

The Great College Essay Test

Is your essay great? The criteria below will help you decide. And, as with all the resources on my website, these are not the only qualities of a great essay (they're just a few qualities I've observed in essays I find to be great). How might you use these criteria? Read your essay aloud, or have someone else read it aloud, then ask these questions.

1 Core Values (aka Information)

- Can you name at least 4 to 5 of the author's core values?
- Do you detect a variety of values, or do the values repeat?

Examples

Not varied: hard work, determination, perseverance

More varied: autonomy, resourcefulness, healthy boundaries, diversity

2 Vulnerability

- Does the essay sound mostly analytical, or like it's coming from a deeper, more vulnerable place? (Another way of asking: does it sound like the author wrote it using mostly their head/intellect, or their heart and gut?)
- After reading the essay, do you know more about the author AND feel closer to them?

3 "So What" Moments (aka Important & Interesting Connections)

- Can you identify at least 3 to 5 "so what" moments of insight in the essay?
- Are these moments kind of predictable, or are they truly illuminating?

4 Craft

- Do the ideas in the essay connect in a way that is logical, but not too obvious (aka boring)?
- Can you tell that the essay represents a series of carefully considered choices, and that the author spent a lot of time revising it over the course of several drafts?
- Is it interesting and succinct throughout? If not, where do you lose interest? Where could words be cut, or which part isn't revealing as much as it could be?

But that's not all that's important!

CEG'S COLLEGE ADMISSION NUTRIENTS

We analyzed materials from 300+ colleges to find the qualities they consistently seek. Rather than a checklist, think of these as nutrients for a healthy application.

The nutrient	What it is
Intellectual curiosity We call it: Unapologetically nerdy	Going beyond the surface with ideas: asking questions, noticing patterns, and exploring academic and intellectual topics with real depth and agency.
Service to others / Community impact We call it: Compassion in action	Caring about others and acting on it, making a real impact on a community you're committed to, whether that's your school, your local area, or beyond.
Leadership or initiative We call it: Curiosity with legs	Being self-directed and proactive: starting things, following through, and making the most of the opportunities around you.
Collaboration We call it: Inclusive excellence	Working well with others and valuing diverse perspectives and talents to accomplish a shared goal.
Consistent engagement We call it: Staying the course	Committing to something and sticking with it, showing dedication and resilience over the long haul.

Other nutrients worth weaving in: creativity, commitment to personal growth, self-reflection, diversity of thought and experience, and critical thinking. These showed up less often, but still matter.

How to use this

As you write your personal statement, see if you can find opportunities to weave these qualities in. Keep in mind that they don't all have to show up there, but can also be revealed in your activities list, supplemental essays, and even your additional information section.

For more free resources, go to: <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/college-application-hub>

