

Dos and don'ts

Here is a quick list of things you should do and should avoid:

- Don't talk about your SAT scores. Why? First, doing so will make you look like someone who is obsessed with test scores. Second, your application should already have a place for you to report your SAT scores.
- Instead, talk about your love of learning.
- Don't talk about having private tutors, as doing so may make you appear privileged.
- Instead, talk about spending time in the library on your own to learn more or staying after school to get extra help from teachers and friends.
- Avoid tired topics such as the generation-gap topic ("my parents don't understand me!"). Doing so might make you sound whiney.
- Instead, talk about things that you are proud of.
- Avoid the pity-me essay.
- Instead, talk about how you have overcome hardship.
- Important! Be extremely careful when discussing matters relating to race, sexuality, illegal activities, etc. If you are going to write about this sort of thing, please ask other people for feedback so that you can get a better idea of how you come across to others.

Self-assessment

First, we are going to show you how to assess yourself. Later, you are going to ask your friends for your help.

You need to think very carefully about yourself, your qualities, your abilities, and your achievements. Answering the following questions can help.

1. What sets you apart? What makes you different from your friends?
2. What is your greatest quality?
3. What is an experience that is meaningful to you? Have you done anything, even seemingly insignificant, that made the world a better place?
4. What are your dreams? What are your dreams for yourself and your family? What are your dreams for the world?

5. What do you see as your role in society? Do you believe that you will make the world a better place?
6. Do you consider yourself a good student? How do you look “on paper”? I.e., if you are curious and motivated, does your transcript bear this out?
7. Have you been busy outside of school? When given the choice, would you rather chat online or spend time with people?
8. How do you envision your future in college? Do you think you will have an active social life? Do you plan to work harder in college than you have worked in high school?

Next: Let’s look at the part that your friends will help you with.

“Aren’t I wonderful?”

Okay, here’s the part that should be fun. This will take a bit of courage, but it will help you a lot, we promise.

As we have mentioned, you need to reflect a little bit on yourself, your qualities, and perhaps even your weaknesses. To do this well, you will need to ask other people for help, as you may not be the most objective person to assess your strengths. In our experience, most people tend to underestimate themselves; many people are much stronger, brighter, and interesting than they give themselves credit for. It is also important to remember that our culture rewards people for confidence, borderline arrogance, and even a bit of bravado. Our culture also punishes self-important braggarts, windbags, and pedants. So it’s important to get outside opinions so that you know how you appear to others.

Here’s what we would like you to do: take this questionnaire and ask your friends to help you out by filling it out. It would be a nice gesture for you to do the same for them, if they’re also applying to college. If they’re not applying to college, buy them some *boba* or give them a nice handmade thank-you card. (It’s a good habit for your life as well—thank people for the help they’ve given you.)

You may also want to consider asking a family member for help. Yes, it can be a bit embarrassing to ask someone you live with or know very well to help you with this, but if you feel comfortable doing so, by all means, ask!

Finally, think of a teacher whom you like and trust and consider asking her or him for help, too. As a teacher, I can say that I would be thrilled to help a student with this exercise! In fact, I wish more high school students came to their teachers for extra help (most of us are educators because we genuinely enjoy helping people). In exchange, please consider filling out the information for your teacher as well. That's right! You can assess your teacher, too. A tip—many teachers have a lot of responsibilities and are very busy, so please ask well in advance. Two weeks (or more) is a good amount of time.

Now, go to the next page to see the questionnaire for your friends, family, and teachers to fill out.

Will you please help me?

"Hi! As you probably know, I am applying to college right now. And yes, I'm just a little stressed out about it. I need a bit of help assessing my strengths and qualities, and I thought you would be the perfect person to help me.

"I am asking only a few people for help, and I chose you because I respect your opinion, and I think you know me pretty well. Could you please help me by answering a few questions for me? I promise I will be very thankful and will try to return the favor if I can."

Instructions to the responder: Please be honest and fair, but be tactful. Your friend will take what you say to heart. Try to emphasize your friend's strengths, not weaknesses, as she or he is looking for her or his best qualities to emphasize right now.

Responder's name: _____

9. List five things you like about me.

10. What is the funniest thing I have ever said or done?

11. Which school subject do you think I'm best at?

12. What color do you associate me with? Why? If I were an animal, what animal would I be? Why?

13. What country do you think I would enjoy living in?

14. What do you think are my strengths as a student?

15. What colleges could you see me doing well at?

16. If you were a college, what would most make me appealing to you?

17. What do you wish the world knew about me?

18. What do you wish I knew about myself?

19. What do you think I most overlook in myself?

20. Is there anything else you would like to add?

That's it! Thank you very, very, very much! Please wish me luck and send me good energy. If there's anything I can do for you, please let me know!