Tips and Tricks from a College Essay Reader:

The “perfect” topic doesn’t exist. Everyone’s lives and stories are going to be different and what works for one person might not be the best strategy for you—if you don’t like what you’re writing about, you’re writing about the wrong thing!

College admissions officers are looking for three things:
- 1.) Who is this person and are they curious?
- 2.) Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?
- 3.) Can this person write?
  - This is not where you need to write about your academics or test scores—you can, but it’s really your place to show colleges who you are off paper
  - You really want the person reading your application to feel like they’re getting to know you and beginning to care about you

1. Break up your essay into paragraphs (but not too many!)
   a. Remember that the person reading your essay is just a human! Would you want to read 600 words in one big chunk? Break it up where it feels natural.

2. Treat your supplement essays and common app with the same care—if your supplements are noticeably lower in quality, the readers will most likely assume that that is your real voice.

3. Don’t rush the writing process! You absolutely should not procrastinate your essays or supplements—they’re your chance to really shine!

4. Prioritize your VOICE, you want your writing to sound like you, not like it came out of a textbook or your mom wrote it—so edit for grammar, but don’t edit out your personal details and anecdotes.
   a. Write in the same way you would talk to someone you really admire, you want to make sure it’s polished but not stuffy and boring—present yourself, but the best version of yourself!

5. Remember to write about yourself right now. College’s don’t care too much about what you were like as a kid or even in your freshman year of high school because they’re admitting you right now not back then. Show them how you have grown and how you will continue to grow at their school.
Brainstorming:

This is the time to write about all the things that make you, YOU! Brag about yourself and all of your achievements—but keep in mind that it’s always better to be honest than to tell a tall tale.

Questions you can use to brainstorm a topic depending on what you want to write about!

**Academic Essay:**

1. What’s your main academic area of interest? Why does it matter to you? When did it first start to matter to you? Was there a specific event that sparked your interest? How did your interest evolve over time?
2. Did you ever face a really big challenge in continuing to learn about or study this topic? Was this challenge the result of your gender, race, or religion; your family’s socio-economic background or the culture of the place you lived?
3. Would you still pursue this academic interest if you earned a very small income with your future job in this area?

**Activities Essay:**

1. What’s an extracurricular activity you do that’s unique? How has it shaped your personality and character?
2. Why does this activity matter so much to you? When did this activity first start to matter to you? Was there a specific event that sparked your interest? How did your interest in and commitment to this activity evolve over time?
3. Have you done something with this activity that no one else you know has done?
4. Did you ever face a really big challenge in continuing to pursue this activity? Was this challenge the result of your gender, race, or religion; your family’s socio-economic background; or the culture of the place you live?

**Life-event Essay:**

1. Is there something you’ve done or experienced that changed you forever in a positive way? How did this event make you more mature, compassionate, self-aware, determined, or strong?
2. Is there a day from your life that you reflect on often? Why is this day so memorable to you?
3. Are you similar to or different from your parents / siblings? What made you this way?
4. When did you feel like you didn’t fit in with a group of people? What made you different than others?
5. Is there something (non-academic / extracurricular) that you devote A LOT of time to? Why do you do this?
6. Are there activities/pursuits you have done that didn’t earn you praise, attention, or success?
7. What makes you feel like your life is meaningful and important to you?
8. What is one thing that you would never change about yourself or your life experiences?

One of the most exciting things you can do to stand out is to twist your topics — for example, one of my supplemental essay questions was “Tell us something about yourself that is not conveyed elsewhere in your application” meaning basically something that doesn’t have to do with your grades or your test scores. I considered writing about my extracurricular experiences but decided instead to write about yellow because it’s my favorite color. I’m pretty sure my admissions officer didn’t read another essay about the color yellow, so I think it helped me stand out!

The Essence Objects Exercise:
I. Video Walkthrough: https://collegeessayguy.squarespace.com/blog/2016/8/18/the-objects-exercise-video-walkthrough

The Feelings and Needs Exercise:
I. Overview: https://collegeessayguy.squarespace.com/blog/feelings-needs-exercise

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<th>CHALLENGES</th>
<th>EFFECTS</th>
<th>FEELINGS</th>
<th>NEEDS</th>
<th>WHAT I DID ABOUT IT</th>
<th>WHAT I LEARNED</th>
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<td>Here, list 1-2 major obstacles you’ve faced in your life—anything from major health or family issues to failing a class to experiencing racism or violence. They do not have to be traumatic or life changing—just examples of things you overcame.</td>
<td>How did each challenge impact you? The purpose of this column is to differentiate your experience of the challenge you named in the first column (e.g., divorce or moving around a lot) from anyone else who might have experienced a similar challenge.</td>
<td>What did you feel? Name the main emotion you felt or several different emotions. Don’t worry if the feelings you write down contradict. Mixed emotions are normal and noting them can actually make for a more interesting, nuanced personal statement.</td>
<td>Based on the emotions you’ve listed, what need was or is underneath each one? Consider that each emotion you feel has an underlying need that can help you understand why you feel what you feel.</td>
<td>Consider the steps you took to meet the needs you wrote down. Ask yourself: Why do I do Activity X? What deeper need is it meeting for me? If you’re still in process (i.e., haven’t done anything yet to meet those needs), what could you do?</td>
<td>Ask yourself: What did I learn from all this? What did that lesson lead to, if anything? How did this experience affect who you are today? Did it change your goals/plans for the future?</td>
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