

Admission FAQs

What topic should I choose for my college admission essays?

Every year, thousands of anxious high school seniors ponder that question. Parke Muth, U.Va.'s senior assistant admission dean, advises, "A good essay is not good because of the topic, but because of the voice. A good writer can make any topic interesting, and a weak writer can make even the most dramatic topic a bore."

Thus, the goal of a college essay should not be to pick an obscure topic and use a robust vocabulary to impress the admission deans with one's intelligence. Rather, a college admission essay should attempt to share the student's voice and explain something of value—no matter how big or small.

In addition, a student essayist must employ vivid imagery. Muth tells students to "recall the difference between two simple concepts—showing and telling. A good essay always shows; a weak essay always tells. By showing, a writer appeals to all of the senses," Muth says. "To show means to provide a feast for the eyes, ears and, depending on the essay, the mouth, nose or skin." As such, students writing their college admission essays should seek to transport the admission deans to a new place or time with vivid imagery and detailed personal stories.