

# **Suggestions for Application Essays and Admission Interviews (Borrowed from Gonzaga University)**

## **The Essay**

1. Answer the Question. This is the single most important thing. Even the best, most mind-blowingly fantastic essay in the world will be graded down if it doesn't address the question that was asked. If you can't write an essay that answers a given question, those reading it will assume either (1) you don't really care about your application, or (2) you either don't understand or can't follow directions. Either way, it will raise serious doubts as to whether you really ought to be considered for admission or for the scholarship you are applying for.
2. Follow Directions. Often there are other requirements for your essay, such as page length or format. For the reasons discussed above, it is very important that you keep these in mind and not violate these additional guidelines.
3. Who Are You? That's what your readers want to know—after all they're trying to decide whether they want you to go to their college, be in their Honors Program, etc. Therefore your essay should be somewhat personal and revealing of your personality. Your essay reflects who you are, so if it's too generic and devoid of individuality, you run the risk of being classified as an average, boring person.
4. Stand Out. Your essay evaluators will try very hard to be fair and honest when judging every application. Unfortunately, after reading 150 other essays, many of which are very similar, readers tend to get tired and find being enthusiastic about reading every essay very hard to do. The way for you as a writer to get around this is to make your essay seem like a refreshing, cool glass of water that will get your evaluators' attention and make them really WANT to read your essay—and consequently see your smiling face in their college or program in the year to come! For that reason, you should look for ways to make your essay interesting. Be creative with your writing and grab the reader's attention. Don't let yourself become long-winded or redundant, instead seek to make your essay easy to read and engaging. Be careful not to overdo it though—too many clichés, quotes, witticisms, metaphors, etc. can drag down your writing. Read your essay: did you enjoy what you had to say? Remember the 3 B's: Be Brief, Be Brilliant, Be Gone.
5. Plan Your Essay. Organization counts for a lot. By planning your essay you can cover all of the relevant topics, avoid redundancy and rambling, and ensure that the flow of the essay makes it easy to read.
6. Proofread, Proofread, Proofread. Saying you "when" first place at the cross-country meet won't "when" you any brownie points from your readers! Read over your essay multiple times and then ask friends, parents, or teachers to proofread it too. This way you can avoid those typos that make you look silly and less intelligent than you really are. Similarly, too many errors in spelling and grammar can make your readers think you don't really care about your application.
7. Be Honest. If you aren't, your readers can often tell. If your essay sounds false or glossed over it won't win their full attention and praise.
8. Be Specific. Remember life is in the details, and so is great writing (so long as you don't get bogged down in them!). The point of the essay is not to be one giant summary, but to show off your writing skills and your ability to relate your answer to the question. If you find yourself covering too much material, narrow down your topic.

9. Put care into your work. Actually pay some attention to your essay when you submit it. There are a lot of mistakes (besides just spelling and grammar) that can make you seem like a poor applicant. One source of many such mistakes comes from submitting essays that you wrote for another purpose. When applying to the Texas A&M University-Commerce Honors College, for instance, don't start out your essay "I'm applying to the University of Texas because..." Resubmitting an essay is tempting, but often a poor choice. If your readers can tell that you've done it, they won't be impressed.

10. Be Neat. Once the essay is written, the hard part is over, but remember what they say about first impressions. Submit a paper that is legible and tidy. Don't choose distracting fonts—unless you're using Times New Roman, sans serif is probably the way to go. Also, be careful not to make your margins so wide or thin as to be distracting, your font too small to read, or your character spacing too close together or far apart. By the time the readers get to your essay, their eyes may be very tired indeed, so make reading easy for them. It's also important to present your paper neatly. DON'T turn in anything with food stains, ink spots, or smudges. If you can keep your essay from being folded or creased, do so.

11. Relax. The essay isn't life or death, and this one little thing will not determine your future. Remember that the essay is only one part of your application. Try the best you can to write a good essay, but once you've done your best, that's all your readers can hope for!

12. If You Still Aren't Sure... Try to write the essay first. However, if you still aren't sure, ask your school counselors for suggestions, read books, or look online for examples of good and bad essay writing. Don't let these stifle your creativity, but they can still give you a good idea of what to look for in your own writing.

## **The Interview**

### **1. Plan Ahead!**

A. Know Your Interviewers. While you usually can't actually know who your interviewers will be, remember that they will almost always represent those sponsoring the scholarship or be part of the college or program to which you are applying. Take the opportunity to learn about the scholarship, organization, college, program, etc. Talk to people, read brochures, and, if it is a college or college program, ask for a tour beforehand. This way you can demonstrate in the interview that you are enthusiastic about being accepted. It can also help you to anticipate possible questions and be better prepared to answer them. (For instance, one of the questions asked during the Wal-Mart Good Works Scholarship interview is: What do you know about Sam Walton?)

B. Talk to Those Who've Already Been Through the Interview. If at all possible, talk to someone else who's already done the interview in the years before. They can give you a good idea of what to expect. We change our questions every year, so it's not cheating to ask what the questions were the year before. The styles and themes will be similar, so this will let you think about how to answer your interview questions.

C. Learn About the Interview Format. Often you have opportunities to ask ahead of time what to expect (such as when you schedule a time for your interview or when you call the Office of Admission). Knowing about where the interview will be held, who will be conducting it (students, head of the program, etc.), and what type of interview format will be used can help you to prepare and feel more relaxed when you actually do get into the interview.

D. Brainstorm Possible Questions and Answer Them. Think about the type of questions you are

likely to be asked (such as "why are you applying?") and come up with really good, peachy-keen answers ahead of time. While you can't think of everything, having an answer all ready to go on such questions can ensure that you say everything you want to and that you present yourself well.

E. Prepare Yourself on the Day of the Interview. Do whatever you have to in order to be relaxed and confident. Eat a good breakfast and get some sleep.

## 2. First Impressions Matter

A. Be on Time. NEVER, EVER, EVER BE LATE! That's probably the number one way to make a bad first impression. Also, there are numerous interviews scheduled each day – it will be difficult to give you the time you deserve if you're late. Clear plenty of time on your schedule and arrive at the interview about 10 minutes early, so you can wait and be right there when you are called. If you are unfamiliar with the area where the interview will be held, find out ahead of time.

B. Dress for Success. Like it or not, you are being judged the minute you walk in the door. Every interviewer wants to pick candidates who will not only do well, but who actually want to be admitted to the college or program. If you don't look like you're taking the interview seriously, they'll assume you aren't – even if this evaluation is occurring at a sub-conscious level. Dress nicely. Avoid "sloppy" clothing. Make sure your hair is neat. If possible, ask ahead of time what type of dress is expected—if you aren't sure, always choose to fall on the side of too formal rather than too casual. At Texas A&M University-Commerce, we are not expecting suits and ties, but do present yourself in a way that shows you care.

C. Smile. You want to appear friendly, relaxed, and confident. Smile, have a firm handshake, and use positive body language (no slouching, cringing, or fidgeting). Yes, you're going to be nervous – that's normal and, at some level, a survival mechanism. However, balance those nerves with confidence – in the end that's how you get ahead in college and life

## 3. The Big Event.

A. Remember the Purpose of the Interview. The point of the interview is to learn more about you. Assume that your interviewers have already read your application and know your credentials. Now they are looking at your enthusiasm, articulateness, reasoning skills, personality, and how well you are able to answer questions. They may also be interested in your viewpoints on certain issues and your knowledge of specific topics—generally, this will depend on what you are interviewing for. The key is to present yourself in your best light, and let your interviewers know who you are.

B. Show No Fear. Don't appear nervous, scared, or shy during the interview. Remember to breathe and collect yourself during the interview.

C. Have a Sense of Humor. This doesn't mean giggling all the time, but having a sense of humor can keep you from becoming anxious or frustrated. It can also make you appear to be more in control of yourself and to appear friendlier to the interviewers.

D. Think. When asked a question, you don't have to respond right away if you aren't ready to do so. Your interviewers will often take it as a positive sign that you consider your answers before you give them. It will help to give a more organized and convincing answer, in addition to keeping you from rambling or contradicting yourself. Just don't let the silence get oppressive—15 seconds is probably more than enough time.

E. There is No Right Answer. Questions during an interview are meant to be open-ended. While the question itself may be controversial, there is generally no right or wrong way to answer it. Even if the interviewers disagree with your viewpoint, they will appreciate it if you can demonstrate good reasoning and thoroughly explain your position.

F. Be Personal. Once again, your interviewers want to know who you are. Don't always go for the easy answer. Take the time to give an answer that reveals something about you. Explain yourself fully, giving examples from your own life.

G. Be Definite. Again with the confidence thing—you don't want to sound wishy-washy. Say "it is" rather than "it seems like." Try not to use filler words such as "um" and "uh," and also, like, try not to, like, make "like" every third word you say. Support your positions and don't contradict yourself.

H. Make it a Conversation Rather Than an Inquisition. The sole purpose of the interview isn't just for you to speak when spoken to. Don't dominate or speak out of turn, but do try to engage your interviewers whenever possible. It'll make everyone more comfortable with the situation and make the interviewers more willing to like you.

I. Ask Questions. Almost always there is an opportunity at the end of the interview for you to ask questions. Asking intelligent and thoughtful questions will make you appear more intelligent and thoughtful (go figure!). Use questions specifically to clarify and to learn more about the college, program, or scholarship you are applying for. There are no dumb questions (though there are offensive and poorly worded ones, so avoid those). Questions such as "What are your most and least favorite aspects of this program?" and "How would you describe the community?" can be very valuable to you and show the interviewers that you are interested. If at all possible, prepare your questions before you ever walk in the room. Feel free to bring notes with questions you want to ask.

J. Don't Forget to Smile! Don't keep a goofy look on your face, but make sure you present yourself positively. Keep up the friendly, confident, and relaxed attitude throughout the interview. Thank your interviewers and smile as you leave the room.