The College Entrance Essay and YOU

WHAT is the College Entrance Essay (also known as the personal statement)?

The college entrance essay is a mandatory part of many college applications including the University of California system and many private universities. This is your chance to set yourself apart from the other applicants and make a case for why you are a good fit for this school.

Many applicants will have similar GPAs, SATs, ACTs, and extracurricular activities so how can you stand out from the crowd and be more than a transcript?

According to the University of California system, the college entrance essay is used to:
- “discover and evaluate distinctions among applicants whose academic records are often very similar;
- gain insight into your level of academic, personal, and extracurricular achievement; and
- provide information that may not be evident in your application.”

(Source: http://students.berkeley.edu/files/admissions/12626_4.statement.pdf)

Your college entrance essay adds the human element to your college application and gives Admissions and Scholarship Offices insight into you as a person.

This is the opportunity to demonstrate your individuality, your personality, and your uniqueness in an essay written by you.

HOW do I write the essay?

Read your completed application, the essay instructions (carefully read them and note the word limit), and ask yourself the following questions:

1. In what types of classes do I get the best grades? (Your application will answer this)
a. Example: I do really well in English, especially writing assignments.

2. Why is it that I get the best grades in these classes? (This will answer your question on what topics you should choose for the essay)
   a. Example: I wanted to be an author when I was a child so I used to write short stories, puppet show scripts, and elementary school play scripts. As I grew up, I became fascinated with Greek plays and attempted to write my own trilogies.

3. How can I use my abilities and interests to make a contribution to ….? (This answer tells the reader why your ability (question 1 answer) and your interest (question 2 answer) matter)
   a. Example: As my ability to write matured over time, my desire to use my writing abilities to entertain my audience became less important than my ability to persuade my audience to consider alternative perspectives on....

Answer these questions more than once using different topics. Then, walk away for awhile.

Come back and re-read what you wrote. Did you leave anything out? Is there more to add? Does it need revision?

Now, assign your answers to questions 1, 2 & 3 to one of the essay prompts / questions. From this, your topic(s) should begin to emerge. Maybe walk away for a day. Maybe chat with a friend, teacher, or parent about what you wrote.

Let it simmer for a few days, make more revisions to your answers, and then start writing.

Write your essay over several days; write out a draft, walk away, and come back and revise. Keep working at it until you feel satisfied. Remember: the first draft is NEVER the final draft. Admissions officers know the difference between a well thought out essay that was carefully written and an essay that was a last minute effort to make the application deadline!

(Source: http://www.californiacolleges.edu/admissions/university-of-california-uc/personal-statement.asp)

TIPS for writing the essay

1. Be concise. Admission officers have a lot to read so you want to get to the point.
2. Be honest. Do not make yourself out to be something you are not. Just because you were not the class president does not make the fact that you were president of the drama club any less important.
3. Be an individual. Ask yourself what makes you different from your classmates.
4. Be coherent. This is not your life story; pick a topic or a few topics to describe yourself.
5. Be accurate. Use proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation.
6. Be vivid. Give the reader enough detail so that he/she can visualize and/or understand what you are describing (a reader should feel as if he/she knows you better after reading your essay).
7. Be cautious in your use of humor. Tone is not always evident in writing and misinterpretation can occur (you cannot include emoticons in your essay). So, be careful with any form of humor especially if it is implied.
8. Be controversial (as appropriate). It is ok to write about religion, politics, obesity, etc., provided you are thoughtful, consider all aspects, and you avoid preaching! So many essays are bland; make yours colorful if you can.
9. Be smart. Colleges want intelligent students who will succeed so show your smarts (and that does not mean frequent use of SAT words, it means an essay that demonstrates your ability to think and communicate).

(Source: http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/)

DO not...

1. Let someone else write your essay (big, big, big mistake)
2. Forget to read the essay instructions (read them several times)
3. Reiterate information that is already in the application
4. Describe an accomplishment without any detail
5. Use slang or gimmicky language (no OMG, LOL, etc)
6. Use clichés
7. Write about another person other than yourself
8. Ramble
9. Be too humorous, self-deprecating or impressed with yourself
10. Wait until the last minute – Admissions Officers know when an essay was rushed and that does not help your case (seriously!)

(Source: https://admissions.ucdavis.edu/apply/personal_statement.cfm)

HELPFUL references
YouTube Video on the UC Personal Statement:  
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iB4O2UXdLo0

CaliforniaColleges.edu (college and career planning in California)  
http://www.californiacolleges.edu/admissions/university-of-california-uc/personal-statement.asp

Purdue University Online Writing Lab (OWL) (common writing source used by academics)  
http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/642/01/

UC Berkeley Admissions (all of the UCs have a web page on the personal statement)  
http://students.berkeley.edu/apa/personalstatement/index.htm

Just for fun...

Below are some first lines from the most memorable application essays of the 2012 incoming class at Stanford University:

- When I was in the eighth grade, I couldn’t read.
- Unlike many mathematicians, I live in an irrational world; I feel that my life is defined by a certain amount of irrationalities that bloom too frequently, such as my brief foray in front of 400 people without my pants.
- I have old hands.
- My younger sister, Jessica, arrived home one day reeling about the shirt that her friend had worn to school. It had simply read “Genocide, Homicide, Suicide, Riverside.”
- Some fathers might disapprove of their children handling noxious chemicals in the garage.
- As an Indian-American, I am forever bound to the hyphen.
- I change my name each time I place an order at Starbucks.
- Good grief! You never would have guessed than an unassuming meek lovable loser like Charlie Brown would have an influence on anyone; but indeed he has.

(Source: http://alumni.stanford.edu/get/page/magazine/article/?article_id=31010)