

# Juicy Personal Essay Topics

SAY GOODBYE TO THE SUMMER-VACATION ESSAY AND HELLO TO BOLD AND DARING WRITING

It's September, which means one of two things, depending on what grade you're in. You are either a) getting ready to deal with your college application essay (aka, the Ultimate Personal Essay), or b) being asked by your English teacher to write a personal essay, in order to get you warmed up for the year.

The first step, and maybe the most important one, is picking your topic. If you pick a boring topic, the chances are good that your essay will be boring (and you will be bored out of your head while writing it). Here are a few things you should keep in mind when picking a personal essay topic.

## > IT COULD HAPPEN TO YOU

It is your job to choose a topic that is unique to you. Perhaps you competed in the Iditarod. Perhaps you're the first person in the history of your town to finish high school in two years. Perhaps you're already a published author.

But don't worry if you're not any of these people. (Most of us aren't.) The key to your essay is your perspective. You can write about whatever you want, as long as your take on it is unique. Travel is broadening, winning a game is thrilling, and losing a beloved relative is devastating, but the fact of the matter is, these are



things that happen to everyone at one point or another. However, if you can write an essay about why winning the championship lacrosse game was actually the worst thing that ever happened to you, or a humorous piece about how travel to Europe actually really isn't that broadening if you spend most of the trip in the American Embassy replacing your lost passport, then you've got something. Perspective is everything, especially if the perspective is unexpected.

## > GIVE US THE GOODS

One of the purposes of the personal essay is to reveal something about who you are, what you believe in, or what's important to you. Choose a topic that allows the

reader to gain some insight into you, but don't go overboard—we don't need to know everything about you all at once. Overwhelming your reader is as bad as underwhelming your reader.

How do you reveal yourself? Say you choose to write a piece about the moment you decided to pursue a career in medicine. Don't just tell us that when you were in 9th-grade biology class you realized how

fascinating the human body is. Tell us exactly why biology appealed to you; whether it had anything to do with your good (or not so good) teacher; whether you were happy or freaked out by this realization; whether you told anyone or kept it to yourself; and whether or not you thought you could make it through the years and years of training. If you can reveal all of this about yourself in an essay on choosing a career in medicine, then you've chosen a good topic.

## GET THE JUICES FLOWING

**Don't just come up with a topic and start writing your essay. Do some preparatory, exploratory writing. It's a great way to find a topic that will excite you as well as your reader.**

**1 MAKE A LIST.** Start with general ideas, just to get you thinking. List people who have influenced you, places that have moved you, experiences that have challenged you, successes, failures, funny and terrible things that have happened to you, and goals (big and small) that you wish to attain.

**2 PICK THREE.** Pick the top three subjects that appeal to you from your list. In other words, pick the items that you are most willing to spend time thinking (and writing) about.

**3 WRITE WHATEVER.** Get a pen and paper, or turn on your computer, and spend five minutes writing in a stream-of-consciousness style about each of the three topics. Start with your favorite one, and don't worry about

punctuation and grammar and all that stuff—just write whatever comes into your head. Then do the same thing for the other topics.

**4 READ—LATER.** Leave what you've written for a while, and go do something else—give your mind a break. When you come back, see if anything jumps out at you. Did you go off on a strange tangent? Is the tangent more interesting than the original topic? Did you write anything unexpected? Have you lost interest in your original topics because something more interesting came up?

**5 FIND YOUR PERSPECTIVE.** List your top three topics again, with space after each topic. (The list may be the same, or it may have changed, based on the previous exercise.) After each topic,

write down your perspective. For instance, if one of your topics is the day you didn't make the basketball team, you might write, "It was traumatic." Now, just for fun, rewrite that sentence to reflect its opposite: "It was delightful." For each opposite perspective, take three minutes to write a stream-of-consciousness paragraph.

**6 CHOOSE!** Based on the exercises you've completed, choose the topic you think will reveal the most about you and that you will most enjoy writing about. Don't pick something just because you think you should—remember, you're the one who has to do the work. And if you enjoy writing it (or, at the very least, if you know you will have meaningful things to say), chances are good that your reader will enjoy reading it.

**Don't be alarmed if a lot of what you've written while doing these exercises seems unusable. The point here is to give yourself as many ideas and options as possible, and to wake up your creativity, in case your brain is still in summer mode. If you finish this exercise with one good idea that excites you, it was a success.**

**>>STAY TUNED:** Next month, we'll put your topic to the test, with *How to Write the Personal Essay of Your Dreams*.