



How Adults Can Support Students Who Are Working On Their College Application Essay

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Students must write their college application essays themselves. College admissions officers read the essay to learn about a student's best qualities as revealed in a student's own unique voice. Still, adults can help.

Here are some ways that adults can support a student who is applying to college but still maintain the boundary that students must write the essay themselves.

Families – Prior to writing, students think about the essay questions and topics, and ponder their own possible answers. Families remember situations that students may have forgotten. These situations might end up being good essay material illustrating a student's strengths. Families can support the student emotionally, organizationally, and throughout the process. Sit down together before the student starts the essay process and talk. A student can discuss how (and if) he or she wants a parent's help, and families can offer help and be clear about boundaries. Here's a stress-relieving idea: a parent can consider which friends she has with writing skills, and ask such a friend to give her child feedback, or two parents can switch so that each works with the other's child. Older siblings who are already in college, grandparents, and aunts and uncles may also be helpful to a student.

College counselors—in the college and in high school—can give the big picture about what the school is seeking.

College consultants and writing coaches can reduce the stress for parents and students while creating writing process structure via meetings, writing exercises and goals. They offer experience in bringing out a student's voice and strengths. They also offer a knowledgeable and fresh viewpoint, similar to that of a college admissions officer.

English teachers and writers can offer insight into how a student can strengthen his or her essay to make the writing more compelling and error-free. English teachers can recreate a college essay experience in class by assigning a college essay for a writing assignment. However, when it comes to grading, teachers can consider swapping papers with another teacher for a fresh outlook from someone who doesn't know the students. The key question is "What did you learn about the student from reading the essay?"

Low-cost assistance, including classes – Many free and low-cost talks are sponsored by the library, teen organizations, writing organizations, and the school system. Start with your college counselor or English teacher when seeking assistance. Reading sample essays on your own can also be very helpful. Go to your local library or bookstore to review some of the books with sample essays.

Stage of the Essay Writing Process	What Helping Adults Can Do
Research colleges online, read their written materials, and talk to their representatives to select which colleges interest you.	Help the student get to know a college and a specific admissions representative in order to clarify his or her interest in a school. Details such as the names and the appeal of certain professors, clubs, programs or courses can strengthen an essay. If time and finances permit, take the student on college visits and encourage him or her to ask questions. Be aware of a college’s application—including essay questions before you visit the school. Even though the school will likely have a new application when you apply, ask if they expect the essay questions to change next year.
Organize the essay questions and application deadlines in one place.	Help the student gather the exact college essay questions for the schools to which he or she is interested in applying. Help the student estimate and schedule the time needed to write his or her essays. Look for essay writing workshops sponsored by schools, libraries and student organizations.
Stir up your thoughts and emotions.	Act as a “prompt coach.” Give the student writing prompts, be the timer, and listen to the student read his or her essay aloud if he or she is comfortable doing so. Offer your insights or good judgment during this talking/pre-writing stage. Students who are reluctant to discuss their ideas with peers may welcome this time. Offer to tell your own stories from college or high school and also your positive stories about the student.
Choose a topic using good judgment.	Listen to the student’s ideas. Ask the student, “What will the admissions officer learn about you from reading your essay?” Offer your good judgment about the topic. Does it seem fitting and unique?
Write it like you’re telling a true story.	Help the student to remember that “you can’t edit a blank page”—any start is a good start. Optionally, write about yourself while the student is writing his or her essay. The story needs to show reflective ability. Ask a student, “What does the story show about you?” Compare what you hear in the writing to your personal impression of the best qualities of the student.
Edit frequently and carefully.	Listen while the student reads his or her essay draft aloud. Reading aloud from paper is a great way for writers to listen for impersonal or inappropriate content or wording that is awkward or confusing. Answer the student’s questions honestly. “I felt confused when you said...” or “I felt uncomfortable when you mentioned...” “I couldn’t tell from the essay that you were as enthusiastic about ... that I know you are.” After the big picture comments, move on to help with smoothing out the essay. Help with proofreading if you are asked. “I would think it foolish of a student not to have an essay proofed for spelling, grammar and syntax by someone competent to do so.” – Jeffrey Brenzel from Yale, in <i>The New York Times Magazine</i> , May 20, 2007.

There are many low-cost or free options for receiving assistance with your essay, some of which are listed earlier in this section. Some students find their stress is also reduced by working with a professional writing coach or college consultant who fills in the gaps between parents and teachers and high school counselors. The best coaches and consultants:

- Help students to understand the criteria for a winning college essay, so that they can learn to evaluate their essays knowledgeably.
- Are positive and encouraging. Even the weakest essay can be strengthened if a student understands what needs to be done and is willing to do the work.
- Enjoy working with students and respect their individual abilities.
- Listen to students read their essays out loud as much as possible before the final draft.
- Ask thought provoking questions and react honestly to what they hear. “This is what I learned about you from hearing your essay.” Or “This part confused me. Why did you say that?” The explanation from the student may then need to be included in the essay. It’s like an explanation after a quotation in an analytic essay.
- Do not write on the essay—that’s the student’s job. The student decides the changes to make, and makes them.

“I think it’s perfectly all right for a parent or friend to read the essay, but they shouldn’t do it with a red pen in hand.” –Margit A. Dahl from Yale, in *College Essays that Made a Difference*