

Contents

1	Introduction to The College Essay	2
2	Vik's Rules	9
3	My Personal Statement(s)	10

1 Introduction to The College Essay

It is important to understand that there are different writing styles. In an academic setting, one might adopt an objective, scientific tone in the third person. In a creative writing class, we might be more free to express ourselves.

College essays are so nuanced that I consider them their own writing style. It's very similar to creative writing and narrative styles, with an extra layer of complexity: the importance of showing who you are. You have definitely heard the phrase "show not tell" to the point that it might feel cliché, but however oversimplified and overdone it is, it serves as a crucial mantra when writing a college essay.

Think about books you may have put down in the past because they got too boring, too monotonous — what was the reason for it? If you can answer that question, then you know exactly what not to do. As some great philosopher probably once said, if you eliminate the things you shouldn't do, you will eventually figure out exactly what you should do. On that note, let us examine the seven major classes of essays you will see in your applications!

1. Personal Statement (P)

The general term "college essay" most often refers to your personal statement, often known as the Common Application Essay. This is the essay that will be sent to all the schools that you apply to. With a 650 word limit (800 for Quest—Bridge applicants), this essay is the opportunity for you to tell your story, your unique life experiences that have shaped who you are. This will be the only non—tailored essay you will ever have to write, meaning that "fit" is not a concern since the essay isn't for any one college or scholarship program.

It is rather difficult to provide advice for this essay type simply because essay themes and ideas can vary greatly. Of course, there are the generic guidelines you might have heard of, including "be yourself", "show don't tell", "write in a quirky way or about a quirky topic", the list goes on of course. The truth is, the efficacy of this essay does not depend on the topic. What really matters is the writer's passion and their skills at elucidating said passion.

With all that said, here are my insights on approaching this essay:

a. Start From the End: The hardest part of writing this essay is figuring out what you want to convey, so let's work backwards. Start with asking yourself what message you want to convey to admissions officers (AOs). Once you have answered that, think about the general structure of the essay — is it a conflict/resolution structure, a cause/effect or chronological structure, or even an exotic metaphor that connects the entire essay?

b. Hooky Hook: Your number one goal when writing this essay is to not bore the admissions officers. Be creative with your hook! That could entail thinking of a unique metaphor, or starting with an unexpected statement or quote. In most cases, the best hook is simply you being yourself through telling a joke, recounting a personal experience, or commenting on life.

c. Be Yourself: Perhaps the most important piece of advice. When I began writing my personal statement last summer, I struggled to decide how I wanted to present myself. Through experience, I realized that there is no need for any filters: try to show the AOs who you truly are. Take them through your life story, make them live in your shoes and see the world through your perspective! Show vulnerability and emotional growth - psychologically, people are drawn to those who are relatable and authentic.

d. Know When to Stop: Many people think that the perfect college essay is achieved after tens of drafts, and still some think that it is impossible to achieve complete perfection. While it is rare that your first draft will be the draft that is sent to colleges, make sure not to overdo it - if you start getting tired of reading the essay, that is when you need to take a breath and reflect. Keep in mind that you are not submitting this essay for an in-depth literary review - AOs will spend two to four minutes tops reading it, so make sure that above all else, the essence of your essay is preserved.

Questions to Consider:

1. *What life experiences or anecdotes have shaped who you are now?*
2. *If the world were to end tomorrow, what would you spend today doing and why?*
3. *What is the one most important thing I want the admissions team to know about me?*

2. Why Us? (U)

Every college that has supplemental essays will have one of these. Essentially, this is the college cutting to the chase and asking you why you think you are a good fit for them. Generally, you can approach these prompts by talking about your intended major or passions in life and how you will pursue them at said college. If you have a unique tie to the college or are interested in a niche or unconventional program they offer, you are in a good spot, especially if you articulate your passion well.

Whatever you do, NEVER talk about the college's prestige, rank, location (unless it is relevant), or football team, please! The college knows that it is great and you don't need to reiterate that. Think of it this way: every word they give you is an extra word that you can use to differentiate yourself from other applicants. Use your words wisely!

Questions to Consider:

1. *What led you to apply to this college (specifically)?*
2. *If you could pursue any opportunity at the college, what would it be and why?*
3. *Why do you think you are an amazing fit for that college specifically?*

3. Why Major? (UM)

Of course, you are going to college to study (hopefully!). Thus, it is very likely that you will run into a lot of essays that ask you why you are interested in whatever you wish to

study.

Keep in mind that these essays are all forms of a loaded question. The college isn't only asking why you want to study something - it is implied that they are asking how you will study it in that specific college. Yes, it is time to introduce Vik's Rule 1:

Rule 1: ALL "Why Major?" Essays are ALSO "Why Us?" Essays

In other words, don't just explain why you want to study your chosen field; demonstrate how this major will come to life at this specific college! This is why doing *sub-surface level research* about the college and its programs relevant to your interests is crucial, especially for selective schools where showing fit is arguably as crucial as having strong academic statistics. Note that this is why these essays are denoted by (UM), which reflects that they fall into both Why Us? and Why Major? classes!

Some of you may be wondering, "But Vikram, if this rule applies, then what do I do if a college has both a Why Us? AND a Why Major? essay?" And yes, it seems redundant to write two essays about the same topic. Which is why you write about different topics.

What do I mean? Well, let's say you're a STEM student applying for aeronautical engineering. For the Why Major? essay, you can go into your passions within aeronautics and physics and how the school is a good fit for you. In your Why Us? essay, you can touch on a different aspect of the college, some unique hook. Maybe it's how they balance the humanities and STEM, or interdisciplinary research, or even an Integration Bee or similar events (cough cough MIT). The point is, you want to maximize differentiation and minimize redundancy. ([Rule 7](#))

4. Diversity (D)

After the 2023 Supreme Court decision that declared race-based affirmative action unconstitutional (colleges can no longer directly factor race and ethnicity into admissions decisions), colleges have found a new way to give applicants a chance to talk about their culture and "lived experiences": supplemental essays.

Most of the top schools will have a Diversity essay which asks you about your lived experiences and ties to a community. Topics can vary greatly - you can talk about your religion, ethnicity, cultural traditions, your struggles with any -isms or -phobias, cuisine, intellectual heritage, even your affinity for cats (the last one I threw in for fun, but you can definitely make that work!). It's basically ANYTHING that makes you, YOU!

Similar to the Why Major? essay, it's a good idea to tie these essays to the specific college's community and how you will enrich that community - after all, your job is to give them as many reasons to admit you as possible, and through this essay you get a new angle to show fit to a school.

Questions to Consider:

1. *What is a memorable, interesting story that you experienced?*

2. *How has your race/culture/ethnicity/religion/etc. shaped you, your views, and your future goals?*
3. *How will your lived experiences enhance the specific college and its community?*

5. Adversity (A)

Although this type of essay is less common, some colleges will have prompts that ask you about any challenges you have gone through in life. It is important to realize that it is hard to define a challenge, simply because they can vary vastly, from fleeing from a war-torn country to facing a category 5 hurricane. Please realize that you can write about any issue or obstacle that you have faced within the context of your life.

I have a few words to say about trauma-dumping within your essays. While sharing a deeply personal story has worked for some applicants, it can be difficult to strike the right balance. There are some heavily dystopian books out there that take a toll on the reader, sometimes emotional (The Ballad of Songbirds and Snakes, for my Hunger Games fans, is one such book for me). *You do not want your essay to have a similar effect on your admissions officers.* I always think that ending on a positive note is the way to go in your essays, so here is my final verdict:

The key is to ensure your story is transformative. If you choose to write about trauma, focus on what you've learned, how you've grown, and the resilience or perspective you've gained as a result. Always end on a hopeful or positive note.

Questions to Consider:

1. *How have you overcome a specific challenge in life?*
2. *How has your story empowered your views on navigating adversity?*
3. *How will you use the skills you learned to help you on your academic journey at college?*

6. Activity (E)

A few essays cut to the chase and ask you about your most meaningful or passionate extracurricular activity. It is important to show, not tell, your passions. Also, don't shy away from bragging a little about your achievements, but also mention the scope of impact that you had.

When choosing an activity, pick something that truly excites you—one you can write about without it feeling like a chore. Passion is contagious, and admissions officers can tell when you're genuinely invested in what you're describing.

Some prompts will tell you to talk about your "most meaningful activity" and my word of advice here is to talk about a high impact extracurricular as opposed to one where you received awards. This is simply based on the word "meaningful" which suggests they

want to see an applicant involved in their community.

Questions to Consider:

1. *Why were you attracted to this activity / how does it relate to your passion?*
2. *Have you shown talent/ability through this activity, and how will you communicate it?*
3. *What was the breadth of the impact of your activity?*

7. Honors Program and Scholarship (H)

If you are applying to any outside scholarships, such as the Coca-Cola, Burger King, or Gates scholarships, you will need to write additional essays. Also, if you are applying to schools like Vanderbilt or Boston University, these schools have separate essays for their institutional scholarships. Finally, some colleges will require additional essays to be considered for their Honors programs.

You can see that these essays are tied to things even more specific than a college itself, so it follows that these must be original, authentic essays that demonstrate your fit for these programs. In other words, try your best not to reuse essays for these types of prompts (more about that a bit later).

Focus on the college's or scholarship's stated mission and values, tying those into your essay. Since these essays tend to be shorter, dive right into your story without too much flamboyance and lengthy hooks.

Questions to Consider:

1. *Why am I a good fit for this program or scholarship?*
2. *How have I embodied the values and mission of this program or scholarship?*
3. *How will I use this program or scholarship for the betterment of the community?*

General Words of Advice:

Now that you have a working knowledge of the types of college essays and general guidelines to approach each type, let's talk about more general heuristics that apply to the essay-writing process as a whole.

Reusing Essays – At times, it makes sense to reuse essays for different colleges. However, it is a good rule of thumb to appreciate the [Cookie-Cutter Rule](#): if you can simply change the name of the college in your essay and use it for a different college, then your essay is incomplete. In fact, a great college essay will be written such that you will have to expend considerable energy to change the essay for a different college.

Adversity, **Activity**, and **Diversity** essays lend themselves to be more easily reused since they are less contingent on the specific school. In general, you should not try to reuse **Why Us?** or **Why Major?** essays, and certainly not **Honors/Scholarship**

essays!

Cliches – It might feel like your writing is unoriginal at times, especially if you try to make a one-sentence summary of an essay. This is normal. Just make sure that after reading the essay, the Admissions Officer will have some answers to the following questions:

1. *What are your passions?*
2. *Why are you a great fit for their school?*
3. *What “type” of personality do you show (intellectually curious, empathetic, logical, philosophical, athletic, the list goes on and on!)*

Metaphors – College essays are meant to be creative, and I strongly encourage you to channel your inner Wordsworth or Shakespeare to make your writing memorable! However, it’s a good idea to ground your essay in the tangible if only a little. After all, there is a tangible end goal you are working towards: admission!

Here are three particular types of metaphorical structures that, in my experience, are very compelling.

1. Full Circle: Introduce a metaphor or abstract topic in your hook, diverge in your body paragraph, and bring it all back in the conclusion. This structure is so useful because it plays with closure and a sense of satisfaction - psychologically, reading a story and a wholesome ending that ties the whole story together is quite literally a recipe for a dopamine rush, which is definitely in your best interest if your AO associates your essay with happiness (Pavlov moment)!

2. Flowery Tieback: One of my favorites, this structure describes a descriptive analogy or metaphor in your conclusion to emphasize the tieback to the college. My go-to metaphors are often related to water (ocean, crystal clear, etc.) or navigation (compass, journey, etc.) This is the place for creativity to run free!

3. Full Shakespearean Mode: This structure exists, but it is incredibly difficult to pull off. Here, the whole essay is written through metaphorical language and literary devices, while still telling a story and heeding the guidelines for the specific type of essay. Personally, I limited this to very few essays since it is challenging and taxing and has a lot of room for error, but it exists and is a viable option for truly talented writers!

Notation and Nomenclature:

The reference section at the end of the guide organizes the essays by type and by college, allowing for easy access to specific prompts as you write your own essays.

Here is how each essay will be identified in this guide. There are three parts to the name – the Number (Corresponds to College/Scholarship), the Letter (narrows down within a college), and the Type (Classifies the Essay Type(s) through uppercase letters). Numbers and letters will go in chronological order. Below is the legend for Type. Keep in mind that a single essay can cover multiple types.

Type	Symbol
Why Us?	U
Why Major?	UM
Diversity	D
Adversity	A
Activity	E
Honors/Scholarship	H

Table 1: Essay Nomenclature Legend

For example, the second essay of the tenth college in the list that is classified as an Activity essay will be called **10b A**.

Remember! As the key alludes, [ALL Why Major? essays are also Why Us? essays](#). This rule, and every other rule that I will be referencing throughout this guide, is tabulated in the next section for reference.

Click [here](#) to jump into the essays!

2 Vik's Rules

Rule 1: ALL "Why Major?" Essays are ALSO "Why Us?" Essays

Whenever a college asks you about your chosen field of study, always remember that they are also asking you how you will pursue that field at their school.

Rule 2: Cookie Cutter Rule

A great college supplemental will be written such that you will have to expend considerable energy to change the essay for a different college.

Rule 3: Specificity Rule

In a college essay, general statements about your fields of interest are not optimal; deeper, specific discussion about your experiences with the fields and your viewpoints are more powerful.

Rule 4: Keep it Simple, Stupid (KISS)

While metaphors and flowery language can be powerful, the number one priority is to get your message across clearly and memorably. Don't beat around the bush, especially for smaller supplementals.

Rule 5: POV and Tense Consistency

Stay consistent with verb tense within an essay, unless using an exceptional scenario such as a flashback, discussion about the future, and other scenarios that clearly warrant a different tense. Also, stick to first person in general, and avoid referring to yourself in the third person.

Rule 6: Code of Humility

They say your writing is a reflection of your personality. Please ensure you do not come across as arrogant in your essays, and always emulate humble characteristics (humility, gratitude, open-mindedness). While it's important to demonstrate your strengths and achievements, it's equally crucial to show how you've grown from challenges, embraced learning opportunities, and recognized the value in collaboration and the input of others.

Rule 7: Law of Differentiation

A strong college essay will maximize differentiation of the applicant and minimize redundancy. In other words, use every word you have to craft your unique story!

3 My Personal Statement(s)

Common Application Essay

I had two different Common essays that I switched for my Regular Decision schools. The first essay was more tangible and relatable, but the second one was abstract, more story-like, and more nuanced. I decided to switch the essays for the T20 RD schools because I felt it reflected me better as a person.

0a: BREAKDOWN

Deep inside me, my melody pulsates, growing move by move. The pressure builds on my opponent, controlled by my tune. But for how long? The ever-increasing tempo bears down on me – a single wrong note and it all goes flat. I cannot miss, I mustn't miss.

Breathe.

The briefest moment of self-awareness. Unparalleled mental clarity, a respite from the electric rhythm of the attack. Time comes to a standstill as I find the answers I've been looking for.

The rest is history. The melody finds her harmony as my pieces swarm his kingdom. Overpowered by my tune, my opponent sings his swan song. The perfect ending to the symphony that was this game.

Chess is a game of opportunity costs. It's two players, each playing a game of opportunity costs, and their decisions are interdependent. This concept led me to a dilemma: is the final result of a chess game predetermined or does it depend on the players' decisions? Logically, the latter makes more sense, yet when I substituted "chess" with "life" I arrived at a ponderance that bemused me – am I in control of my own destiny, or is it predetermined by some higher entity?

To me, chess has become something even bigger, a reflection of life – the game of chess is the game of life. When I see chess, I see a model of my existence where I believe I have control over the game, and naturally my own life. Chess has likened me to the idea of free will that I control my destiny, and it continues to guide me on my spiritual journey.

The competitive element to the game also shaped me because I discovered a new version of myself. When I solve differential equations, analyze data for hidden trends, or dive into number theory, I tap into my logical side, yet chess has pushed me to look beyond. Take a differential equation: separating dy and dx is akin to brainstorming different solutions to a conflict and solving for y is equivalent to resolving the conflict. Through chess I reshaped my insight, my thought processes, and myself.

From connecting with so many people over shared experiences of the game, to reading their unique epiphanies, sharing my thoughts on Chess.com helped me find my community. One such epiphany I read was about a girl who shared how music helped her relieve stress and focus on key moments in her games. Her story fueled my superstition to listen to Mozart before a tournament game – seriously, Eine Kleine helped me win my games (might have to run some statistics to confirm that!)

As I gained more experience as a player, I discovered my affinity for teaching the game to kids. I loved seeing passion in their eyes as I showed them new ideas. Not only are they

learning patterns and motifs, but they are also learning how to adapt: “Your opponent checked you but it’s not the end of the world!” Move by move, they improve their game but they also learn key life lessons. As a kid myself, I often struggled with change both on and off the chessboard, but through the game I strived to embrace it. Immersing myself in new ideas also fed my curiosity in numerous academic fields, from statistics to chemistry.

Chess not only strengthened my mental physique but also allowed me to explore different paths and interests in life. As I embark on my next chapter, I hope to find and join diverse communities, fostering a family united by shared passions and interests. I also intend to take the dedication that chess taught me and apply it to my other interests, developing my passion in these fields as I did for the royal game. I vividly imagine myself sitting hunched over a lustrous Staunton chessboard, coffee in hand, surrounded by my newfound family. What will be my next move?

0b: [BREAKDOWN](#)

e4.

The king’s pawn bravely moves forward. Behind it, the cavalry stands patiently. Each piece, with a specific role to play, reflects my search for my purpose in this life. Each move, rooted in logic, reflects my fascination with the elegance of mathematics. The patterns on the chessboard reveal my curiosity, guiding my approach to solving problems from data-driven analysis in science to the immutable truths of the universe. But is there more? Even the chessboard, with all its patterns, has its limits.

As I continue to advance, I find a new inspiration. The passion to heal, to pursue my purpose in this life through medical research. It’s an unexpected strategy, but I embrace it in all of its splendor. After all, it reflects my strong belief in the value of application – knowledge is a tool, but our motivation to use it to solve problems is the ultimate purpose of education. After a long thought, I let go of rationality, letting my intuition take the reins.

Soon, I find myself in the present, aware of past events but tasked with planning out the future. The currents of passion pull me to the confluence of data and medicine; I see every path leading me in that direction.

But I must choose one. The moment I choose one, I am committed to the path. There is no going back. The decision of a lifetime.

I glance at my watch. The seconds tick ever forward: a reminder of the inevitable passage of time. A single moment, a single decision. How do I choose?

Suddenly, in the distance, I see an old man. He slowly approaches the board, his walking stick seemingly echoing the wisdom of the years. Something about him feels so nostalgic – memories of my childhood suddenly flash before my eyes. Pouring himself a cup of tea, he sits across from me, gazing at the current position, stroking his wispy beard. He seems to see beyond the pieces, almost as though he knows the final outcome.

After a deliberate sip, he gestures to the board.

“What do you see?”

I hesitate. “Passion. . . and uncertainty.”

His face wrinkles into a smile, his eyes twinkling. *“And what about yourself? What do you bring to the game?”*

The question catches me by surprise. What did I bring? My unique experiences. My story. My fire of passion. But how will that help me choose the right path? Unless. . .

Suddenly, it hits me. All this time, I was focused on not making the wrong choice, on choosing the best path that I failed to consider the journey as a whole. Had I missed the forest for the trees?

The Old Man nods as if reading my thoughts. *“There is a way forward,”* he says. *“One where questions illuminate the path and the journey becomes its own reward.”*

I gaze at the board again, but this time I look at the position as a whole. I understand. My next move isn’t choosing one path over the other; it’s embracing the freedom to choose a future that combines my passions. Medicine and data are not separate worlds but forces that can harmonize. I simply need to embrace the power to choose the destination. The journey becomes its own reward.

The Old Man rises. *“The best moves come from embracing who you truly are.”*

He grabs his rough cedar walking stick, then turns, facing me.

“The power of choice is the greatest power of all.”

Tipping his hat, he glances at his pocket-watch, smiles, and hobbles off into the sunset. His figure slowly shrinks in the blood-red horizon of the setting sun. Something about him still feels unshakably familiar: his gaze, his words, his clairvoyance. . .

Clearing my mind, I make my move, confident now. The future is clearer, and in my heart, I feel – I’ve chosen not just a destination, but a version of myself I aspire to become.

Oa: ([Link to Essay](#))

Main Idea: Chess as a reflection of life and free will.

Intended AO Takeaway: This student is an intelligent, curious, and conscientious individual.

I originally had a hook with a water-based metaphor, but after some revision I decided to make it a music-based metaphor. "Controlled by my tune", "swan song" and "symphony that was this game" felt natural and interesting to read.

After the abstract hook, I come back to the tangible, talking about "opportunity costs" and the deeper meaning behind chess. This shows maturity and sets the stage for the introduction of my spiritual journey. The concept of free will appeals to me so I made sure to talk about it. Notice how I said "I *believe* I have control over the game" - this adds an extra layer of complexity because it raises the question about the power of belief. I end this introspective part by comparing chess and life. With this, I try to differentiate myself through my unique perspective on the importance of chess ([Rule 7](#)).

Once I mention the "competitive element" of chess, the essay pivots into the tangible realm. The differential equation metaphor seemed good back then, but now it feels a bit forced. Maybe I could have instead talked about coding or quantum mechanics, where data plays a bigger role.

Next, I touch on community and adopt a light-hearted tone, providing an anecdote about a perspective I encountered and ending it with a light joke. I think sprinkling jokes within your essays is a great idea, especially if it fits the "aura" that you develop in the essay!

The next paragraph brings back an element of the abstract by talking about adapting to change. I give a tangible example of giving back to my community through chess. This leads into the reflective conclusion where I expand on the skills chess taught me and how I will use it in other areas. The "what will be my next move?" ending feels satisfying to read as it comes full circle.

Three Key Takeaways:

1. *Balance Abstract and Tangible:* A successful college essay walks the line between philosophical introspection and real-world application. By grounding your reflections in tangible experiences, you can make abstract concepts more relatable and impactful.
2. *Engage the Reader With Humor and Reflection:* Injecting humor and lightness into your essay can make it feel authentic and approachable.
3. *Conclude with Reflection and Forward Thinking:* A conclusion that reflects on your journey and hints at what comes next adds a sense of resolution while keeping the door open for future growth.

Ob: ([Link to Essay](#))

Main Idea: Free will and the ultimate power of choice.

Intended AO Takeaway: This student is deeply introspective and has a clear passion and goal for their higher education.

I start with a direct metaphor using chess, personifying the pieces on the board. I compare aspects of the game to my own passions, and end with the fact that even the chessboard "has limits", foreshadowing the upcoming realization.

With the new inspiration, I introduce my passion for uniting data science with medicine and also transition towards the abstract, as I "let intuition take the reins". This strikes a nice balance between the tangible and abstract.

In the next few lines, I introduce a metaphor for being faced with a decision. I shorten the sentence length to increase the pace and tension: "A decision of a lifetime" also underscores the gravity of this moment. I introduce the conflict of choice.

The old man is now introduced and I mention my memories that flash in my mind to hint at his symbolism. I paint him as a old yet wise individual, who looks so mortal yet is immortal in a way. I build him a mysterious aura, of course!

"I hesitate..." is crucial to show vulnerability and further outline my conflict. It sets the stage for the powerful insight that I gain about the journey as a whole. I add some imagery and powerful words of wisdom from the old man - I really like "The power of choice is the greatest power of all".

In case it isn't obvious, the old man represents Time. Him hobbling into the sunset reflects the passage of time, and it shows that the wisdom he imparts will stay with me despite the ticking of the clock. This leads into the ending where I become more confident and realize the power of free will and my quest for my identity.

Three Key Takeaways:

1. *Use Metaphors to Enhance Understanding:* Metaphors, like the old man representing Time, can be powerful tools to convey complex ideas in an accessible way. Using symbolism can add layers of meaning to your essay, making it more memorable and impactful.
2. *Embrace Vulnerability for Depth:* Don't shy away from showing moments of uncertainty or hesitation. Vulnerability adds authenticity and emotional depth, helping the reader connect with you on a personal level.
3. *Maintain a Balanced Tone:* While it's important to reflect deeply, also ensure your tone remains engaging and accessible. A conversational yet thoughtful tone helps the reader stay connected to your journey and feel your passion.