

THE GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY TEST 2.0

Five Qualities Colleges Like to See

Recently, my team and I researched 300+ college and university websites to see if we could determine a set of overlapping qualities — things that, pretty reliably, admission officers like to see in essays and applications. We read through hundreds of mission statements, strategic plans, and [pages like this one from Caltech](#).

The result: our list of five college admission “nutrients.”

Important: We don’t want these to become like a Ten (or Five!) Commandments of College Applications! Think of these more like ingredients of a healthy application (aka “nutrients”).

In no particular order, then, here they are...

- **Intellectual curiosity**
- **Service to others / Community impact**
- **Leadership or initiative**
- **Collaboration**
- **Consistent engagement**

[Learn more about each of those on this blog](#).

Ooh, and I recorded a [6-part podcast](#) with admission officers that breaks down what each of these looks at + why they’re important in high school, college, and life.

How to Use These Five Qualities:

1. Scan your personal statement and ask yourself, “Do these qualities show up in my essay? Or not so much?”
2. If yes, highlight where specifically.
3. If not so much, where might you include the quality... or how could the quality be made even more clear in the essay?

Note: Not ALL of these qualities need to come through in your personal statement—it could be that the qualities come through in another part of your application. Something like “consistent engagement,” for instance, might be evident in your activities list. Or a teacher recommendation letter might speak to your “intellectual curiosity” or “collaboration.” But it’s a not a bad idea to scan for these qualities and specific examples from your life that show them.

But remember: We want a great piece of personal writing too. So let’s turn our attention to...

Four Qualities of a Great Personal Statement

Here are four qualities I have observed in essays that 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)

- a. Can you name at least 4-5 of the author's core values?
- b. Do you detect a variety of values, or do the values repeat?
 - * Examples of NOT varied values: hard work, determination, perseverance
 - * Examples of more varied values: autonomy, resourcefulness, healthy boundaries, diversity

2. Vulnerability

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

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

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

4. Craft

- a. Do the ideas in the essay connect in a way that is logical, but not too obvious (aka boring)?
- b. Can you tell that the essay represents a series of carefully considered choices and that the author spent a lot of time revising the essay over the course of several drafts?
- c. 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?

If you're feeling bold...

Give your essay to someone else and ask him or her to evaluate it based on these elements.

Want more college essay and application resources?

Check out my [College Application Hub](#) for the latest and greatest of my admissions resources.