



Sample College Admissions Essays

We have prepared this handout of actual essays written by current Harvard students who attended secondary schools in the UK (with names changed for anonymity) in order to provide some guidance to schools and applicants. Because the university admissions processes in the US and the UK are markedly different, we have received requests for some sample essays and tips for writing them and hope they will be helpful.

Here is the official description of the personal essay requirement:

Please write an essay (250 words minimum) on a topic of your choice or on one of the options listed below. This personal essay helps us become acquainted with you as a person and student, apart from courses, grades, test scores, and other objective data. It will also demonstrate your ability to organize your thoughts and express yourself.

1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.
2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.
3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.
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.
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.
6. Topic of your choice.

Your essay for a US university *might* be the same one you would write for the UCAS system, but perhaps not. We are interested in your academic successes and future plans, but also want to understand what makes you tick as a person. What are your hopes, dreams and fears?

Our advice is to think of two or three possible topics, write a quick first draft of each essay and then show them to your best friend, mother, teacher or anyone who knows you well. Ask that person if your voice and personality come through in the essays and which one sounds the most like *you*. Then take that essay and polish it off!

As you will see from the following sample essays, these students have written about learning to ride a bike, culture shock at coming to the UK, music, public service, and a favourite book. What will you write about?

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Donald Asher is the author of Who Gets Promoted, Who Doesn't, and Why (3.88 avg rating, 286 ratings, 28 reviews, published 2007), Graduate Admissions Ess.

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