of colleges and universities **believe the essay to be of considerable or moderate importance** in determining which academically qualified students they would choose.  In other words, when all else is equal between competing applicants, a compelling essay can make the difference. A powerful, well-written essay can also tip the balance for a marginal applicant.

**What are colleges looking for in an essay?**

College admission officers look to the essay for evidence that a student can write well and support ideas with logical arguments. They also want to know something about the personality of the student. Sarah Myers McGinty, author of [*The College Application Essay*](http://store.collegeboard.com/productdetail.do?Itemkey=007115R), shares the following tip for both counselors and students: "If you get a chance, ask college representatives about the role of the essay at their colleges. At some colleges the essay is used to determine fit, and at others it may be used to assure the college that the student can do the work. At any rate, find out from the rep how essays are weighted and used in the admissions process."

**What are the different types of essays?**

There are typically three types of essay questions: the "**you**" question, the "**why us**" question and the "**creative**" question. The following descriptions and tips are based on information found in McGinty's book.

**1. The "you" question**

This question boils down to **"Tell us about yourself."** The college wants to know students better and see how students introduce themselves.

**Example: "**The University of Vermont values a diverse student body. What contributions might you make to our campus community outside of academic achievement?"

**Plus:** This type of direct question offers students a chance to reveal something about themselves other than grades and test scores.

**Danger:** The open-ended nature of these questions can lead to an essay that's all over the place.

**Tips:**

-Focus on just a few things and avoid the urge to "spill everything" at once.

-Do not simply write out your resume in paragraph form. It's better to develop one small event, person, place or feeling with a lot of narrative and

specifics.

-This is a "tell us a story" question. Students should tell a story that only they can tell.

**2. The "why us" question**

Some institutions ask for an essay about a student's choice of a college or career. They're looking for information about the applicant's goals, and about how serious the student’s commitment is to this particular college.

**Example: "**How did you become interested in American University?"

**Plus:** This type of question provides a focus for the essay; that is, why the student chose this particular college or path — and the answer to that will (hopefully) be clear.

**Danger:** Any factual errors in the essay will reveal that the student really hasn't thought deeply about the choice. For example, writing about attending Carleton College to major in agriculture would be a blunder, because Carleton doesn't have an agriculture major. An upside to this type of question is that while working on the essay, the student might realize that the college is not a good match — and it's better to know that sooner than later.

**Tips:**

-Make absolutely sure you know your subject well.

-Do not go overboard with flattery. You should sound sincere but not ingratiating.

**3. The "creative" question**

The goals of the "creative" question are to evaluate a candidate's **ability to** **think and write creatively** and to assess the breadth of the student’s knowledge and education.

**Example:** "Sharing intellectual interests is an important aspect of university life. Describe an experience or idea that you find intellectually exciting, and explain why."

**Plus:** This kind of question gives students an opportunity to convey their personalities and views.

**Danger:** Some students may take the "creative" aspect of the question as license to be obscure, pretentious or undisciplined in their writing.

**Tips:**

-Write an informed essay. For example, you should not write about a fantasy meeting with a famous artist and get the titles of the artist’s paintings

wrong.

-Use common sense ("creative" doesn't mean eccentric or self-indulgent).

-Do not write about high-minded topics or exotic locales simply to impress the reader.

**How much help is too much help?**

According to the College Board report [*Admissions Decision-Making Models*](http://store.collegeboard.com/productdetail.do?Itemkey=997021), admission officers have expressed concern about how much assistance students receive in preparing an essay. Many institutions ask applicants to sign a statement avowing that the essay submitted is their own work.

**What can I do to help my students within the guidelines of my job?**

Help your students overcome their nervousness and encourage them to start writing.

Suggest that they seek essay advice from teachers who know them well.

Make sure that students understand the role of the essay in college applications.

Look over the student's essay for signs that a parent "helped" too much.

Give general feedback on a finished or nearly finished essay. You may point out areas that need revision, but you cannot rewrite or edit — the essay must be the student's work.

This article is based, in part, on information found in *The College Application Essay*, by Sarah Myers McGinty.