

WHERE TO APPLY FOR COLLEGE ADMISSIONS

Finalizing Your College List

With so many colleges to choose from, you need to explore your options, narrow them down and decide which colleges are a good fit. To create your final list, you should [identify colleges](#) that have the educational programs you need, including ones where the campus life offers you the opportunities you want.

Keep in mind that there isn't just one perfect college out there — you will probably find many that are a good fit for you. The goal is to apply only to colleges that meet your criteria; that way, you can reach your academic and personal goals at whichever one you choose to enroll in.

Search for colleges that match your preferences on the following websites to narrow down a list of schools that fit YOU...

<http://collegesearch.collegeboard.com/search/index.jsp>

<http://nces.ed.gov/collegenavigator/>

<http://www.cappex.com/>

Apply to a Range of Colleges

College counselors generally recommend that your college list include five to eight colleges. Some students submit fewer applications, others submit more.

To ensure you have options later, apply to a diverse range of colleges and be realistic about the strength of your applications. Here's the breakdown:

- One or two colleges you feel very confident about — you think you can get in (you have a 90 to 100 percent chance) and you can afford to go there. These colleges are usually called "**safeties**."
- Two to four colleges that are "**probables**" (you have at least a 75 percent chance of getting in). These are colleges that are both likely to accept you and close to what you are looking for.
- One or two "**reach**" colleges (you have a 50 percent or less chance of getting in). These are colleges that present an admission challenge, but applying is well worth the try.

College Application Checklist

Use this checklist and stay on top of your application requirements, tasks and deadlines.

Add enough columns to fit your list of colleges.

Application Checklist	College	College	College
Applications			
Obtain or access application			
Regular application deadline			
Early application deadline			
Safety? Probable? Reach?			
Grades			
Request high school transcript sent			
Request midyear grade reports sent			
Test Scores			
SAT® or other admission test required?			
SAT Subject Tests™ required?			
Send SAT Subject Test scores			
Send SAT scores			
Send AP® scores			
Letters of Recommendation			
Request recommendations			
Send thank-you notes			

Essays			
Draft initial essays			
Proofread essays for spelling and grammar			
Have two people read your essays			
Revise your essays			
Proofread your revisions			
Interviews			
Interview at college campuses			
Alumni interview			
Send thank-you notes to interviewers			
Send and Track Your Application			
Make copies of all application materials			
Tell school counselor that you applied			
Pay application fee			
Sign application and send			
Confirm receipt of application materials			
Send supplemental material, if needed			
Financial Aid Forms			
Priority financial aid deadline			
Regular financial aid deadline			
Submit FAFSA			

Submit PROFILE, if needed			
Submit institutional aid form, if needed			
Submit state aid form, if needed			
After You Send Your Application			
Receive letter from office of admission			
Receive financial aid award letter			
Meet deadline to accept admission and send deposit			
Accept financial aid offer			
Notify the other colleges you will not attend			

Letters of Recommendation

How to Get the References You Need

Most college applications request two or three recommendation letters from people who know you in and out of the classroom. It's your responsibility to find appropriate people to write these letters on your behalf. You also need to give them enough time to write a thoughtful letter. Start by discussing the process, and possible candidates, with your counselor and family.

Whom should I ask?

Read the application carefully. Often colleges request letters of recommendation from an academic teacher (sometimes in a specific subject), your school counselor or both. If the college requests a letter from an academic teacher, and the subject is not specified, your English or math teachers usually make good candidates.

You should also ask one of your teachers from junior year, or a current teacher who has known you long enough to form an opinion of your potential. It is best not to go back too far; colleges want current perspectives on their potential candidates.

It can also be good to get a recommendation from a teacher who knows you outside the classroom — for example, the teacher who shaped your performance in the class musical. Whoever you ask should be able to attest to your academic and personal achievements and potential.

When should I ask?

Make sure to give your recommendation writers plenty of time — at least one month before letters are due — to complete and send your recommendations, but the earlier you can ask the better. If you apply under early decision or early action plans, you'll need to ask at the start of the school year, if you didn't ask earlier.

How can I get the best possible recommendations?

Talk to your recommendation writers. For teachers, it's important that they focus on your academic talents and accomplishments within their classroom, because that's what colleges are looking for in teacher recommendations.

Talk to them about what you remember about their classes and your participation in them. Remind teachers of specific work assignments or projects you did, what you learned and any challenges you overcame. Give them the information they need to provide specific examples of your achievement.

It's also important that you spend time talking with your counselors and ensure they know about your plans, accomplishments and pursuits. You may want to provide them with a brief resume

of your activities and goals; a resume can provide the best overview of your high school involvement and contributions.

Also, if there is some aspect of your transcript that needs explaining — for example, low grades during sophomore year — it's helpful to talk with your counselors to explain why and how you've changed and improved.

Helpful Tips

- Don't be shy. Teachers and counselors are usually happy to help you, as long as you respect their time constraints.
- Supply your recommendation writers with addressed and stamped envelopes for each college to which you're applying.
- Provide teachers and counselors with deadlines for each recommendation that you are requesting.
- On the application form, waive your right to view recommendation letters. This gives more credibility to the recommendation in the eyes of the college.
- Probably you know your teachers well enough to know who can provide favorable reviews of your accomplishments. If in doubt, don't hesitate to ask if they feel comfortable writing a recommendation. In some cases, you may have no choice about whom to ask, but when you do, make the best choice possible.
- Follow up with your recommendation writers a week or so prior to your first deadline, to ensure recommendations have been mailed, or to see if they need additional information from you.
- Once you've decided which college to attend, write thank-you notes to everyone who provided a recommendation and tell them where you've decided to go to college. Be sure to do this before you leave high school.

College Admissions Essays: Common Topics & Tips by Topic

Option #1. Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

- **Evaluation requires you to think critically and analytically about your topic.** The admissions folks are not asking you to "describe" or "summarize" an experience (although you'll need to do this a little). The heart of your essay needs to be a thoughtful discussion of *how* the experience affected you.
- **A "Significant" Experience Can Be Small.** Think about the first time you challenged authority, the first time you disappointed your parents or the first time you pushed yourself to do something outside of your comfort zone. A significant risk can be choosing to study art; it doesn't have to be about rappelling into icy waters to rescue a baby polar bear.
- **Don't Brag** About an "Achievement." Be very careful to avoid sounding like a braggart or egoist. The best essays have a generosity of spirit and an appreciation of community and team effort.
- **An "Ethical Dilemma" Doesn't Need to be Newsworthy.** In fact, the huge topics that dominate national debate will often miss the point of the essay question -- the "impact on you." Tackling personal dilemmas in your essay will give the admissions folks a good sense of who you are, and you will be addressing issues that are central to being a good campus citizen.
- **Reveal Your Character.** The main purpose of the essay is so that the school can learn more about you. It's the only place on the application where you can really demonstrate your character, your personality, your sense of humor and your values.

Option #2. Discuss some issue of personal, local, national, or international concern and its importance to you.

- **Be Sure to "Discuss".** To "discuss" something you need to think critically and write analytically.
- **Focusing Close to Home is Often Better.** The admissions office gets lots of essays on big, newsworthy issues like the war in Iraq, the fight against terror and U.S. dependence on fossil fuels. In truth, however, these giant and complex issues often don't impact our immediate lives as much as more local and personal issues. Focus on a topic that will tell the admissions committee something about YOU.
- **Don't Lecture Your Audience.** The admissions officers don't want to be lectured on the evils on global warming or the cons on world trade.
- **Give Emphasis to "The Importance to You".** Whatever issue you discuss, you want to make sure that it truly is important to you and that your essay reveals *why* it is important to you.
- **Show Why You'd Be a Good Choice for the College.** Colleges want to learn about you, and they want to see evidence that you will add value to the campus community. As you discuss an issue, make sure you reveal yourself to be the type of thoughtful, introspective, passionate and generous person who will make an ideal campus citizen.

Option #3. Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence.

- A good response to #3 does far more than "describe" a person's influence on you. You should **examine why the person was influential to you**, and you should **analyze the ways in which you have changed because of your relationship with the person**.
- **Think Twice About Essays on Mom or Dad.** Consider the millions of students who could write the exact same essay. Make sure your relationship with your parent is unusual and compelling in some way.
- **Don't Be Star Struck.** In most cases, you should avoid writing an essay about the lead singer in your favorite band or the movie star who you idolize.
- **The person does not have to be a typical role model.** Max writes about a rather unremarkable junior high kid he encountered while teaching summer camp. Among a million

application essays, Max's will be the only one to focus on this young boy. Also, the boy isn't even a role model. Instead, he's an ordinary kid who inadvertently makes Max challenge his preconceptions.

- **The "Significant Influence" Need Not Be Positive.** The majority of essays written for option #3 are about role models: "my Mom/Dad/brother/friend/teacher/neighbor/coach taught me to be a better person through his or her great example..." Such essays are often excellent, but they are also a bit predictable. You could even write about someone who is abusive or hateful. Evil can have as much "influence" on us as good.
- **You Are Also Writing About Yourself.** When the prompt asks you to "describe that influence," it is asking you to be reflective and introspective. While an essay for option #3 is partly about the influential person, it is equally about you. To understand someone's influence on you, you need to understand yourself -- your strengths, your short-comings, the areas where you still need to grow.

Option #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.

- Be sure to **keep the mere description to a minimum**, and keep the focus on *analyzing* the character, historical figure or creative work and its relationship to you.
- **Keep the Focus on the Word "Explain."** Present a thoughtful discussion of yourself and the things that influence you; reveal your passions, interests and personality.
- **Watch Out for Predictable Choices.** Shy away from predictable figures like Martin Luther King, Jr., and Albert Einstein. Try to identify a character, historical figure or creative work that is a bit less predictable and that connects clearly with your passions and interests.
- **Be Careful with Fictional Characters.** Make sure your writing isn't shallow, facetious or dismissive.
- **Approach the Word "Creative" in Broad Terms.** Every field -- engineering, science, psychology, mathematics, religion, medicine -- depends upon creativity for its advancement. Some of the best essays for option #4 focus on creative works *outside of* the arts.
- **Keep Much of the Focus on You.** The admissions folks don't want to learn about the influential work or character as much as they want to learn about you. If your essay doesn't reveal your interests and personality, you haven't succeeded in responding to the essay question.

Option #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.

- **Diversity Isn't Just About Race.** Colleges want to enroll students who have a diverse range of interests, beliefs and experiences.
- **Understand Why Colleges Want "Diversity."** Most colleges believe that the best learning environment includes students who bring new ideas, new perspectives, new passions and new talents to the school. A bunch of like-minded clones have very little to teach each other, and they will grow little from their interactions. As you think about this question, ask yourself, "What will I add to the campus? Why will the college be a better place when I'm in attendance?"
- **Be Careful Describing Third-World Encounters.** College admissions counselors sometimes call it "that Haiti essay" -- an essay about a visit to a third-world country. Invariably, the writer discusses shocking encounters with poverty, a new awareness of the privileges he or she has, and greater sensitivity to the inequality and diversity of the planet. This type of essay can too easily become generic and predictable. Also, a claim like "I never knew so many people lived with so little" can make you sound naive.
- **Be Careful Describing Racial Encounters.** As you describe that Japanese, Native American, African American or Caucasian friend or acquaintance, you want to make sure your language doesn't inadvertently create racial stereotypes.
- **Keep Much of the Focus on You.** What diversity you will bring to campus, or what ideas about diversity you will bring? Whether you describe your own contribution to campus

diversity, or if you talk about an encounter with diversity, the essay needs to reveal your character, values and personality. The college is enrolling you, not the diverse people you've encountered.

Option #6. Topic of your choice.

- **Make Sure Options 1 Through 5 Aren't Appropriate.**
- **Don't Try Too Hard To Be Clever.** Keep in mind that the admissions officers take the essay seriously, so you should too. If your essay focuses more on a good laugh than on revealing why you'd make a good college student, you should rethink your approach.
- **Make Sure Your Essay Is An Essay (No Poems, Drawings, etc.).** Every now and then a budding creative writer decides to submit a poem, play or other creative work for essay option #6. Don't do it.
- **Reveal Yourself.** The college admissions folks are looking for evidence that you'll make a good campus citizen. Your essay should reveal your character, values, personality, beliefs and (if appropriate) sense of humor. You want your reader to end your essay thinking, "Yes, this is someone who I want to live in my community."

DO

1. Keep Your Focus Narrow and Personal

The best essays tell a story about the applicant. The essay does not have to be the story of your whole life, but rather a small glimpse of it, one that is rich with meaning and alive with imagery. Essays that try to be too comprehensive end up sounding watered-down. Remember, it's not about telling the committee what you've done—they can pick that up from your list of activities—instead, it's about showing them who you are.

2. Capture the reader's attention in your introduction paragraph

Engaging a blurry-eyed admissions officer's interest is a difficult task, but it doesn't require Shakespearian talents. What it does need, though, is a unique approach. Here's how a typical introduction might read...

Michael Jackson came into this world from meager beginnings, only to persevere and rise up out of poverty to become the greatest Pop icon of the twentieth century.

This introduction isn't terrible, but it is terribly boring. This introduction to this essay has put the reader on into a daze and your essay has failed to capture her attention.

Now, here's an alternative essay introduction:

Dubadub Dah, Dubadub Dah, Dubadub Dah- I couldn't make out the words, but it didn't matter, syllables were strung together like Venetian blinds.

After reading that first sentence can you guess the topic of the essay? Don't have a clue? Well, that is the entire point. An admissions essay doesn't have to spell things out for the reader. You don't need a topic sentence or an executive summary like we are taught to do in school for research or term papers. An admissions essay is a different type of animal. Feed the reader something interesting and unique, and you have satisfied the first condition in how to write an admissions essay.

3. Create a consistent and logical flow of your ideas

Consistent flow doesn't just mean from paragraph to paragraph, it means from idea to idea, from sentence to sentence. Every idea, every word, should not be sitting on its own little island, it should be part of an interconnected stream of words that take the reader on a smooth ride from point A to point B. Often overlooked, transitions are the easiest and most effective way to give your application essay that even feel. Here's an illustrative example of poor flow:

The songwriter showed his contempt for the audience with a shake of his white glove. Michael began to sing the first few notes his final song- Dangerous. His star quality was cemented.

Notice that these are three separate ideas. They are not tied to one another, and as a result, the paragraph does not flow, and the reader loses interest.

Here's an example of consistent and logical flow:

The songwriter showed his contempt for the audience with a shake of his white glove. Despite his irritation, Michael began to sing the first few notes of his final song- Dangerous. It was this ferocious conclusion that cemented his status as King of Pop.

Although the three sentences are still distinct ideas, transitional devices hold them together. Now, readability is increased, improving the likelihood that an admissions officer would continue further to your finale.

4. Leave the reader with a lasting impression of YOU

If you have trouble thinking of ideas, be resourceful. Ask people who know you well what they would say about you. If someone has written a letter of recommendation for you, re-read it. Which accomplishments listed on your résumé might interest the committee? Or, ask a few people who know you well (parents, teachers, coaches, friends, etc.) any of the following questions:

- How would you describe me to someone who has never met me?
- What is the best thing anyone has ever told you about me?
- What is the worst thing anyone has ever told you about me?
- What do you think is my most unusual or unique character trait?
- What was your initial impression of me when you first met me? How has that changed?

5. Proof-read multiple times, and ask others to edit your essay for you!

DON'T

Attack of the Thesaurus

Did a giant meteor kill off the last thesaurus during the Mesozoic era? Absolutely not, thesauruses are alive and well on all our word-processing machines. They give us the ability to replace our own thoughts with similarly meaning alternatives. Although the thesaurus means well, its overuse often confuses readers and interrupts that consistent flow we all strive for. Here is the result of a thesaurus gone awry.

The conjectural anecdote resulted in a most calamitous insurrection directed at my nostrils.

Not sure what the writer is trying to say? Try this one:

The hypothetical remark got me a punch in the nose.

This second sentence shows how saying what you mean, without the aid of a thesaurus, can be much more effective than overusing word-processing features.

Well-Rounded

Many a student sees the admissions essay as an opportunity to put his or her best foot forward. The problem occurs when our aspiring college student tries to condense his or her attributes, awards, and extracurricular activities into one single literary masterpiece. The admissions essay, however, is not a resume or a list of your accomplishments. The admissions essay is an opportunity to show the admissions committee one or two interesting tidbits about you as a person. Attempting to jam eighteen years of accomplishments into a few sheets of paper is a harrowing task that should be held off until graduation day.

Clichés

Many clichés used in admissions essays have been used again and again. Admission officers will be quick to go numb after reading an essay filled with overused phrases. Coming up with different ideas or a unique perspective is the challenge of any writer. This is what separates an average admission essay from an exceptional one.

See handout "Avoid Overused Ideas; Seek Out Overlooked Ideas"

Sample Essay #1

Accepted by Princeton

Title: "Hiking to Understanding"

Surrounded by thousands of stars, complete silence, and spectacular mountains, I stood atop New Hampshire's Presidential Range awestruck by nature's beauty. Immediately, I realized that I must dedicate my life to understanding the causes of the universe's beauty. In addition, the hike taught me several valuable lessons that will allow me to increase my understanding through scientific research.

Although the first few miles of the hike up Mt. Madison did not offer fantastic views, the vistas became spectacular once I climbed above tree line. Immediately, I sensed that understanding the natural world parallels climbing a mountain. To reach my goal of total comprehension of natural phenomena, I realized that I must begin with knowledge that may be uninteresting by itself. However, this knowledge will form the foundation of an accurate view of the universe. Much like every step while hiking leads the hiker nearer the mountain peak, all knowledge leads the scientist nearer total understanding.

Above tree line, the barrenness and silence of the hike taught me that individuals must have their own direction. All hikers know that they must carry complete maps to reach their destinations; they do not allow others to hold their maps for them. Similarly, surrounded only by mountaintops, sky, and silence, I recognized the need to remain individually focused on my life's goal of understanding the physical universe.

At the summit, the view of the surrounding mountain range is spectacular. The panorama offers a view of hills and smaller mountains. Some people during their lives climb many small hills. However, to have the most accurate view of the world, I must be dedicated to climbing the biggest mountains I can find. Too often people simply hike across a flat valley without ascending because they content themselves with the scenery. The mountain showed me that I cannot content myself with the scenery.

When night fell upon the summit, I stared at the slowly appearing stars until they completely filled the night sky. Despite the windy conditions and below freezing temperatures, I could not tear myself away from the awe-inspiring beauty of the cosmos. Similarly, despite the frustration and difficulties inherent in scientific study, I cannot retreat from my goal of universal understanding.

When observing Saturn's rising, the Milky Way Cloud, and the Perseid meteor shower, I simultaneously felt a great sense of insignificance and purpose. Obviously, earthly concerns are insignificant to the rest of the universe. However, I experienced the overriding need to understand the origins and causes of these phenomena. The hike also strengthened my resolve to climb the mountain of knowledge while still taking time to gaze at the wondrous scenery. Only then can the beauty of the universe and the study of science be purposefully united. Attaining this union is my lifelong goal.

Sample Essay #2

Accepted by Cornell

Question: Tell us about an opinion have you had to defend. How has this affected your belief system?

I chuckle to myself every time I think about this topic. I am perceived as a mild-mannered, intelligent individual until I mention that I am involved in riflery. It is interesting to watch someone's expression change. It is as if I instantaneously grew a pair of horns and a sharp set of claws. Believe me this gets worse; I am a member of the NRA. I try to tell these folks that I belong to the NRA to fire my rifle. "Oh my God! You fire real guns? with real bullets?!?" they remark with a perplexed look on their face. Besides having horns and claws, I now possess a tail and leathery wings.

This is how it began five years ago. I had played on a soccer team for several years. As I grew older I began having difficulty playing soccer because of shortness of breath. I was diagnosed as having mild asthma which ended my soccer career and eliminated my participation in most physical sports.

Shortly afterward, during a Boy Scout summer camp, I participated in riflery at their shooting range. This was the first time I had ever touched a firearm. To my amazement, I won the camp's first place award for marksmanship. I was more than eager when a friend of mine asked me if I would like to join a shooting club.

My parents were wary when I asked to join the rifle club. My mother feared guns, but my father felt there was no problem with trying this sport. Gratefully, he gave me the opportunity to try rifle marksmanship, despite secretly hoping that I would quit. Both of my parents were afraid of what people would think about their son's involvement with guns.

Like my parents a majority of people believe that all firearms are dangerous to our society. All they remember are the hysterical news releases of street violence and injured children. I am often asked how many deer I've shot. Frankly, I could never bring myself to injure another living creature and neither would most of the competitors I have met. Yet, I keep finding myself defending the sport from all of the misconceptions that surround it. Most people have developed a negative impression of the sport and I have found that these prejudices are difficult, if not impossible, to rectify.

Because of this conflict, I have become an open minded individual. I express my opinions without reservation, and I have learned to accept opinions and viewpoints contrary to my own. I do not intend to alter what I enjoy because of the ignorance of friends and acquaintances. If people have a negative view of me simply because of the sport I am active in, then they must be so superficial that they cannot see the person who I really am. I am no longer apprehensive of being perceived as a gun toting, trigger happy fanatic, even though I still endeavor to educate my friends and relatives on the beauty of this sport.

Sample Essay #3

Accepted by Wellesley

It took me eighteen years to realize what an extraordinary influence my mother has been on my life. She's the kind of person who has thoughtful discussions about which artist she would most want to have her portrait painted by (Sargent), the kind of mother who always has time for her four children, and the kind of community leader who has a seat on the board of every major project to assist Washington's impoverished citizens. Growing up with such a strong role model, I developed many of her enthusiasms. I not only came to love the excitement of learning simply for the sake of knowing something new, but I also came to understand the idea of giving back to the community in exchange for a new sense of life, love, and spirit.

My mother's enthusiasm for learning is most apparent in travel. I was nine years old when my family visited Greece. Every night for three weeks before the trip, my older brother Peter and I sat with my mother on her bed reading Greek myths and taking notes on the Greek Gods. Despite the fact that we were traveling with fourteen-month-old twins, we managed to be at each ruin when the site opened at sunrise. I vividly remember standing in an empty amphitheatre pretending to be an ancient tragedian, picking out my favorite sculpture in the Acropolis museum, and inserting our family into modified tales of the battle at Troy. Eight years and half a dozen passport stamps later I have come to value what I have learned on these journeys about global history, politics and culture, as well as my family and myself.

While I treasure the various worlds my mother has opened to me abroad, my life has been equally transformed by what she has shown me just two miles from my house. As a ten year old, I often accompanied my mother to (name deleted), a local soup kitchen and children's center. While she attended meetings, I helped with the Summer Program by chasing children around the building and performing magic tricks. Having finally perfected the "floating paintbrush" trick, I began work as a full time volunteer with the five and six year old children last June. It is here that I met Jane Doe, an exceptionally strong girl with a vigor that is contagious. At the end of the summer, I decided to continue my work at (name deleted) as Jane's tutor. Although the position is often difficult, the personal rewards are beyond articulation. In the seven years since I first walked through the doors of (name deleted), I have learned not only the idea of giving to others, but also of deriving from them a sense of spirit.

Everything that my mother has ever done has been overshadowed by the thought behind it. While the raw experiences I have had at home and abroad have been spectacular, I have learned to truly value them by watching my mother. She has enriched my life with her passion for learning, and changed it with her devotion to humanity. In her endless love of everything and everyone she is touched by, I have seen a hope and life that is truly exceptional. Next year, I will find a new home miles away. However, my mother will always be by my side.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

The topic of this essay is the writer's mother. However, the writer definitely focuses on herself, which makes this essay so strong. She manages to impress the reader with her travel experience, volunteer and community experience, and commitment to learning without ever sounding boastful or full of herself. The essay is also very well organized.

Sample Essay #4

Accepted by Harvard

Of all the characters that I've "met" through books and movies, two stand out as people that I most want to emulate. They are Attacus Finch from *To Kill A Mockingbird* and Dr. Archibald "Moonlight" Graham from *Field of Dreams*. They appeal to me because they embody what I strive to be. They are influential people in small towns who have a direct positive effect on those around them. I, too, plan to live in a small town after graduating from college, and that positive effect is something I must give in order to be satisfied with my life.

Both Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham are strong supporting characters in wonderful stories. They symbolize good, honesty, and wisdom. When the story of my town is written I want to symbolize those things. The base has been formed for me to live a productive, helpful life. As an Eagle Scout, I represent those things that Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham represent. In the child/adolescent world I am Mr. Finch and Dr. Graham, but soon I'll be entering the adult world, a world in which I'm not yet prepared to lead.

I'm quite sure that as teenagers Attacus Finch and Moonlight Graham often wondered what they could do to help others. They probably emulated someone who they had seen live a successful life. They saw someone like my grandfather, 40-year president of our hometown bank, enjoy a lifetime of leading, sharing, and giving. I have seen him spend his Christmas Eves taking gifts of food and joy to indigent families. Often when his bank could not justify a loan to someone in need, my grandfather made the loan from his own pocket. He is a real-life Moonlight Graham, a man who has shown me that characters like Dr. Graham and Mr. Finch do much much more than elicit tears and smiles from readers and movie watchers. Through him and others in my family I feel I have acquired the values and the burning desire to benefit others that will form the foundation for a great life. I also feel that that foundation is not enough. I do not yet have the sophistication, knowledge, and wisdom necessary to succeed as I want to in the adult world. I feel that Harvard, above all others, can guide me toward the life of greatness that will make me the Attacus Finch of my town.

ADMISSIONS COMMITTEE COMMENTS:

This essay is a great example of how to answer this question well. This applicant chose characters who demonstrated specific traits that reflect on his own personality. We believe that he is sincere about his choices because his reasons are personal (being from a small town, and so forth). He managed to tell us a good deal about himself, his values, and his goals while maintaining a strong focus throughout.

Tips about Writing Style

Pay attention to Structure and Format

- Be concise and to the point.
- Use logical paragraph breaks. Don't limit yourself to the five-paragraph essay format you learned in English class.
- Mix short sentences with long ones so that your essay flows naturally and rhythmically when read aloud.
- Use the "active" voice instead of the "passive" voice. Here's an example of each:
 - (active) The applicant wrote an outstanding essay.
 - (passive) A less-than-outstanding essay was written by the applicant.

Use a genuine style and tone

- Strive to write in a style that reads like a phone conversation with a friend, without all the "like"s, "um"s, and "ya know"s.
- Don't try too hard to be funny. It's okay to be lighthearted and to show a dry and subtle humor about your topic, but don't try to write a funny essay. They are *very* hard to pull off.
- Don't tell the reader explicitly, "I am a unique and interesting person." Instead, let the reader figure this out from your interesting and unique essay.
- Be forceful and opinionated, but don't insult or offend.
- Avoid whining, complaining, or appearing bitter, sarcastic, angry, boastful, or aggressive.
- Avoid coming across as overly humble.

Tips for Opening Sentences and Essay Endings

See handout "The all-important opening sentences & Essay endings"