

We are painfully aware that writing the college essay can be one of the more dreaded parts of the application process for students. We are often asked questions about the role and purpose of the essay: "How much does it count?" "What should I write about?" and "How do I know if an experience is 'significant' or not?"

Although there is no single thing we are hoping to find out about you, the essay can help you "come to life" and often becomes a way for us to understand your story. Remember, we aren't looking for perfection. We are looking for the human being behind the roster of activities and grades. Think of the essay as an opportunity rather than an ordeal. Don't psych yourself out by thinking the essay has to do all the heavy lifting in your application. It is only one part in our holistic review that allows us to construct an interesting Oberlin community.

Tips

- **Write about yourself.** We want to learn about you and your writing ability. Share a real story that gives us one slice of your life rather than trying to summarize your life in 650 words. You only are allowed so many words; use them wisely.
- **Keep the focus on you.** It shouldn't be a story you observed, but a story in which you played a central or pivotal role. Write about something meaningful and describe your feelings, not necessarily your actions. If you do this, your essay will be unique.
- **Use your own voice.** We can tell the difference between the voice of a 40-year-old and a high school senior. We want to hear your voice, so be you – your strongest, clearest, best, grammatically correct you, but you.
- **Proofread** and then ask someone else to proofread for you. Although we want substance, we also want to be able to see that you can write a paper for our professors and avoid careless mistakes that would drive them crazy.
- **Write naturally.** Use the vocabulary and writing skills you already have. We find that writers who stumble are often trying to dazzle us with style rather than concentrating on substance. Be natural, but remember that this is not a text, tweet, or Instagram post – in other words, it is not casual communication.
- **Finally, don't forget about the supplements.** The supplement questions are very important – you should plan to spend as much time on them as you do on your essay. A well-written essay won't help if your supplement answers are sloppy and uninformative.

You can also check out some of our blogs about essays:

How tofu got me into college: my Common App essay by Eli Goldberg '12
http://blogs.oberlin.edu/applying/applying/how_tofu_got_me.shtml

Three college essays by Chris Gollmar '10
http://blogs.oberlin.edu/applying/applying/three_college_e.shtml

More Essay Writing Tips by Elizabeth Houston '06/Systems Administrator
http://blogs.oberlin.edu/applying/applying/more_essay_writ.shtml

College Essay Advice by Will Mason '10
http://blogs.oberlin.edu/applying/applying/college_essay_a.shtml

My advice on the college essay by Assistant Director of Admissions Jesse Hernandez
http://blogs.oberlin.edu/applying/applying/my_advice_on_th.shtml

Oberlin requires both the Common Application essay and the Oberlin Writing Supplement. Both are found at www.commonapp.org

Common Application Essay Prompts

- Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
- The lessons we take from failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma – anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Oberlin Writing Supplement

How did your interest in Oberlin develop and what aspects of our college community most excite you?