

Analyzing your activities and how to express your involvement on the college application.

Colleges are interested in your serious involvement in a few activities – not a long laundry list. They are looking for activities that you are passionate about; those that you have gone into depth with as well as have participated over a long period of time. This document contains suggestions for you to understand not only what the college is looking for, but to help you understand the depth of your involvements.

Examples of activities:

Award Winning Service Activities (more at http://cyberguidance.net/finance/service_ideas.htm)

- Josh created a recycling center at his high school. The center raises money that will be used to provide a scholarship for a graduating senior, and it improves the environment for all Marfa residents. The school's National Honor Society will continue to run the center as a permanent project.
- Carrie created a gardening project for children in her community.
- Emily created a community service club, called RACS (Random Acts of Community Service Club) at her high school.
- T. Joseph designed and initiated an art therapy program for the elderly.
- More at <http://cyberguidance.net>

The following are questions from a community service scholarship application. The questions can be adapted to help you think about any of your activities and your involvements, and craft an essay from your answers.

When reading an essay about an activity, the key elements, to be given most weight by the readers, will be a student's ability to write about his/her outstanding, original, academic, artistic or leadership endeavors.

What do they want to hear?

- What was your activity that you are writing about?
- How did you become involved in this activity?
- What role did you play in the activity?
- Approximately how many hours did you spend on the activity? Weekly?
- When did you start working on the activity (month/year)?
- When did it end (month/year)?
- How did your activity impact others?

Hints:

- Briefly explain what motivated you to do your activity.
 - How did you come up with the idea for your activity?
 - Who or what inspired you to get involved?
 - How did your involvement in the activity begin?
 - Why did you feel it was important?
- Briefly explain the effort required to do your activity.
 - What exactly did you do, and how did you do it?
 - What steps did you have to take to accomplish your goal?
 - Did you recruit others to help, or work with any local or national organizations? If yes, explain.
 - What was the most difficult part of your activity?
- Briefly describe what your activity accomplished.
 - Who benefited, and how?
 - How many people were involved or directly affected?
 - If your activity involved fundraising, how much was raised?
 - Will your project continue in the future?
- Briefly describe what you, yourself, got out of your activity.
 - What did you learn from your experience? Did you acquire any new skills?
 - What was the most memorable part of this activity?
 - Can you recall a specific incident that made you feel particularly good about the activity?
 - What would you tell other young people about your experience?

College Essay - What Should I Write? What Do They Want Me To Write About?

- Don't describe your science project in detail – describe your curiosity.
- Don't give a travelogue; give an interior monologue.
- Don't write what you think others want to hear. Answer the question honestly.
- Don't talk about Aunt Sally's death. Talk about how Aunt Sally's death affected you.
- If it's the first time you've thought about it, don't write your college essay about it.
- Write about something personal that you can be passionate about.

From college admissions counselors:

- What we look for in an essay (in general): sophisticated writing; cogent communication; passion; content; answer the question!
- Landmines - things to avoid or to be very, very careful with: the "I" essay; it's/its; their/there/they're; etc; trite phrases or words, such as myriad, plethora, broaden your horizons, etc; using larger words that don't fit or are inappropriate.
- Risks (these topics might work well, but students should be warned of the inherent risks): profanity; drugs; describing inappropriate behavior; boyfriend/girlfriend; shock value; sympathy; travel/community service ("those poor people") - not a warning to not write about these trips, just to be careful about tone when doing so; humor (if you're not naturally funny, don't try to start now!; some humor good but too much can be bad); writing about depression or other mental health issues; writing about religion; poetry.
- Do not rely on spell check!
- Online applications - don't treat informally like an e-mail; take care in crafting responses and looking for errors.
- Recipe for the College Essay:
 - 3 parts thinking to one part writing;
 - Write about something you care about (demonstrate passion and intellectual curiosity)
 - Be focused and provide detail rather than choosing too broad a topic and not getting specific enough (trying to solve the world in 500 words)
 - Attention to detail - avoid the landmines mentioned above and other careless errors such as spelling and grammatical errors, writing in different colored pens on the same application, having your parent or someone else fill out part and you fill out another (different handwriting). No sloppy applications!
 - Keep in mind your audience - 23 - 65 years olds with diverse backgrounds
 - Read your essay out loud.
 - Have two people review your essays but not more than that. Edit but don't overedit.
 - When having someone read your essay, recreate the situation will essay will face - have someone read it in about 2 minutes and then take it away. Ask them what you wrote about (to see if you are clearly getting your point across).

Sample essay questions:

- The 18th-century French philosopher Denis Diderot said, "Only passions, great passions, can elevate the soul to great things." Describe one of your passion and discuss its contribution to your personal growth.
- It is common knowledge that Thomas Edison invented the light bulb. Less well know is the fact that he failed 6,000 times before succeeding. Reflect on an accomplishment you achieved in an unlikely way.
- Newton's First Law of Motion states that an object in motion tends to stay in motion in the same direction unless acted upon by an external force. Tell us about an external influence (a person, an event, etc.) that affected you and yow it caused you to change directions.
- Tell us about an activity that is important to you, and why.
- Describe your academic interests and how you plan to pursue them at [college].

Quick takes: three words that describe you; last book you read for pleasure; favorite musical performer/band/composer; dream job; favorite leisure activity; role model; favorite quote; favorite food; best movie of all time; most prized possession.

The following list contains prompts meant to help you look into yourself, beyond words and activities, to get to know yourself better. The better you know yourself, your values, your goals, etc., the better you will be able to write a winning essay.

Here's Looking at You! (complete list at http://cyberguidance.net/college/evaluate_yourself.htm)

- What values are most important to you?
- What do you care most about?
- What concerns occupy most of your energy, effort, and thoughts?
- How do you define success?
- Are you satisfied with your accomplishments to date?
- What do you want to accomplish in the years ahead?
- What kind of person would you like to become?
- Of your unique gifts and strengths which would you most like to develop?
- What would you most like to change about yourself?
- Is there anything you have ever secretly wanted to do or be?
- If you had a year to go anywhere and do whatever you wanted, how would you spend that year?
- What events or experiences have shaped your growth and way of thinking?
- What activities do you most enjoy outside the daily routine of school and other responsibilities?
- Looking back, would you have made different choices?
- Do your activities show any pattern of commitment, competence, or contribution?
- How would others describe your role in your school or home community?
- What do you consider your most significant contribution?