

Different > difficult brainstorming worksheet

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Purpose

As you begin thinking about the college search process, you probably will wonder to yourself, “What will colleges look for in an applicant?” and “How do I stand out from the pack?” While there is no one-size-fits-all answer here (after all, if you are applying to art school, they’ll possibly look at your art portfolio as their #1 criteria; if you’re applying to a general liberal arts college, they won’t even ask for an art portfolio at all), there is one universal statement that applies:

As you begin thinking about your story and how you want to demonstrate your value to a potential college, keep one thing in mind: just because something is more difficult does not mean it is more valuable in the eyes of a college admissions representative looking at your application. What really stands out is when something is unique, regardless of the difficulty to complete.

Instructions

Great news: if you are completing this worksheet in-line with my recommendations, then you have just begun your junior year of high school. This means you have *plenty of time* to work on crafting your story—one that is ideally unique, stands out...and might not even be that difficult to work on building over the next two years! (Side note: if you are late to the game here and are a senior, *that’s okay!* *You can and should still complete this exercise. It will be extremely valuable to you!*).

1. What are you passionate about? To determine, I like to utilize what Cal Newport dubs the “Saturday Morning Test.” Picture yourself in the middle of the school year. You wake up on a Saturday morning with the entire day in front of you. To make it more fun, let’s say you have zero homework to complete for the entire weekend, no family obligations etc. A 100% free day. What do you do with your day? List anywhere from 3-10 passions below, more if you have them. Don’t shy away.

Passion 1: Work on my hobby research project (a history of WWII written entirely in Latin (except for citations))

Passion 2: Read some of the many books which I’ve been meaning to get to

Passion 3: Further build my website and get it fully-functional

Passion 4:

Passion 5:

Passion 6:

Passion 7:

Passion 8:

Passion 9:

Passion 10:

2. For a second now, forget about step #1. We'll come back to that shortly. For step #2, I want you to think outside of the box and answer the following question: What things, if you heard that a 16-18 year old accomplished, would you say to yourself, "Wow, that's unique/impressive/different/not something I hear a 16-18 year old doing on a daily basis"? Feel free to get creative here, anything goes. To kick you off, a few examples could be: start & run their own blog, start & run their own company, start & run their own Youtube channel, write & self-publish a book, mentor a younger student. For some more examples, Cal Newport describes several high school "superstars" who accomplished unique (and often, not super-difficult tasks) that got them accepted to elite colleges:

"High School Superstars (who excel at college admissions) are *genuinely interesting people* who do *genuinely interesting things*. Kara, for example, developed a technology-based health curriculum. Olivia spent her summers working on horseshoe crab research at a nearby university. Michael spearheaded a series of sustainability projects at his school that earned considerable press attention. Maneesh wrote a bestselling guide to computer game programming for teens. Kate's research on teaching methods changed the way that a well-known charter school taught reading to its students. And I co-founded a web development company."

List anywhere from 3-10 things below that would be super impressive/cool/different/fun if you heard a 16-18 year old accomplished them:

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #1: Make their own website from scratch

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #2: Write a major work (of academic quality) in Latin

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #3: Over 100 Volunteer hours

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #4: Creating a language

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #5:

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #6:

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #7:

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #8:

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #9:

Super impressive/cool/different fun thing #10:

3. Finding the overlap: Now take a look at the first list and second list together. If easier, put both lists side by side on different pages. Can you find any overlap between the two lists that you think you might just be able to accomplish sometime in the next two years? This should not feel like a stressful, tedious task. Instead, think of it almost like a fun art project. Combining two lists to see if you can make one, super-cool & fun master list. Feel free to get your family involved too! Moms, dads, brothers, and sisters have been known to get creative from time to time...

Here's a small example:

LIST 1: Cooking vegan recipes, playing soccer, playing guitar

LIST 2: Be a published author, give a TED talk speech in front of hundreds of people, help support a group of underprivileged peers

As I look at the above lists, how can I combine them to potentially create a super-cool-awesome thing that I also happen to be passionate about?

-I could combine my passion for soccer with my desire to help support a group of underprivileged peers by creating a non-profit that provides soccer balls/soccer cleats to communities that otherwise could not afford. Anytime I hear of a friend with used gear, instead of throwing away, I could donate it via my organization, which I will call "Kicks for Kids".

-I could start writing down my vegan food recipes anytime I cook. Then, once I have a hefty google-doc of recipes built up, I could [self-publish via Amazon](#) and, what do you know, I am a published author and have a great holiday gift to go along with it!

-I love guitar and always think music should be used more in general education. I could write down my thoughts and turn it into a mini-speech. I could then apply to one of the many [locally-organized TEDx events throughout the country](#). If I don't get accepted, so what? I applied and that, in itself, is super impressive and different. And if I do get accepted, amazing! I get to give a 3-minute speech...something very, very few 18 year olds have done.

The actual matches above are ones I just completely made up on the spot right here, but it serves as a great example that, with a little creativity, you can absolutely find something you are not only passionate about, but that is super unique!

Give it a go. How many matches can you find between list one and two? Write down 3-10 matches.

Potential cool/unique/different project match #1: My website

Potential cool/unique/different project match #2: My History of WW2

Potential cool/unique/different project match #3:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #4:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #5:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #6:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #7:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #8:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #9:

Potential cool/unique/different project match #10:

4. Now go back and star your 1-2 favorites. Once you have done so, truly think about them. Are they feasible? Can you actually accomplish them? Feel free to discuss with your parents if needed. If you are super excited and want to get going on the project right away, that's fantastic--give it a go! And if not, that's ok. You may want to wait a

couple days, go back and try this exercise again. Keep in mind, having a unique “project” to work on will help you distinguish yourself in the college application process so I highly recommend putting in a good amount of effort to find one. Still having trouble? Utilize the DCC Facebook Community for insight, or read more of the examples from [Cal Newport’s How to be a High School Superstar](#). And remember, your “project” does *not* have to be difficult as long as it’s just a little different!