

The College Essay

and the Southeast Raleigh Senior

Mrs. Cush

Six Common Essay Topics

- Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you
- Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you
- Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence
- 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, and explain that influence
- A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, 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
- Topic of your choice

Option #1 Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you

- Note the key word here: evaluate. You aren't just describing something; the best essays will explore the complexity of the issue
- When you examine the "impact on you," you need to show the depth of your critical thinking abilities. Introspection, self-awareness and self-analysis are all important here
- And be careful with essays about the winning touchdown or tie-breaking goal. These sometimes have an off-putting "look how great I am" tone and very little self-evaluation

Tips for Essay Option 1

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you

- **"Evaluate" -- Make Sure Your Response is Analytical**
The heart of your essay needs to be a thoughtful discussion of *how* the experience affected you. Examine how the experience made you grow and change as a person
- **A "Significant" Experience Can Be Small**
If you're 18 years old, even if your life has been smooth and comfortable, you've had significant experiences. Think about the first time you challenged authority, the first time you disappointed your parents or the first time you pushed yourself to do something outside of your comfort zone

- **Don't Brag About an "Achievement"**
You want to be very careful to avoid sounding like a braggart or egoist. The tone of such essays is critical
- **An "Ethical Dilemma" Doesn't Need to be Newsworthy**
Tackling these personal dilemmas in your essay will give the admissions folks a good sense of who you are, and you will be addressing issues that are central to being a good campus citizen
- **Reveal Your Character**
The main purpose of the essay is so that the school can learn more about you, they want to see evidence of a team spirit, humility, self-awareness and introspection

Option #2 Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you

- Be careful to keep the "importance to you" at the heart of your essay
- It's easy to get off track with this essay topic and start ranting about global warming, Darfur, or abortion
- The admissions folks want to discover your character, passions and abilities in the essay; they want more than a political lecture

Tips for Essay Option # 2

Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you

- **Be Sure to "Discuss"**

Don't "describe" or "summarize" an issue, you need to think critically and write analytically

- **Focusing Close to Home is Often Better**

Since colleges want to get to know you through your essay, be sure to focus on an issue that will actually teach them something about you

- **Don't Lecture Your Audience**

The admissions officers don't want to be lectured on the evils on global warming or the cons on world trade, The heart of an essay needs to be about *you*, so make sure your writing is as much personal as it is political

- **Give Emphasis to "The Importance to You"**

Whatever issue you discuss, you want to make sure that it truly is important to you and that your essay reveals *why* it is important to you. A good essay on this option reveals the person behind the writing

- **Show Why You'd Be a Good Choice for the College**

As you discuss an issue, make sure you reveal yourself to be the type of thoughtful, introspective, passionate and generous person who will make an ideal campus citizen

Option #3 Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence

- I'm not a fan of this prompt because of the wording: "describe that influence."
- A good essay on this topic does more than "describe." Dig deep and "analyze." And handle a "hero" essay with care
- Your readers have probably seen a lot of essays talking about what a great role model Mom or Dad or Sis is
- Also realize that the "influence" of this person doesn't need to be positive

Tips for Option #3

Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence

- **Push the Language in This Option**

You should examine *why* the person was influential to you, and you should *analyze* the ways in which you have changed because of your relationship with the person

- **Think Twice About Essays on Mom or Dad**

There is nothing wrong with writing about one of your parents for this essay, but make sure your relationship with your parent is unusual and compelling in some way

- **Don't Be Star-Struck**

you should avoid writing an essay about the lead singer in your favorite band or the movie star who you idolize, you may come off as a pop culture junkie rather than a critical, independent thinker

- **The "Significant Influence" Need Not Be Positive**

You could even write about someone who is abusive or hateful. Evil can have as much "influence" on us as good

- **You Are Also Writing About Yourself**

The details of this essay need to reveal that you are the type of person who will contribute to the campus community in a positive way

Option #4 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, and explain that influence

- Here as in #3, be careful of that word "describe."
- You should really be "analyzing" this character or creative work
- What makes it so powerful and influential?

Tips for Option #4

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, and explain that influence

- **Don't Do Too Much "Describing"**

Be sure to keep the mere description to a minimum, and keep the focus on *analyzing* the character, historical figure or creative work and its relationship to you

- **Keep the Focus on the Word "Explain"**

The explanation is where you will present a thoughtful discussion of yourself and the things that influence you. The explanation is what reveals your passions, interests and personality

- **Watch Out for Predictable Choices** ie. Martin Luther King, Jr., and Albert Einstein

- **Be Careful with Fictional Characters**

Make sure your writing isn't shallow, facetious or dismissive

- **Don't Write About Your Favorite Contemporary Song**

Music can certainly be a good focus for this essay, but the admissions officers get tired of reading hundreds of essays about songs by students' favorite bands

- **Approach the Word "Creative" in Broad Terms**

Don't assume creative means only addressing an artistic approach, for example, a novel technique for attacking the AIDS virus is a "creative work"

Option #5 A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, 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

- Realize that this question defines "diversity" in broad terms
- It's not specifically about race or ethnicity (although it can be)
- Ideally, the admissions folks want every student they admit to contribute to the richness and breadth of the campus community. How do you contribute?

Tips for Option #5

A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, 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

- **Diversity Isn't Just About Race**

Define diversity in broad terms, it isn't just about skin color. Colleges want to enroll students who have a diverse range of interests, beliefs and experiences

- **Understand Why Colleges Want "Diversity"**

This option designed to give you an opportunity to explain what interesting qualities you'll bring to the campus community

- **Be Careful Describing Third-World Encounters**

You want to be careful to avoid clichés

- **Be Careful Describing Racial Encounter**

Racial difference is actually an excellent topic for an admissions essay, but you need to handle the topic carefully and make sure your language doesn't inadvertently create a racial stereotype

- **Keep Much of the Focus on You**

Remember, the essay needs to reveal your character, values and personality. The college is enrolling you, not the diverse people you've encountered

Option #6 Topic of your choice

- Sometimes you have a story to share that doesn't quite fit into any of the options above. However, the first five topics are broad with a lot of flexibility, so make sure your topic really can't be identified with one of them
- Also, don't equate "topic of your choice" with a license to write a comedy routine or poem (you can submit such things via the "Additional Info" option)
- Essays written for this prompt still need to have substance and tell your reader something about you

Tips for Option #6

Topic of your choice

- **Make Sure Options 1 Through 5 Aren't Appropriate**

Remember, it's the quality of the essay that most matters

- **Don't Try Too Hard To Be Clever**

Some students make the mistake of assuming that "Topic of Your Choice" means that they can write about *anything*. Keep in mind that the admissions officers take the essay seriously, so you should too

- **Make Sure Your Essay Is An Essay (No Poems, Drawings, etc.)**

Use the supplemental section for this, if the section states essay, write an essay!

- **Reveal Yourself**

The college admissions folks are looking for evidence that you'll make a good campus citizen. Your essay should reveal your character, values, personality, beliefs and (if appropriate) sense of humor

In closing...

A note about social media sites...

A short clip to address the photos you **MUST**
delete from Facebook

<http://collegeapps.about.com/od/theartofgettingaccepted/ss/bad-facebook-photos.htm>