

WRITING THE APPLICATION ESSAYS

By The Testing Mom

Across the country, applications for private school and some competitive public schools ask for a “Parent Statement” that includes questions for parents. The purpose of these is to give the school one more way to get a sense of your family and child and whether or not you would be a good fit in their program. Essays are especially important for schools that don’t interview parents. They may be the only way for you to “speak” to the admissions committee, give them your impressions of your child, and explain why the school is right for your child.

Here are some typical essay questions asked on applications:

- Tell us about your child?
- Describe your child’s personality and interests including his or her strengths and weaknesses.
- Describe the educational environment and experience you envision for your child.
- What values are most important to your family? How do you communicate these values to your child?
- Use the space below for additional information you want to include as part of this application. (Optional)

Tips for Writing Effective Essays

- **Keep them short.** If there are several essays, you should limit your answer to ½ page each, single-spaced. If there are just 1 – 2 essays, you can write up to a page each. Even if the form just gives you 3 or 4 lines on which to write, you can attach separate pages. Use a readable sized font and keep your margins wide.
- **Answer what is asked.** Be sure to answer the question asked.

- **Brainstorm first.** Take time to brainstorm ideas for answering each question. Ideally, you'll include stories that illustrate qualities of your child that you would like to communicate.
- **Mention the school's hot buttons.** Make sure to touch upon the unique qualities of each school as you write. For example, if you were answering "Describe the educational environment and experience you envision for your child" and you were considering Friends Seminary, you would want to talk about how you believe the Quaker philosophy would be an important element in your child's educational experience.
- **Match your child to the school.** Each school has its own unique qualities to offer. If you choose your list of schools carefully, you will be able to write honestly what about that school makes it just right for your child and family. What you want to do is match your child's personal qualities with what the school offers, talk about why your child will be able to take advantage of the unique opportunities available at that school, why she will thrive in that environment.
- **Your first paragraph is key.** It needs to draw the Admissions Director in and make her want to read on. Make it interesting and action oriented. Your ending also needs to be a grabber – you want it to leave a lasting impression. Pay special attention to these paragraphs.
- **Personal examples.** Back up your points with personal examples that evoke a vivid image. Example: "Sarah is a compassionate child who helps those in need." versus "As we walked to nursery school last week, Sarah handed her lunch to a homeless woman on the corner who was saying „I'm hungry" to nobody in particular."

- **Upbeat topics.** When you have some choice, choose upbeat topics to write about. Try to bring your message to life through anecdotes, facts, dialogue, images, and stories. Focus on poignant details.
- If you are having trouble getting started, try writing in a stream of consciousness to see what you produce. Or, **write a letter to a friend or loved one** who you haven't spoken to for a few years and address the questions in the application.
- **No laundry list.** Avoid answering with a laundry list (i.e. "My daughter enjoys gymnastics, art, theater, and karate.")
- **Flow.** Review the essay for flow. Are thoughts expressed naturally, or do they seem to skip around? Does each paragraph stick to the thought you introduced in the opening sentence?
- **Balance.** Paragraphs should be balanced. If one is significantly longer than the others, see where you could break it up.
- **Series.** If the application has several essays, you should look at the impact that your series of essays has as a whole. You should balance structure and content between essays, just as you would do within essays to keep them interesting.
- Don't overuse any words in particular, especially the word "I."
- Go for a variety of sentence lengths within each paragraph. Short sentences often carry the most punch. Avoid long, run-on sentences.
- Use lots of strong verbs because they add action and interest.

- Use **transition sentences** to preserve the flow between your paragraphs. Without them you run the risk of having your paragraphs feel isolated and unrelated to each other.
- **Avoid clichés.** Be more original. For example, avoid overused ideas like “Teaching Arielle the value of hard work and perseverance is the greatest lesson a school could offer.” or, “Mark always learns from his mistakes.” “Or, Desmond already knows what it means to triumph over adversity.”

In conclusion...

- After you write, **ask yourself if this essay could have been written by anyone, or does it really convey your (child’s) story?**
- Re-read your essay to see if it is memorable. You probably won’t get this on the first draft. Rewriting will improve your essay.
- When you’ve finished your essays, put them away for a day and then go back to them. They will look different to you with the passing of time. Show them to friends and colleagues and get their input.
- Finally, check the essay for grammatical errors and misspelled words. Don’t appear to be sloppy or uneducated.

Examples:

“Jeremy is an excellent student who is very proud of everything he does in classroom. Aware of the teacher’s expectations, he pours his heart into his assignments. He adores experiments and spends hours mixing batters, different liquids, and food colorings into “magic potions” and doughs. He took cooking classes three semesters in a row because he loves the way baking and cooking changes the shape and the smell of food. It is easy

to imagine Jeremy succeeding at a school where children learn through discovery, such as St. Ann's. Your hands-on approach to education would be a perfect match for the way Jeremy learns best."

"Most of all, we are looking for a school that will provide a strong value base for Chloe. Perhaps what we love more than anything about Friends is the Quaker sentiment of equality, integrity, and peacefulness. Our daily spiritual practice of meditation, yoga and prayer probably best communicate our values to Chloe. Meditation provides us quiet time for inner reflection. Yoga provides us with a way to keep our body and our spirit healthy. Praying provides us with a way to respect the equality of all beings. Our evening prayer is: May all beings be happy, may all beings be peaceful, may all beings be safe, may all beings be free. We demonstrate our commitment to this prayer in our everyday encounters with other human beings. We also have regular conversations with Chloe about our principles and values and whenever possible, we try to involve her in our value-based endeavors. For example, we regularly cook meals together and deliver them to homeless shelters."

"Enthusiasm and passion are the two words that describe my daughter Lily. As her mother, I am moved by the boundless curiosity and joy Lily brings to any endeavor she undertakes. She is impassioned by nature. Her love of flowers, trees, seeds, and nuts is unending. We regularly walk through park where we collect various items from nature and discuss them. We collect everything from acorns and leaves to wildflowers and rocks. Lily has always had a special interest in flowers, so now we identify all the wildflowers we find. After each trip to the park, we consult our special reference book on wildflowers and identify and read about each flower we have picked. Exploring and studying nature is a very important interest of Lily's that she pursues both in the city and the country. Lily also loves animals and insects – anything at all that comes from nature. She has never met a dog she didn't like. And, she is fascinated by bugs, never afraid."

“On an intellectual level, Rachel never ceases to amaze me. Whether she is seeking to learn more about nature, art, history – you can practically see her mind ingesting and processing the information at hand. Then, she’ll ask questions that show that she has made appropriate connections and has a true grasp of the subject. She shows wonderful excitement when listening to a story, completing a jigsaw puzzle, or mastering a new skill. Recently, we purchased a few nursery school “workbooks” for her so that she could practice her letters and learn some early math skills. She constantly wanted to work on her books and before we knew it, she had completed them and was ready to tackle the kindergarten level. Rachel is a child who will “eat up” school.”

“Recently, we were traveling to Sweden and Joey inadvertently left his “special” puppy, Bingo, on the seat of the airplane. When we realized Bingo was gone, Joey was very sad, but worked hard to hold himself together. For two nights he struggled to sleep without Bingo. I contacted the airline to report Joey’s loss, but I was not optimistic that Bingo would ever be found. Joey, on the other hand, was certain that the pilot would find Bingo and take good care of him. He knew he and Bingo would be reunited. Two days later, a package arrived for us and inside of it was Bingo along with a note from the airline telling Joey how happy they were to have found the lost puppy’s owner. Joey was happy, but not surprised that Bingo came back to him. That is the essence of our son Joey. He is positive, optimistic, and a believer in happy endings. Joey is as smart a boy and as wonderful a human being as we have ever known.”

“Andrew is bright, naturally inquisitive, and eager to learn how the world works. He never accepts a superficial or thoughtless answer, and he will keep asking questions until the adult tells him “we need to find out more about it” or “nobody really knows for sure”.

His questions not only cover many scientific facts children wonder about like “ where do the stars go when we don’t see them”, “why wouldn’t I hear music on the moon” or “how does the rain get into the clouds”, but also more metaphysical ones like “is there only one heaven?” “How will grandma find her friends in heaven?”

“Although Steven loves games and competitions, the concepts of fairness and cooperation are very important to him. He is good at seeing a situation from another child’s perspective. He often becomes concerned when he sees another child who is angry or sad and will try to help. When he saw a boy from his neighborhood cry on his second day of Kindergarten because his mother was not allowed to go up to the classroom, Steven invited the boy to stand with him and his friend Stacy.”

“It is important to us that Katy is in a school that promotes open mindedness, a key ingredient for success in this world, we believe. The United Nations International School (UNIS) also offers the unique ability to surround its students in a miniature “real world” that includes the customs, language, and culture of many different people. We can already see that Katy has a flair for language, and we want her to attend a school where she can learn and *use* Spanish, French and beyond! The whole multicultural world of UNIS appeals to our family values in a very direct way.”

“Everyone who knows David comments on what a wonderful artist he is. He will spend hours at a time drawing intricate pictures of the sea, lighthouses, the ocean, sunsets, fish, cats, Clifford the dog, and, of course, cars. He captured details and likenesses very well, even when he was just a toddler. David spends lots of time doing puzzles and can do a 60-piece puzzle on his own. With little help, he can even finish a 100-piece puzzle. Already, he is reading books, especially the Dr. Seuss books for beginner readers. One of

his favorite activities are to visit a bookstore or the library. David also enjoys building with Legos and blocks very much. Usually, he will build complex and imaginative cars.”

“We would like our son to go to the best possible school so that he gets a wonderful education and can go on to lead a successful, productive life. We are interested in Collegiate because we know it is a very special school. First, Collegiate offers wheelchair accessibility, which many schools do not. That tells us that you welcome children who are physically disabled, as long as they can do the academic work required. We have heard that you honor the diversity of the students you accept, and that is the kind of open-minded school community we hope Eric can be part of.

Second, Collegiate is an extremely challenging and demanding school, and we know that Eric can handle that. Since he is unlikely to excel at physical endeavors, he needs to be in a school where he will be able to stretch intellectually. He needs a school that will help him acquire a love for learning by having a deep and varied curriculum. He needs a school that will teach him the skills he needs to be an independent student. These are all qualities we have heard that Collegiate offers in its own unique way.

Third, Collegiate provides many alternative avenues where Eric can excel. We want Eric to feel proud of himself and his accomplishments. By being in a boy’s school, Eric will feel that he can try anything and everything as he looks for his path to success. We have been told that students can find their niche at Collegiate in many different ways, and that athletics aren’t the only way to succeed.”

Since Max is an only child, we have been able to travel with him all over the world. He has been to Switzerland, Italy, Spain, England, and even Cuba already. His Cuban trip was a special father-son vacation. In Cuba, he spent time with his father’s two friends

and their sons, participating in a fishing championship. Before he left for Cuba, we looked up Kia Koo Ko, Cuba on the map and compared its location with NYC. Now, whenever we travel, Max asks to look at the map so that he will understand just where on the earth he is going. This November, we will take him to the Far East for two weeks, which he is very excited about.

We believe that Nowell will also very soon be an excellent reader. He is fascinated by stories especially when they are based on real people and events. His favorite books at the moment come from the “Magic Tree House” series, in which Morgan, master librarian and enchantress help two children to travel through time and space and asks them to solve mysteries and riddles. Nowell is excited by the stories we read to him, especially stories about ancient civilizations or historically based adventures. After telling him a story about Caribbean pirates in the 17th century, he was intrigued, asking us “Are there still pirates today?” “Do people hunt for treasure today? Where?” “Can we go to the Caribbean and dive for treasure?”

Nowell is a highly imaginative boy and often creates his own tales of adventure. His own stories have taken place in the Ice Age, Ancient Greece, Egypt, or the Amazon Jungle. Often characters from each place and time will meet, talk, and defend their land in Nowell’s own made-up universe. From what we know about St. Ann’s, a child with such a vivid imagination who loves to create stories of his own, would fit right in.

“One of Sam’s special talents is her broad range of vocabulary and the expressive way she uses language. What we mean by this is she communicates easily and can paint a vivid picture using many different words she absorbs from the world around her. For example, around the age of three she became very interested in dinosaurs. She learned about what they might have looked like through songs, books, audiotapes etc. They were

not just described as „big,“ but also „huge,“ „enormous“ or „gigantic.“ Soon she started using these words in her own everyday speech. Similarly, she may call a star in the sky „brilliant,“ a word she learned because it describes the Emerald City in her favorite book, „The Wizard of Oz.“ Sam is very observant of the world around her, and picking up new words every day comes very natural to her.”

Idea Starters for Application Essays

Take a look at this list to give you ideas. What words describe your child? Use some of these or come up with your own. Now, can you think of a story that illustrates how your child demonstrates the trait described by each word you selected?

- self-motivated
- eager learner
- naturally curious
- gets along easily with others
- creative
- inquisitive
- lively conversationalist
- active
- confident
- musical
- artistic
- unique
- takes care of others
- fun to be with
- asks lots of questions

- enthusiastic, bubbly
- helpful
- loves to discover new things
- enjoys games
- organized
- spontaneous
- fair
- laughs
- funny
- mimics others
- makes everything fun
- entrepreneurial – runs a lemonade stand in our lobby on occasion!
- focused
- an entertainer
- our little scientist
- precocious
- vivacious
- sensitive
- strong sense of who she is
- explorer
- sensitive to others’ feelings
- social
- inspiring
- diligent
- orderly
- the social chairman
- determined
- polite
- respectful
- a leader

- loving
- a gentle soul

What your child does for fun...

- puts on shows
- sings and dances
- colors in her coloring books
- enjoys numbers
- plays with puzzles
- tells wonderful stories
- enjoys sports – baseball, swimming, skating, biking
- loves museum trips
- collects stamps or match box cars
- cares for animals
- hiking
- climbing trees
- plays piano
- inventor
- gardens
- builder
- loves to be with nature – insects, butterflies, frogs
- plays dress up
- enjoys the beach, woods, park
- baking or cooking
- plays school
- loves to be read to
- cuddles with mommy before bed
- paints and draws
- plays with cars and trains

Qualities to describe your child...

- plays quietly for a long time
- puts her things away neatly
- comfortable with grown-ups
- calming around animals
- gets lost in her projects
- remembers what he has seen, great sense of direction
- drawn to colors, shapes, patterns, and other visual stimuli
- has friends all over the neighborhood
- ability to settle arguments, a mediator
- makes others feel welcome
- waits her turn
- looks forward to school each day
- makes transitions easily
- takes responsibility for his actions
- explains her ideas well
- sophisticated use of language
- storyteller
- shares her belongings
- gentle and kind
- introspective and shy
- makes people smile
- loves to figure things out himself
- socially conscious
- a real ham
- loves to be with her friends/cousins/grandpa
- a calming influence
- great hand-eye coordination
- prides himself on being a good friend