

A great university application essay

Section A – Important things

Discuss or think about this question:

What are the most important things to make a great application essay?

Choose a top ten from the list below, and compare with someone else if you can.

- A) Using complex vocabulary
- B) Using long, complex sentences
- C) Having a logical structure
- D) Illustrating your real personality
- E) Having stylish prose
- F) Avoiding grammar, punctuation and spelling mistakes
- G) Using lots of linking expressions like “on the other hand” and “moreover”
- H) Showing positive things about yourself
- I) Being original
- J) Saying why you want to study that subject
- K) Saying why you want to study at that university
- L) Being easy and enjoyable to read
- M) Being amusing
- N) Writing about something that really matters to you
- O) Keeping within the word or character limit
- P) Avoiding clichés
- Q) Being insightful
- R) Focusing on the future
- S) Closely matching the essay question/ Staying on topic
- T) Not leaving unanswered questions
- U) Having interesting content

Should any of the things above be avoided, do you think?



Section B – Important Things suggestions

Which points above do these statements refer to?

1. “This is the only way to make yourself stand out from the thousands of similar essays”
2. “This is really important, not so much because it shows your language level but because it shows attention to detail”
3. “This can seem really unnatural, and anyway in a well written essay the logical link between the sentences and paragraphs should be obvious”
4. “This is really important as it makes what you say about your history or life story relevant to your studies at that university”
5. “This is the most important thing. Otherwise they will think that you’ve just written one essay and sent it to every university, or even that you’ve copied it from somewhere”
6. “There’s no need to use a list of the kinds of vocabulary that are on the SAT. After all, they will have already seen your test results”
7. “Paragraphing is really important in English language essays, so this an opportunity to show that you can do that”
8. “This is really important, but you have to make sure that it doesn’t sound like boasting and that you give proof”
9. “I don’t think you have to avoid this if it comes up naturally, but you certainly don’t want to make it appear that you aren’t taking your application seriously”
10. “This is the number one most important thing. Some universities will not even read essays that are overlong”

Which statements above do you agree with? Modify the ones that you don’t so that they make more sense.

Section C – Tips

What can you do to ensure that your essay includes the points that are most important?

Match the suggestions below to the factors on the page 1. (There isn’t a one-to-one match).

- i. Search your text for spellings that do exist but are not the right ones for your text, e.g. mixing up homophones such as “there” and “their”
- ii. Don’t look at your essay for a couple of days and then go back and edit or rewrite it
- iii. Brainstorm positive adjectives and think of stories to illustrate those factors of yourself
- iv. Find a list of common spelling mistakes online and search your text for them
- v. Brainstorm a list of people and events that have influenced you
- vi. Write a mini-biography and then identify which moments and people really had an effect on you and would make an interesting story
- vii. Do a questionnaire that analyses your personality
- viii. Read your essay again and imagine questions that people reading might want to ask you about the experience and your motivations. Answer the questions, and add any of that information which is particularly relevant and/ or interesting.
- ix. Don’t look at other people’s essays until you have done the first draft of your own
- x. Start by brainstorming a huge list of things that you could write about, and then keep it at the back of your mind for a couple of weeks before you pick which and start writing
- xi. Spellcheckers and grammar checkers don’t pick up everything, so keep a list of mistakes that you often make and check your writing against them
- xii. Get a native speaker to check your writing before you send it

Suggested answers Section A

Which things are most important is a matter of opinion and can depend on you and which course and institution you are applying for. Things which are best avoided are:

- Using (unnecessarily) complex vocabulary
- Using (unnecessarily) long, complex sentences
- Using too many linking expressions like “on the other hand” and “moreover”

Suggested Answers Section B

1. The only way to make yourself stand out – I (Being original)
2. Important because it shows attention to detail – F (Avoiding mistakes)
3. Unnatural, and anyway the logical link between the sentences and paragraphs should be obvious – G (Using lots of linking expressions)
4. Really important to make it relevant to your studies – R (Focusing on the future)
5. Otherwise they will think that you’ve just written one essay and sent it to every university – S (Closely matching the essay question)
6. No need to use the vocabulary on the SAT test – A (Using complex vocabulary)
7. Paragraphing is really important – C (Logical structure)
8. Make sure not boasting – H (Positive things about yourself)
9. Don’t want it to appear you aren’t taking it seriously – M (Being amusing)
10. Some universities will not read essays that are overlong – O (Within the word or character limit)

Suggested answers Section C

- i. Search for spellings that do exist but are not the right ones – F (Avoiding mistakes)
- ii. Don’t look at your essay for a couple of days and then go back and edit or rewrite it – Many answers possible
- iii. Brainstorm positive adjectives and think of stories to illustrate them – H (Positive things about yourself)
- iv. Find a list of common spelling mistakes and search for them – F (avoiding mistakes)
- v. A list of people and events that have influenced you – Several answers possible
- vi. Write a mini-biography and then identify what had an effect and would make an interesting story – U (Interesting content)
- vii. A questionnaire that analyses your personality – D (Real personality)
- viii. Read again and imagine questions people might want to ask. – Several answers possible, e.g. C (Logical structure)
- ix. Don’t look at essays until you have done first draft of your own – I (Being original)
- x. Brainstorm a huge list of things that you could write about, and then keep it at the back of your mind for a couple of weeks – Several answers possible, e.g. N (Something that matters to you)
- xi. Spellcheckers and grammar checkers don’t pick up everything, so keep a list of mistakes that you often make – F (Avoiding mistakes)
- xii. Get a native speaker to check your writing before you send it – F (Avoiding mistakes)