**Approaching the Writing Curriculum**

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This Writing Curriculum has been broken down into two major sections.

The first section covers the “personal essay” (or the Common Application essay). It consists of ten lessons (lessons one through ten), which will take approximately twenty hours to complete. In total, plan to devote **three months** to the entire essay-writing process, which includes completing the curriculum exercises and multiple drafts of your personal essay.

The second section covers the “why” essay (or the school-specific supplement). It consists of three lessons (lessons eleven through thirteen), which will take approximately seven hours to complete. In total, plan to devote **one month** to to the entire essay-writing process, which includes completing the curriculum exercises and multiple drafts of your “why” essay.

We recommend that you start this process in the summer before your senior year. See below for a *suggested* schedule of completion, along with instructions.

June before Senior Year (Personal Essay)

**Lesson One (~2hrs)**

Pages 4-5: Introduction to Part I: Brainstorming *– Read*

Pages 6-15: Brainstorming I *– Answer only the most pertinent question(s) in multi-paragraph format*

Pages 16-17: Sample Essays *– Read*

**Lesson Two (~3hrs)**

Pages 18-27: Brainstorming II *– Answer only the most pertinent question(s) in multi-paragraph format*

Pages 28-29: Sample Essays *– Read*

**Lesson Three (~2-3hrs)**

Pages 30-38: Brainstorming III *– Answer only the most pertinent question(s) in multi-paragraph format*

Pages 39-40: Sample Essays *– Read*

July before Senior Year (Personal Essay)

**Lesson Four (~1.5hrs)**

Pages 41-43: Choosing Your Topic *– Complete each exercise*

Pages 43-46: Sample Essays *– Read*

**Lesson Five (~2hrs)**

Page 47: Introduction to Part II: Effective Storytelling Techniques *– Read*

Pages 48-53: Storytelling Process and Techniques I *– Complete each exercise*

Pages 54-55: Sample Essays *– Read*

**Lesson Six (~1hr)**

Pages 56-59: Storytelling Process and Techniques II *– Complete each exercise*

Pages 60-61: Sample Essays *– Read*

**Lesson Seven (~2hrs)**

Pages 62-70: Storytelling Process and Techniques III *– Complete each exercise*

Pages 71-72: Sample Essays *– Read*

August before Senior Year (Personal Essay)

**Lesson Eight (~3hrs)**

Pages 73-79: Part III: The Revision Process *– Read & Complete each exercise*

**Lesson Nine (~2hrs)**

Pages 80-85: Part III: The Revision Process (from "4. Structure") *– Read & Complete each exercise*

**Lesson Ten (~.5hr)**

Pages 86-89: Analysis of Final Draft of the Sample Essay *– Read*

September before Senior Year (“Why” Essay)

**Lesson Eleven (~2hrs)**

Pages 90-99: Introduction to The “Why” Essay *– Read & Complete each exercise*

**Lesson Twelve (~3hrs)**

Pages 100-107: “Why Your Major?” Essay *– Read & Complete each exercise*

**Lesson Thirteen (~1.5hrs)**

Pages 108-112: “Why This School?” Essay *– Read & Complete each exercise*

**Lesson Fourteen (~1.5hrs)**

Pages 113-117: Things to Consider While Writing The “Why” Essay *– Read*

***The Art of Essay: Personal Essay***

**Chaim Durst**

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Since 2001, I have helped students craft college essays that are works of art. To create a masterpiece that stands out and moves the admissions committee, you must think like a director shooting a short film. You must consider the plot twists, the cutaway scenes, and the close-ups that will create the greatest impact in the short window you have to make an indelible impression. If you follow the exercises outlined in this curriculum, you should generate an essay that is a work of art.

Touting strengths and accomplishments, which many students do, may not be as effective as discussing a failure or weakness. Indeed, three out of the five essay prompts on the 2016-2017 Common Application directly ask about a failure, problem, or challenge. The reader is inviting you to reveal how you have grown through struggle. Few heed that invitation, however: These were the three least answered questions on the 2015-2016 Common Application.[i]

The philosophy of Sun Tzu, as expressed in his *The Art of War*, infuses much of this curriculum. In particular, his exhortation to **“appear weak when you are strong and strong when you are weak”** is a primary theme that repeatedly appears throughout these lessons. **Showing vulnerability, fear, shame, and failure reveals great strength, self-knowledge, and growth.**

**People fear revealing weakness. If you overcome that fear, you will craft a moving essay. And, you will stand out.**

The personal statement has become an increasingly important component of the college application. Indeed, many colleges have begun to **de-emphasize the SAT or ACT tests** for content, such as the personal statement, which more directly conveys a student’s personal philosophy and character. Over 800 top colleges no longer require that incoming first-year students submit standardized tests; these include Washington University, the University of Chicago, George Washington University, NYU, Smith, Bowdoin, and Wesleyan University.[ii]

That being said, students rarely invest the time and effort in their essay that they do preparing for standardized tests. One reason is that **it is easier to cram for a test than to investigate and explain one’s personal philosophy and psychology.** Furthermore, even if students do set adequate time aside to create a meaningful personal statement, they may not have a roadmap to do so.

**The personal statement belongs to a unique genre of writing**. Too many students approach it as they would a formal five-paragraph essay for English class. Those that do so generally do not generate a statement that stands out. Yes, it’s a research paper of sorts: The research topic is YOU. Yes, it’s an expository essay of sorts: You explain a personal circumstance or experience. You are describing yourself, so it could also be called a descriptive essay.

It even has elements of a persuasive essay: You are trying to persuade the readers of your merits as a candidate for their school. It might even have elements of an OP-ED (opinion-editorial) if you choose to take it in that direction. It is all of these and none of these. It is unique.

**Course Overview:**

This curriculum is divided into three sections. The first is dedicated to **brainstorming**. Too many students start writing without first taking the time to brainstorm adequately about themselves. **The more carefully you chronicle your personal philosophy and psychology, the more tools you will have to construct a personal statement that will move the reader and set your essay apart.** In this section, you will delve into various aspects of your identity and reflect on significant events and incidents that have shaped you.

In the second section, you will deal with the nuts and bolts of **writing**. I’ll cover 12 topics related to effective storytelling. These include: **point of view, syntax, pronoun and verb use, the hook and the close, tone, structure**, and much more. I will teach you specific techniques to transform your essay into a singular essay.

The third part is dedicated to **revision**. Expect to spend far more time revising your essay than writing it. Most exceptional essays I’ve worked with required upwards of 15 drafts before they were one-of-a-kind works of art. I will cover specific revision techniques that you can employ as you polish your essay.

**LESSON ONE**

**Brainstorming Part I: Understanding Your Emotional, Physical, and Intellectual Identity**

The goal of this curriculum is to help you craft an effective essay that **moves the reader**. To do so, you will need to reveal something poignant about your character, philosophy, or psychology. Although delving into your identity may seem like a roundabout way to craft a personal statement, it is the most effective way to lay the foundation for a stellar essay. An effective essay will not merely **report** on a significant event or incident in your life; it will detail how that event significantly shaped your identity.

In this section you will be prompted to answer: Who are you and how did you get that way? **Upon the foundation of such self-knowledge, you can then begin to formulate your essay.** The admissions committee member who reads thousands of these essays is on the lookout for those individuals who demonstrate heightened self-knowledge.

For the sake of the brainstorming process, I divide identity into three components: **emotions (psyche)**, **body**, and **mind (intellect)**. There are numerous factors that have an impact on each or all of these such as whom you interact with; artistic and literary influences; how you balance your beliefs and doubts; and your habits and goals. As you answer the questions, consider how the various factors impact all three parts of your being. Some questions relate more to your emotional identity. Others will relate to your physical or intellectual self. And, perhaps some questions touch on all three.

* **Family Members**:
* Parents and siblings often have an outsized impact on us. Which family member shaped your **emotional, physical, and intellectual** worlds the most? Consider members of your extended family as well.

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* In what way did this family member impact you? It could be positive, negative or both. People rarely affect us in simplistic terms.

Positive: Ex: Gave you confidence, self-esteem, optimism, etc.

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Negative: Ex: Made you feel anger, fear, regret, anxiety, etc.

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* Are you closer to your father or mother? How so? Why do you think that is? What quality does that parent have that makes you feel safe and nourished?

This is the question that has yielded many exceptional essays in the past. Students often feel attracted or repelled to certain qualities that their parents possess. What they are attracted to or repulsed by is quite telling.

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* Concerning your **emotional, physical, and intellectual** makeup, are you more similar to your father or mother? How so? It is useful to explore ways that your makeup is similar or dissimilar to your parents. We often emulate our parents in terms of how we express ourselves, act, or think, sometimes without even realizing we are doing so. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* What are the positive and negative ways you are affected by your sibling(s)? If you do not have any, how has that affected your growth?

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* How do you feel that your family and your upbringing affected your development? How did your upbringing affect your growth? Some people feel confident or independent because their parents gave them freedom growing up. Others had to contend with overbearing or strict parents. **Do you believe you feel a certain way, act a certain way, or think a certain way because you were raised a certain way?**

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* What has been the most challenging aspect of dealing with your family, or a specific family member? Perhaps you had to contend with the extended absence of a parent. Perhaps a family member’s mental health, addiction, or health issues push you to an emotional limit. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* In terms of how you express yourselves or act, what makes your family unique? Do you belong to a family of huggers? Is your family particularly cold or expressive? Is there a lot of yelling in your house, or perhaps singing?

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* **Mentors**:
* Mentors include counselors, teachers, coaches, and gurus (spiritual teachers) — pretty much anyone who is willing to support you and take you under his or her wing.

Which mentor has had the greatest impact on you?

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* Consider the positive and negative ways that this mentor affected you.

Positive: Ex: Helped you to feel confidence, self-esteem, optimism, etc.

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Negative: Ex: Caused you to feel anger, fear, frustration, etc.

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* Who is your favorite teacher or coach? What do you admire most about this person? How have you tried to emulate this person?

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* Who is your least favorite teacher or coach? What do you dislike about this person?

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* Mentoring others is one of the most formative experiences in life: We have to find ways to nurture, guide, and inspire others, perhaps when we don’t feel all that nurturing or inspirational. When have you mentored someone else? How did that experience change how you feel, act, or think?What did it teach you about yourself?

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* **Friends/Enemies:**
* Friends play a huge role in our development; they can often pull us out of a funk or put us in one. We turn to them for any number of emotional needs, and we are often at our best when we are with certain people. Who is your best emotional friend?

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* Consider the positive and negative ways that this friend has affected you **emotionally**, **physically, and intellectually**.

Positive: Ex: Helped you feel secure, loved, valuable, etc.

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Negative: Ex: Increased your anxiety, fear, jealousy, etc.

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* What is the most challenging aspect of dealing with this friend? Friends often know us so well that they can push our buttons or get under our skin in ways others can’t.

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* When was your friendship stretched to the breaking point? **When was your friendship threatened by something your friend did?** This is a very rich topic. Often our friends do things that put themselves or **us** at risk. How we respond to such actions often defines our character and shapes our personality and relationships. I have worked with many essays that explore breaks, strains, ruptures, heartbreaks, betrayals, breakups, and makeups with best friends.

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* What impact do you have on your friends? It’s rare that we stop and take stock to gauge how we affect others; often our focus is on how others affect us. How do you think you affect your closest friends?

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* Who is your worst nemesis? How does that person make you **feel or affect the way you act** **or think**? Why do you think he or she affects you this way?

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**Emotionally**, **physically, and intellectually** have you been shaped more by your friends or enemies in your life? We are often shaped more by those we dislike than by those we like if for no other reason than we vow never to act like or be like those we despise. Have your friends or enemies shaped you more? How so and why do you think that is?

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* **Hobbies**: (Blowing Off Steam)
* From the games we play to the videos we watch, hobbies can greatly affect our growth. What hobby has had the greatest impact on your emotions, body, or mind?

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Has it been a largely positive or negative influence? How so?

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* What hobby do you turn to most for **emotional** nourishment? What extracurricular activity makes you **feel** happiest? On the Common Application, there is a question that asks about your most significant extracurricular activity. I encourage students to write about what they LOVE most, not what they think will make them look good. If you write about what you are genuinely passionate about, the reader will get good a sense of your inner workings.

This is an opportunity to reflect on that very topic.

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* If you didn’t have to go to school, how would you spend your time? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_
* Many of us spend a great deal of time interacting with others online. How has social media affected your growth? For some, social media is a godsend allowing for constructive self-expression. For others, it provides a false sense of connectedness and breeds insecurity. How does it affect you?

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* **Belief and Faith**:
* Our formal religious faith and personal beliefs also shape our identity. Has formal religion played a role in your development? If so, how? Consider the indirect ways that religion has had an impact on your thinking; for example, how has your parents’ faith or lack of formal faith affected you?

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* Do you expect good things or bad things to happen to you? Why? **That reveals a great deal about your outlook.**

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* Do you believe you are capable, kind, or caring? Do you believe that you are a good test-taker or a good friend? Which of your personal beliefs gives you the greatest strength?

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* We all face negative self-talk at times, which can become negative personal beliefs over time. Which of your internal statements about yourself is the greatest threat to your growth? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What steps do you need to take to challenge that belief or interrupt that negative self-talk?

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* When were your beliefs put to the greatest test? How did you feel at that time?

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* **Habits**:
* The things that we do on a regular basis shape our identity the way flowing water molds rock over time. Our habits reveal so much about our character.

A good habit can impact us in a way few things can. What is a “good” habit that strengthens your emotions, body, or intellect? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* On the flip side, bad habits such as procrastinating, eating late at night, or cheating can make us feel rotten. What is a “bad” habit that undermines you, one that erodes your confidence, pride, or self-esteem?

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If your bad habit affects you this way, why haven’t you changed it? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* What do you do to make yourself **feel** better? Are there certain things you do on a habitual basis to improve your mood?

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* How would you describe your sleep habits? How do they affect your wellbeing? **Sleep affects every aspect of our being. Do you feel more productive late at night or early in the morning? Do you sleep well, or is it frequently interrupted? Do you remember your dreams? Do you write them down? Several of the best essays I’ve ever worked with were about dreams that students had. Dreams are the laboratory of our psyche: Images that appear in dreams often represent parts of our personality that we may be uncomfortable relating to during our waking hours.**

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* Do you practice an instrument or have you? How has that experience shaped your identity?

Special Note: **FAR TOO MANY STUDENTS WRITE ABOUT AN INSTRUMENT THEY PRACTICE. They go on and on about a significant award or concert. In the process, they often miss the very point of the essay: to reveal something significant about who they are and how they got that way.**

If you do feel that the investment you have made in your instrument best defines you, you must consider how it affects the deep structures of your being: your sense of self, your fears, and your outlook on life. What you have accomplished is not as important as how the process has shaped your identity. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* Do you practice a sport? How does that shape your sense of self?

**This is another black hole when it comes to essay topics.** I ask this not to encourage you to write about your involvement in sports but to get you to consider how this particular physical activity shapes your sense of self.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* **What is your most singular habit?** How does that shape you? It is critical to consider how we are unique. You are, after all, trying to stand out from the thousands or tens of thousands of other applicants. You are unique. There is no question about that. Consider the small seemingly inconsequential things you do that make you FEEL unique. \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* **Art**: (Music, Film, Literature)
* From the movies we watch to the music we listen to, art has the power to transform our internal word.

What is your favorite **song**?

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What impact does it have on you? When do you listen to it? What do you hope to **feel** when you listen to it? When you listen to it, how do you change your **behavior** and your **thinking**?

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What is your favorite **movie**?

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What **emotional** impact does it have (did it have) on you? When do you watch it? What do you hope to **feel** when you watch it? How has it changed the way you **act** and the way you **think**?

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What is your favorite **book, poem, or story**?

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What **emotional** impact does it have (did it have) on you? When **do** you read it? What do you hope to **feel** when you read it? How has it changed your outlook or word view?

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* If you could be any character from a film, book, song, or video game, who would you be and why?

I love this question. If you wrote a letter to your favorite character OR from your favorite character, you would have a fascinating essay on your hands. One student I worked with wrote a letter to the Joker and took issues with his worldview. **He got into Harvard early admission.**

What would you hope to feel by being this character?

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* **Appearance**:
* From how we dress to how we cut our hair, the **physical** choices we make have a great impact on our identity.

What is your favorite **article of clothing**?

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What emotional impact does it have on you? When you wear it, what statement are you making, and how does it make you think about yourself?

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* What is your favorite **hairstyle**?

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What impact does it have on you? How do **others respond** when you appear this way? How does their response affect you? It is endlessly fascinating and informative gauging how others respond to our choices. Some criticize how we dress and appear. Others try to imitate us. Do you shape yourself a certain way to get a certain response from others? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

* What other ways do you shape or decorate your **body**?

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How does doing so shape your sense of self?

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* How does how you look (height, body type, and appearance) affect how you **feel**? How does how you look (height, body type, and appearance) affect how you **act**?

**I believe these are two of the most significant questions in this entire lesson. We are emotional and intellectual beings housed in a particular body. The shape and appearance of that body will necessarily affect how we feel, think, and act.**

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* **Are you satisfied or comfortable with your current state of being?** Why or why not? What aspect of your being would you most like to change?

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* How would you describe your **ideal** state? How would you like to feel, act, and think? Be specific.

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* **What steps do you need to take to achieve the state that you desire?** Again, be as specific as possible. Is there a skill you feel the need to acquire? Is there a program you feel the need to attend? Is there a habit of thought, behavior, or speech you need to change? What are some impediments or obstacles that you feel are preventing you from achieving your desired state?

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* **Describe your worst day. Describe not only what happened to you but how it made you feel.** Have you had a day when nothing seemed to go your way and when everything made you frustrated or upset? Or, was your worst day one in which you experienced loss or betrayal?

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* **Describe your best day. Describe not only what happened to you but how it made you feel.** What was your best day, one where you felt happy and fulfilled all day? What were you doing and who were you with?

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You will use the content you generated in this lesson in every subsequent lesson; the details you call to mind and jot down here, as seemingly random as they may currently appear to you now, form the deep structures upon which your essay will eventually rest. Be patient. You may be eager to start the actual essay, but you have already begun doing so. Too many students jump right into typing their statements without taking steps to look at themselves as you have done above. Your efforts will pay rich dividends when it comes time for you to type your first word; indeed, a good essay takes shape in the brainstorming phase long before it appears on paper.

**Please don’t rush through this or blow it off. It is just as important as, if not more so than, the actual writing.**

**Sample Essays:**

**(1) Mom**

you’re the one i confide in, the one i tell everything to. You’re my golden child. at least that’s what i make you believe. I feel alive again, young again, though you. with every single issue i have – girl fights, teacher problems, or emotions – i go to you. Your trust is the fuel of my life. i lay my life out for you to see and comment on but i make sure to leave out the parts that anger you and make me look insignificant in your eyes. You are the apple of my eye. i grew up trying to fulfill the mold that you have set in your mind. You are all that I hoped you would be. i hear you tell your friends about me, saying, “She makes up for the other children’s mistakes that came before.”

growing up i witnessed arguments between you and each of my siblings that left you in tears. You are my only filial child. i saw the pain and frustration in your face when --- got kicked out of school. Why have the others turned against me, against God? the hurt you felt when --- screamed that she despised you and everything you stood for. All I have done is pour God’s love into them. even the time you collapsed to the ground out of anger towards --- when he disrespected you and dad. My own children, sinful.

i felt like I was your last hope. You are. i was going to be the one that got straight A’s throughout high school, always be home at curfew, be one hundred percent dedicated to church, and live a life of a godly child. You have. i was going to be the kid that you always wanted. You are. am i? why can’t you be your own hope? What do you mean? why place such a burden on me? Burden? there is no possible way to live up to such unrealistic expectations. It’s natural for a parent to feel this way. you invest far too much emotion in me, mom; it’s not healthy for you and it’s certainly not healthy for me. Don’t lecture me on heath.

would you still love me if you knew all my secrets. What sort of question is that? you say that god’s love is absolute. It is. nothing is absolute. What words have escaped the barrier of your teeth? yesterdays’ laws are today’s sins. Is that so. you’re heart must be flexible to accommodate all of us. They broke my heart. mom, you broke your own heart.

**(2) Dream**

**Prompt: Describe a recent nightmare or otherwise disquieting dream. Pick specific elements that appear in that dream and explain how each is a symbol for a particular event, person, or emotion. Then, draw some overall conclusions about the meaning of the dream.**

*She slows down, Amy does, that is. She gives me a long, tired look, taking in my white t-shirt and black pants. Are you judging me? I climb in wordlessly. She doesn’t ask me why I am standing alone in the middle of the desert. And I don’t volunteer an explanation. We just drive together in silence. The passenger-side window is open, but I feel no breeze at all. I gaze out the window, not paying any attention to the scenery flashing by. Then we reach our destination. I don’t know where we are, but we’re there.*

*She parks the car, and we both get out. As I do so, I notice that my bag and my wallet are sopping wet. I look back inside the car and run my fingers longingly over the gray interior. It is completely dry. Then I notice that my bag is also wet. I, too, am dripping from head to toe. I don’t bother to dry off, however, and Amy doesn’t offer to help. I feel angry and frustrated. It’s not dirty water, I notice, for my white t-shirt remains unstained. I wake up, close to tears.*

The central elements of my dream are the gray interior of the car, the desert, the open window, and the water that drenches me.

Let’s start with the gray interior. It represents guilt. Guilt for what, you ask. Well, for lying to my brother. About simple things, sometimes for no reason at all. My brother is the most important person in my life. I have always told him the truth and discussed me, us, and everything with him. I was devastated when he decided to join the army. Decided? Hmm, carted off is more like it. It’s not that I’m not patriotic; I’m not, but that’s beside the point. I want him near me. I need him. He left me here all alone in my emotional desert. How can I not expect the worst? We both know where he is headed – a hellish crapshoot in either Afghanistan or Iraq.

And since he has left, I’ve changed. He has too. He has lost 40 pounds, he has a 14-inch tattoo that reads D I S C I P L I N E, and he uses the F-word like an assault rifle. Have I changed in response to his changes? I don’t know. But I have changed, that’s for sure. For one thing, I’ve started to lie to him more. Perhaps I am just protecting my heart or transferring my pain.

Whatever the reason, since I’ve never deceived my brother before – it’s true! – I feel guilty. And I resent my parents more. But I’ve matured fast; I have to admit that. I’ve become “the man of the house”; let’s face it, Dad, where’ve you been?

Dad, you made him go. Is that you picking me up on the highway masquerading as Amy? Does all that blustering emasculate you? Yeah, that’s why the driver’s side window is closed while mine remains open. It has always been a one-way conversation. And you drove him away.

And the water. Are those your tears or mine? Do you realize that you’ve lost us?

I want him back, Father.

**LESSON TWO**

**Brainstorming Part II: Ten Key Character Traits That Make You Unique**

The more you can evaluate yourself, the more likely you will be able to craft a personal statement that conveys your personal philosophy, psychology, and intellectual makeup in a poignant enough manner to gain admission to your desired school. In the previous lesson, you were asked to take stock of your emotional, physical, and mental states. In this lesson, you will be asked about ten specific character traits that will provide you with ample material to draw upon in subsequent lessons.

Some of these themes may resonate with you more than others. Don’t become bogged down trying to answer questions that you can’t relate to. Focus on those you can.

**1)** **Intensity**

We feel most intensely about those things that we are devoted to.

**What are you devoted to?** **What are you most passionate about?** You can be devoted to an idea such as justice. You can be devoted to an author, philosopher, composer, movie director, or band. You can be devoted to a political movement, an era in history, a field of study or research, or a game.

You are devoted to:

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**Why are you devoted to what you mention above?** What does your devotion to it do for you? How does it resonate with your purpose and passion? How does it fulfill your physical, emotional, and intellectual needs?

You are devoted to \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because it resonates with your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and fulfills the following need: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

**When have you most intensely expressed devotion to what you listed above?** When was the last time you cried? When was the last time you yelled in anger or joy? You invariably express such intensity because, on some level, you are expressing devotion to something that matters a great deal to you.

When was the last time you **cried**? Some people do not cry or do not cry easily. That does not make them less intense than people who do. If you cannot recall the last time you cried, relay a time when you cried out in joy.

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The last physical or verbal **fight** you had was:

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**Both of these questions can yield powerful insights into your inner workings. These two questions have yielded the content for many powerful essays. If you feel strongly enough about something to yell, cry, or fight about it, something has moved you deeply.**

**2)** **Creativity**

We can express creativity in innumerable ways.

You feel most fulfilled expressing your creativity in the following way(s):

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What are you most proud of creating? The things you create are some of the most powerful expressions of your inner workings that exist.

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What happens when you do not express your creativity? Where does this energy go? What symptoms, if any, do you experience?

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**I often hear students report that they are not creative. But I have found that people are often far more creative than they give themselves credit for. Just as there are many types of intelligence — social, emotional, musical, verbal, etc. — there are countless types of creativity. How you choose to express your creativity greatly defines your identity.**

**3)** **Uniqueness**

Closely linked to creativity is uniqueness. For, how you channel your creativity defines you as a singular entity. Some express their uniqueness in how they choose to present to the world: how they sculpt their body or how they adorn themselves each day. Others express their uniqueness in their choice of artistic, literary, or historical role models.

How do you express your uniqueness?

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**Do you define yourself in opposition to others, in opposition to what is mainstream and popular?** If so, how?

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When have others acted in opposition to how you uniquely expressed yourself? Have you been scolded or punished for how you have chosen to express your uniqueness? If so, what have such experiences taught you about yourself and your relationship with others?

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**This essay is, fundamentally, a statement of your uniqueness. Reflecting on how you uniquely set yourself apart and express yourself can yield material that will serve you well when it comes time to pick a topic to write about.**

**4)** **Secrets**

What aspect of yourself do you hide away from yourself and others? What secrets do you keep from your parents? What are you most ashamed of?

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What aspect of yourself do you hide from others? What do you feel that you gain by hiding this aspect of yourself away?

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**Please Note:** In the near two decades that I have been helping students prepare their personal statements, **I have found that those students who delve the deepest into their secrets are the ones who craft the most effective essays.** The reader wants to know your value structure. What you think you have done wrong or what you are hiding away fascinates the reader because it reveals your worldview, your sense of right and wrong, and your inner moral compass much more than anything else. If you feel uncomfortable and cringe at revealing your secrets, it is very likely that the reader will snap to attention when he or she reads your essay. For, that is the very material that has the greatest impact on the reader.

**5)** **Strengths and Weaknesses**

When are you at your best, and when are you at your worst? Who or what draws out the best and worst in you? **Most people who submit essays mistakenly think they have to make themselves sound good.** What they think makes them look good often shows their limited emotional, physical, or intellectual capacity.

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I have read countless essays touting an award that a student has won or volunteer work they have done. I have rejected the vast majority of those because they do not stand out; they don’t reveal much if anything about students’ identities and they usually come across as ineffectual and needy. If I feel this strongly, how much more so does the admission committee reader who encounters exponentially more essays, many of which tout the same awards and accomplishments? The **VAST** majority of essays they read are such attempts to look “good” — often by discussing volunteer work. If you simply avoid this pitfall, your essay will stand out by default.

**Discussing strengths may be the greatest pitfall a student faces when writing a personal statement. Your mentors may want you to write about your trip to Central America or the leadership role you played in your school’s Model UN. Your coach or music instructor may want you to write about awards you’ve won. You may feel the need to write about some grand success you’ve had. But, as important as all those successes may be, such topics may not make for a good essay unless they reveal who you are and how you got that way.**

**I know I’ve mentioned this point multiple times, but it bears repeating. Don’t try to sound good. It will backfire. An essay that demonstrates growth through struggle or failure will serve your interests so much better. I realize that that may be counter-intuitive. I realize that you may resist this; every cell in your being may scream out: “Write something to impress the reader.” You can impress the reader by discussing how you grew through a failure. Doing so is a true demonstration of your strength of character.**

**Keep in mind: “Failure is the mother of success.” That is why three-fifths of the essay topics on the Common Application deal with a failure, a challenge, or a problem. By discussing how you dealt with such challenges, you may do a better job revealing your strengths than if you describe an incident that you think makes you look good. And, even if you do decide to talk about success, make sure to dwell on the challenges that allowed you to grow the most in the process of achieving that success.**

**6)** **Leadership**

How do you define leadership? Who are some leaders you admire? How have you demonstrated leadership?

Whether it is a historical figure, a literary or cinematic one, or someone you know, what leaders or heroes inspire you? What qualities do those people have that you would like to embody?

From **history** you admire \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

You admire that person’s: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

How did that individual show leadership? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

From **literature or film** you admire \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

You admire that person’s: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

How did that individual show leadership? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

From your **life** you admire \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

You admire that person’s: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

How did that individual show leadership? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

What do you admire most about **yourself**? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

Often in life, we rise to the occasion and lead others. There are countless ways to show leadership. You can lead others in sports. You can be an intellectual leader. You can lead others in battle in your online gaming guild. You can lead others by our silent example of tolerance. You can be a leader in your family during a crisis.

When did you most demonstrate leadership? How did that experience shape your identity, most significantly your perception of yourself? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Some people like playing a supporting role. They simply don’t like the limelight. **Are you a leader or follower by nature? Explain.**

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**7)**  **Value**

What do you value most: relationships, knowledge, photographs, or memories? Try to pick at least one thing, person, and idea. What is a specific incident when you were anxious to protect your values? \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

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Why do you value that thing, person, or idea?

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How has this particular value shaped your sense of self? How has it defined your place in the world?

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**This essay is fundamentally a statement of value: what you value most emotionally, physically, and intellectually. The more clearly you can express what you value, why you value that, and how those values have shaped your reality, the more effective your essay will be.**

**8)** **Consistency**

What are you most consistent at? We may be curious about something or other or be interested in some hobby or other, but the thing we remain most consistently engaged in over time demonstrates a great deal about our character and our values. **That which remains after all other emotions, interests, and people have fled is the very bedrock of our existence.**

In what ways have you changed the least since you were young?

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Why do you think you have maintained this aspect of your personality or behavior for as long as you have?

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What is your oldest hobby? Who is your oldest friend? **In essence, what is the most consistent source of joy you have in your life? Your answers to these questions have the potential to become the core of a great essay.**

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Why do think you have consistently remained devoted to this activity or relationship? **It must be fulfilling some need on a very deep level.**

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**Who is the most consistent person in your life?** This question can yield many insights into your identity: People who have been devoted to you for a long time find that you are lovable, interesting, and charismatic. **Look at yourself from the vantage point of someone who has been dedicated to you for the longest time.**

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**9)** **Dreams**

What do you want to achieve in your life? What sort of legacy do you want to leave behind?

What do you want to accomplish most in life? How long will it take to achieve this dream? What sort of obstacles do you face accomplishing this, and what steps do you need to take to overcome these obstacles? Lastly, how will achieving each dream shape or reshape each aspect of your being?

You want to achieve: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Time to accomplish this: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

What obstacles do you have to overcome to achieve this dream?

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What steps do you need to take to overcome those obstacles?

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How will achieving this dream change you? **It is instructive to consider how achieving your dream will change you physically, emotionally, and mentally.** “Beware what you wish for!” has a great deal of wisdom.

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**Even if you don’t express this goal explicitly in your statement, it will inform your writing in subtle ways.**

If you are willing to examine your psyche and personal philosophy in the manner these exercises ask you to, you are very likely to write an essay that is a work of art, and, more importantly, you are likely to craft yourself into a lasting work of art.

**Sample Essays:**

**(1) Love Letter**

**Prompt: Write a letter to a lover.**

Rip this. Rip it all. Push me away. No, I’ve already left, and if you’ve no parting gifts for me, I want my identity sleeve back. I gave up who I wanted to be to fit in you, now I’m unanchored.

You left me with the worst and best parts of yourself. I’m salacious, risk-taking, and generous; lesser planets revolve around my passion. Just as you pick unwinnable fights with folks in faraway places, so do I – all in feisty, self-righteous fury that is.

At times, I want to lose more of who I used to be. At others, I like who I am, most of the time that is. Perhaps I’m too impulsive, but I am decisive. I expect to lead, and you’ve given me the charisma to attract followers. But, at what cost?

Hun, people hate you for various reasons. They don’t like what you’ve done to their children and to their culture. How much of that contamination have you passed on to me? They are jealous of us both: of our success, of our beauty, and of our desire for perfection. Help me come to terms with that unlovable part of myself. Or, do you have too little self-knowledge left to see clearly?

You’re the one who polluted my mind with the unattainable. When I first heard about you, your blessings, your dreams, I ran to your arms. You were my first love. I gave up my normal, old life to join you. You made me move, move, and move again to keep up with my broken dream until I simply refused to budge any more.

Even though I’ve had my disappointments, I’m not willing to give up on our investment of love and effort, just yet. You are less colorful without me. I’m far less of everything without you. We’re a good fit, me with my free-loving unpredictability and you, you, with your misguided idealism. I’m the iconoclastic Aphrodite you seek. You’re the dream-maker.

I’ll make myself vulnerable to you once again. Will you open your arms to me?

Well, will you? Speak up, America. I can’t hear you.

**(2) Base**

Is my memory too shallow to forget your frustrating attempts to elicit joy from my unwilling metal? You pluck me roughly, abrade me, and then expect me to create beautiful music.

I was created to play second fiddle it seems. Yet, I want to lead, burst out of this fog of low harmonics and lead your heart into directions of my own choosing. I've always been a reluctant follower, at best – truculent is more like it. Follow your nature and follow, you implore. I have enough insight into my inner workings to know the best sound for me. And it's not this.

Haven't you noticed how adept I've become at adapting to cacophony? You say leave the extemporizing to the solo artist, yet I've been here all along rifting in an unobtrusive way. I'd be content to continue if only you would pause from your head banging just once to notice all I do for you, for the family, Father.

You load me with your own unfilled dreams and try to achieve them, feel new vitality vicariously through me. But your heavy hand on my heart stifles my ability to resonate your laughter, what little is left.

Would that I could make sound without you. But you know I can't, so your threats to withdraw your hand and leave me empty ring true. Even if the symbiosis of our relationship ties me tight, I'll always be the one that makes the sound, even if you're the one manipulating me.

**LESSON THREE**

**Brainstorming Part III: Incidents and Events That Shaped You the Most**

In the last two lessons, you brainstormed about the primary topic of this essay: **you**. You explored aspects of your emotional, physical, and intellectual being and covered nine broader aspects of your identity. Few students take the time to evaluate themselves in such a manner. Your diligent self-reflection will provide you with ample material to discuss in your personal statement.

This chapter covers the incidents and events in which aspects of your identity came to the fore. Many students start writing about some significant event in their lives, without first determining who they are. That often leads to statements that don’t convey the essence of the writer’s nature. **How can the reader understand who the writer is at his or her core if the writer doesn’t even know?**

In this lesson, the deep structures of your essay will begin to emerge, and your essay will begin to take shape. Let it happen organically. **Please don’t become married to a particular topic and decide to write about it without considering if it shows the full gamut of your identity.** Simply respond to the questions in this lesson without any preconceived notion about what you will end up writing about. You may be quite surprised by which memory moves you the most. When the most poignant of them are all laid out side by side, only then decide which ones to focus on in your personal statement.

You may find that memories of pain, crisis, and loss are much more vivid than those of success and accomplishment. That is not an uncommon phenomenon; we link memories to emotions, and negatively charged emotions are among the strongest.

**After years of carefully measuring the efficacy of students’ essays, I have found that students who write essays describing how they’ve grown through overcoming adversity have a much better chance of gaining admission to their first-choice college than those who relate more benign anecdotes of awards or volunteer work.**

**Note: If you don’t feel up to answer any of these questions, don’t. These exercises are meant to serve you. Stirring up memories, especially traumatic ones, is not an easy or pleasant experience. Take on as much as you can. If you feel the need to come back to portions of this later, please do so. These events that you conjure up will serve you immensely when it comes time to start the actual writing process. For that reason, even if you have to take these exercises in increments, please push on to complete them as comprehensively as you possibly can.**

**1)** **Surprise**

When have you been so surprised that you had your breath knocked out of you? This could either be a positive or a negative experience, or both. Jot down as many details of the incident as you can remember.

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When have you thoroughly surprised yourself and others? We often live in a narrowly defined world. When have you broken out of your self-imposed rules or limitations and surprised yourself doing so?

**If you are able to surprise yourself, you have changed in some significant way. Those moments of change are critical events in your identity construction. For if you surprise yourself, you often view yourself in a new light and change your sense of who you are.**

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How did that surprise affect you emotionally, physically, and intellectually? Consider the short- term ways that this event shaped you and the long-term ways it changed you. How does it inform your current hopes, fears, and outlook on life?

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Does this memory of surprise help you guard against similar events in the future? Or, does it inspire you to behave in a way that may surprise you and others in the future?

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**A feeling of surprise is often tied to awareness or self-awareness. For this reason, it is of particular interest to the reader.**

**2)** **Trauma/Crisis**

What was the greatest trauma you’ve experienced? **Most traumas involve a loss of some sort: the loss of a loved one, death of a dream, a betrayal, or abandonment. If you don’t wish to dig up or relive this trauma, don’t.**

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How has that trauma affected you emotionally, physically, and intellectually? Consider the short-term ways that this event shaped you and the long-term ways it changed you. What steps have you taken to grow from or overcome the debilitating effects of this trauma? Have they worked?

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When do you find yourself reliving this memory — what **triggers** it? What effort do you make to avoid or resolve those triggers?

**What causes a memory to spring to life is telling; the steps we take to prevent that from happening reveal a great deal about our personality.**

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What is the greatest crisis you’ve faced? It could be a crisis of confidence or a family crisis. What role did you play in the crisis? Did you precipitate it or did you resolve it? What aspects of your personality came to the fore during the crisis?

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How did that crisis affect you emotionally, physically, and intellectually? Did you emerge from it shaken or stronger? Consider the short-term ways that this event shaped you and the long-term ways it changed you. How does it inform your current hopes, fears, and outlook on life?

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What did you learn about your personality dealing with the crisis? In particular, what did you learn about **how you respond** to stress, pressure, and fear? **What you learned about yourself and your patterns of response is more important than the crisis itself. The crisis is just a means to express discovery and self-knowledge.**

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**Students tend to write too much about a particular event. THIS IS NOT A DESCRIPTIVE ESSAY. The event is not as important as how the event changed some aspect of you. Always focus on who you are and how you got that way.**

**3)** **Conflict**

What is the most intense memory of conflict you have? **Was it an internal or external one?** If it was an external one, who did it involve? How was the conflict **resolved**? If it was an internal one, what two parts of yourself were at odds with one another? Which side won out?

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**How did that conflict affect you emotionally, physically, and intellectually?** Consider the short-term ways that this event shaped you and the long-term ways it changed you. Has it made you more averse to conflict or less afraid of it?

How has the most significant conflict in your life shaped you?

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When do you find yourself reliving this memory — what **triggers** it? Is there a person or place that causes you to relive some aspect of that conflict?

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Are you a person who tries to avoid conflict or do you savor it? If you savor it, why? If you try to avoid it, why and what steps do you take to do so?

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**4)** **Awkwardness**

What is the most awkward experience you have had? **Did you act in a way that made you or others feel awkward? Or, did others make you feel extremely awkward?**

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How did that incident affect you emotionally, physically, and intellectually? Consider the short- term ways that this event shaped you and the long-term ways it changed you. Has it made you more self-conscious or less so?

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By nature, do you try to fit in or do you enjoy standing apart from others? If you do try to fit in, what steps do you take to do so? If you try to stand out, how do you try to accomplish this?

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**5)** **Forgiveness/Compassion**

What is the most powerful memory you have of forgiveness? Did someone forgive you, did you forgive someone else, or perhaps, **did you forgive yourself?** Often we are our harshest critics, finding fault with ourselves far more readily than others do. We are often very cruel to ourselves; we constantly beat ourselves up. It takes great strength of character to forgive ourselves for wrongs we feel we’ve committed.

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How did that act of forgiveness affect you emotionally, physically, and intellectually? Consider the short-term ways that this event shaped you and the long-term ways it changed you. Did you gain a heightened sense of **compassion**? What did it teach you about wielding the **power** of forgiveness?

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Who have you yet to forgive? And why haven’t you? Why do you hold onto the pain they’ve caused you? Taking inventory of the people you still resent and asking yourself why you’ve chosen not to forgive these people are two very telling exercises. **What does withholding forgiveness do for you?** Does it perpetuate your image of yourself as a victim? Is it empowering withholding that forgiveness?

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If you did forgive the people you listed in the last exercise, how would it affect your sense of self? Would it boost it or make you feel less powerful?

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Closely tied to forgiveness is regret. Unless we forgive ourselves, we may feel regret for what we’ve done to ourselves and to others. Unless we forgive others, we may feel regret for the lost time and opportunity that they’ve caused us.

What is your biggest regret? If you have none, that is telling as well. Explain why you’ve chosen not to have any.

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**6)** **Love**

What is your most intense experience of love? It could be romantic love or love for a friend or family member. It could also be love for an ideal such as justice, an intellectual pursuit, or a spiritual or religious notion.

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How did that experience of love affect you? Did you emerge from it shaken or stronger? How did it shape your boundaries and affect your confidence? How does it inform your current relationships? Does it make you more resentful, cautious, or compassionate?

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What aspect of yourself do you consider to be most lovable?

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Do you allow yourself to be loved? Why or why not?

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**7)** **Joy**

What is your happiest memory? When were you most elated? We often feel joy when we accomplish something, have a wish or desire fulfilled, or discover something. Has that been the case for you?

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How did that experience of joy affect you? How did it shape your expectations or relationships?

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Do you often feel joy or do you rarely feel joy? Explain your answer.

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**8)** **Courage**

In many ways, this section on courage is a summary of all the work you’ve done so far brainstorming. You will be asked about how courage relates to aspects of your identity that we touched on in the first two lessons, and you will be asked about ways you courageously dealt with many of the incidents we’ve covered in this lesson. For that reason, this is the last topic we will cover before we get into the actual writing process.

Courage comes in many shapes and sizes. Sure, saving a baby from a burning building takes great courage, but so does forgiving a friend who betrayed you. Storming the enemy’s machine gun nest takes great courage, but so does dealing gracefully with a family crisis.

**What is the most courageous thing that you’ve done in your life? And what gave you the courage to do that?**

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**Courage to Seek After and Face the Truth**

What motivates you to seek after emotional, physical, and intellectual truth? Whether it be in the classroom, at home, or evaluating the stories you tell yourself, when have you demonstrated courage to seek after the truth? What gave you that courage?

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**Courage to Let Go**

Certain habits, memories, regrets, fears, beliefs, and even relationships can limit our potential to grow. When have you demonstrated the courage to let go of something that you realized was detrimental to you?

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**Courage to Believe and Trust**

What gives you the courage to believe in yourself and others? The very process you are engaged in now: Studying this curriculum and getting advice from a stranger about an essay that can make or break your college application — that requires a great deal of courage. You demonstrate that type of courage every day. When have you demonstrated the courage to trust? What was the most dramatic instance of belief in yourself or others?

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**Courage to Grow**

It takes great courage to choose to grow; it is so easy and tempting to avoid growth. **The alternative to growth is escape**. We are certainly bombarded by endless opportunities and ways to escape growth.

**When have you most demonstrated the courage to grow emotionally, physically, and intellectually**?

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**Courage to Love**

Who is the most difficult person for you to love? Our ability to love is often impeded by anger, regret, and fear. Accordingly, we often have to overcome some very firmly implanted emotions and memories to love. When have you demonstrated the courage to love yourself or others?

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**Determination**

It often takes great courage to stay the course and see a project to completion. **Determination often involves overcoming some aspect of yourself: self-doubt, self-sabotage, or some negative habit. Any time you show determination and overcome yourself, you grow. Such incidents are often ideal to write about in your personal statement.**

When was your will most severely tested? When were you most determined to see something through?

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**Sample Essays:**

**(1) Chemical Oasis**

Devour me. I will snuff out your madness. My chemical compounds come to your rescue.

I was writhing and twisting on the ground as the intake coordinator scavenged through my bag looking for sharp items and inappropriate images. Isn’t everything about me sharp and inappropriate, officer? Betty sat watching me as she swayed back and forth in the corner of the room like a visitor gazing at a wounded animal at the zoo.

Let me invade you and heal what lies within.

My journey to a behavioral mental health center started when the iron boot of the law came down on me like a hammer on a crooked nail – except I wasn’t all that crooked. A week of paranoia, angst, and insomnia followed that run-in and led to hospitalization, well, hospitalizations.

Embrace me as I tickle your esophagus walls. I don’t hear you laughing.

Bright lights assault me as I am raced down to Close Watch in the ER. The first needle they bring arrives and my father puts up a fight. I see my guard eyeing him warily. They move to the next room and I peek out of my room and see dad gesturing frantically. The doctor motions for a second needle. Maddening silence enters my veins. I tense. I sleep.

I have what it takes to shut you down, to numb the parts of you that won’t stop firing off in agony.

For ten days I was drugged, poked, and guarded 24 hours a day. That was when I met you. You tell me I need you to sleep, to silence my mind. You tell me you can fix my broken emotions. While I do appreciate what you’ve done, you impede the work that only I can do. I can calm my troubled mind without your assistance, thank you. And I don’t want or need it silenced. I don’t want my emotions strangled.

Yes, they are threatening at times, my emotions that is. But I can either spend my lifetime escaping from them or growing from them. They can either be a constant source of threat or of creativity. This world celebrates constant escape. We live in a culture of escapism. Yet, I know if I escape growth now, I will only have to face it when I don’t have you, my chemical crutch. No, I choose to face myself, all of myself. I’d rather develop real tools to manage my emotions, to channel this pain, to understand it and resolve it on my own terms.

Keep your chemical Oasis.

**(2) Yumi**

I thought if I danced around the house with the grace of a ballerina, you would pick me up and dance with me. I imagined if I learned multiple instruments and learned to sing with aching beauty, you would be touched and stop to listen, but you tuned me out. I hoped if I played multiple sports and came home with injuries, maybe, just maybe, you would bandage me up and let me know everything was going to be okay. I figured if I could become good at something – anything – you would finally pay attention to me.

I expose the best of myself, my most intimate emotions, on stage, to total strangers hoping you’ll buy a ticket and take a seat. You never do. I splash the rawest part of me on canvass hoping you’ll want to own a piece of me, of yourself, and hang me where you can be reminded of the love you have, or might have had. You never buy.

You were gentle, yet cold and reserved. I spent years loving you, hating you, feeling sorry for you, and then hating you again. I tried every way I knew to persuade you to become attached to me. It made me upset that I had to work so hard to earn your unconditional love.

I’ve come to terms that you’ll just never know how to love me; either you simply lack the ability or you lack the inclination. Nothing I do can change that. Our relationship has become one of mutual respect rather than love. Perhaps it’s best this way. Perhaps, if you had come out of the cold, had taken a step inside my emotional world, I would have withered under the weight of your hoarfrost. I certainly never could have melted you.

**LESSON FOUR**

**Choosing Your Topic**

Now that you’ve taken stock of your most indelible memories, **it’s time to pick the most powerful one, the one that has shaped you the most.** The work you’ve just done unearthing these gems that are your most poignant memories will soon pay off as you polish them and present them in your personal statement.

Before you do so, however, I’d like to ask you: **What is your favorite film?** Why do you find that film so compelling? What message or moral do you take away from that film? How does the director create a heightened sense of drama?

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Now it’s time to put on a film director’s hat and begin the process of directing your own film. **Look back over the incidents and events you have written down in this lesson. Which incident or event makes for the most powerful short film? Which has the most compelling characters? Which has the most dramatic plot elements, twists, and surprises? Which has the best ending, one that highlights key elements of your identity as well as reveals your growth?**

**Choosing an incident or event is perhaps the most important step you will take in this workbook. So, take your time.**

**It bears repeating: Don’t necessarily pick an event that you think makes you look good. Showing the capacity for growth is far more important that looking good. Showing self-knowledge is far more important than looking good. Pick an event that is genuinely dramatic.**

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Why have you chosen this event or incident out of all the others you’ve written down in your answers above?

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What does it reveal about key aspects of your identity?

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How does it highlight your growth?

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Now, based on the choice you have just made, decide what sort of story you want to tell: Is yours a story of loss, redemption, discovery, or determination? What genre of film or literature does your story belong to?

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Now that you have chosen the incident to tell your story with, in the next lesson, you will cover effective storytelling techniques.

**DO NOT PASS GO**

**If you have not clearly identified the incident that best describes and defines your personal character, philosophy, and psychology, please do not go on.**

**I know you are eager to get to the actual writing. But that can wait.**

**Find your story FIRST. Your story is there. All the questions you have answered so far provide the raw data that you must now sort through to find the most compelling incident. Use the following checklist to determine which incident is the right one for your personal statement:**

**1)** **Does the incident demonstrate a key aspect of my character?**

**2)** **Does the incident demonstrate a key aspect of my personal philosophy?**

**3)** **Does the incident reveal a key aspect of my psychology?**

**4)** **Does the incident show my capacity to grow?**

**5)** **Does the incident demonstrate self-knowledge?**

**6)** **Is the incident compelling enough to keep the reader’s attention?**

**7)** **Does the incident touch on a failure, problem, or challenge?**

**8)** **Is the incident related to volunteer work? If so, proceed with CAUTION.**

**9)** **Is the incident related to an instrument or sport? If so, proceed with CAUTION.**

**10)** **Will it take too long to describe the incident? If so, proceed with CAUTION.**

**It is often a good idea to reread the answers you’ve given to the exercises that have appeared in the workbook so far, and then sleep on it. Let your subconscious sort things out and sift through all of the raw data that you have stirred up. You may be surprised how an idea or insight will emerge in the morning.**

**Sample Essays:**

**(1) Why Program In Lust**

**Prompt: Pick your two favorite characters from a video game and have them communicate with one another about human nature.**

I’ve picked the Siamese twins, Lance and Luther, from the 1997 video game “Blade Runner.” They are genetic programmers who create human-like robots. Because I too am a twin and plan on studying mechanical engineering, I find them fascinating. I have them discuss issues regarding human nature, creation, and accountability that most interest me. One twin represents my idealistic side, the other my pragmatic side.

“Why program in lust?”

“For their comfort. For their amusement.”

“Hmm…. Will they be more effective if they feel amused? Why poison them with our imperfect emotions? Why make them repeat the fall of man again and again. Didn’t you start out wanting to create something ideal?”

“Don’t blame me for killing off your dreams. You have your own nightmares, and I have mine. And we’ve given them both of ours.”

“Nightmares you say. Mine entered their code inadvertently. You willing gave them yours. Perhaps we need companions in suffering so badly that we’re willing to corrupt our own creations. There really is no other reason to make them suffer even in their sleep. Unless of course, we get pleasure out of their suffering. What sort of gods does that make us? I’ve caught you reviewing the footage of them dreaming.”

“Dreams are the laboratory of the inner mind. I’m simply curious to see how they process our worst fears. We can gain insights.”

“Perhaps we weren’t meant to have that knowledge. You’re cruel not curious.”

“The very act of creation is cruel.”

“And why build in obsolescence? To give us an excuse to create again? To make them need us, to make them dependent on us. Are we that insecure? Am I not enough for you? Are you not enough for yourself?”

“It is good to be needed. It sustains us.”

“We can let them live long dignified lives. They’re superior to us in many ways. Is that why we must destroy them so soon after we create them? A father shouldn’t be threatened by his children. Father always forgave us. Father always forgives us. What would he do if he knew what we’re doing now?

“Perhaps he already knows.”

“It’s not too late to rectify what we have done.”

“Oh, yes it is. I knew you might feel guilt some day so I took protective measures. If you attempt to wipe their memories or overwrite them, they will self-destruct.”

“Perhaps destruction is better for them. It will set them free from their misery.”

“You never could. We would be all alone. No playthings, nothing to occupy ourselves with. Who would care for us in our old age?”

“They won’t care for us after what we have done. They will kill us. Slowly.”

**(2) Hunger**

but no i

should not stray so far so deep

*At seventeen, I started to starve myself.*

into these uncharted lands and

sometimes i laugh

imagining

So goes the first lyric of my favorite Florence and The Machine song, *Hunger.* But at fourteen, I hungered for much more than emotional sustenance. I developedanorexia.

cartographers unearthing my

body here ink

bubbling

In those December days, ensnared by the neon blue glow of the bathroom scale and the frigid vice of the measuring tape, I dismantled myself into calories and pounds and inches, my weight plummeting more swiftly than Seattle snow.

from ribboned red fingers from

flesh anointed

Within a year, I extricatedmyself from my disordered eating. But my anorexia exposedme to the importance of a support system. Before, I had viewed compassion and competitiveness as irreconcilable, but in the months and years following my eating disorder, I developed a fierce sense of empathy for my friends and fellow dancers.

and shredded and pathetic this grave

holy

I understood the shameful pride that haloed disordered eating, the self-destruction masquerading as self-discipline and self-reliance. And I understood the fear of surrendering all the blood-bathed victories commandeered by obsession and self-hatred, whether it be a hundred pounds on the bathroom scale or a hundred points in the grade book.

ground a monument a love letter to

this witchcraft gruesomeness to

Anorexia also exposedme to the painful prevalence of denial in Asian American communities: not just towards eating disorders, but towards mental illnesses in general. While the suck-it-up mentality in many Asian cultures can fosteramazing work ethics, it can just as easily fester into terribly toxic mindsets.

these wallowing thoughts to

this poisoned water to

Recently, I launched *It’s Real,* a website addressing the stigma surrounding mental health in Asian American communities. With *It’s Real,* I seeknot to disparagemy culture, nor other Asian cultures. To the contrary, I aim to work *with* Asian Americans and Asian cultures to dismantlethe stigma surrounding eating disorders.

this hemlock which i

so eagerly

And ultimately, I would love to work with the tightly-knit collegiate community and supportive services, specifically Asian American support groups, to do so.

sip.

**LESSON FIVE**

**Part II: Effective Storytelling Techniques**

You made it! You made it to the lesson on storytelling. All the hard work you put in will pay off. Of that I’m certain. The work you’ve done will set you apart. **Because you looked so carefully at your internal makeup, you will now be able to tell a story that moves the reader.**

The work you’ve done in the first three lessons is the essential brainstorming necessary before you can craft an effective essay. Most applicants start here with the actual storytelling. But without looking carefully at your identity and chronicling the events and incidents that most shaped you, it is hard to tell a cohesive story that reveals your personal philosophy and psychology in a manner that moves the reader.

Good stories are transformative. They can move the reader and convey a powerful message at the same time. As a child, I would beg my brother to read me *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*. I would play certain scenes over in my mind savoring the dramatic elements. I became Hansel tempted by the candied walls of the witch’s house. I was one of the dwarfs protecting Snow White from a hostile world. Judging by Disney’s success retelling and repackaging those stories to a worldwide audience, I know I am not alone in my fascination with good stories.

The stories that the Brothers Grimm compiled, the stories that Homer told, and the ones told on *The Moth* stage all employ certain common devices that make an indelible impression on the listener or reader. This lesson will cover several that you can use to great effect in your personal statement.

**Storytelling Process and Techniques Part I**

**1)** **Method of Delivery**

In the last lesson, you chose the most dramatic incident in your life. You detailed how that event affected you emotionally, physically, and intellectually. You wrote why you’ve held on to that memory for as long as you have. And you chose what genre of film or literature you wish your statement to belong to.

Now, you must decide how you wish to tell your story. In the three examples above — The *Grimm’s Fairy Tales*, the *Odyssey*, and *The Moth* stories — all the stories were originally spoken stories or poems. **The best stories are spoken.** Your task is to approximate a spoken story.

**Many students approach this personal statement with the mistaken notion that they must write a formal five-paragraph essay, the kind they’ve learned in school. As a rule, I’ve found that the more formal a statement is, the less effective it is.** Let go of your desire to fit your essay into any mold that you’ve learned so far. We will cover sample essays in the last lesson, but suffice it to say the most effective essays don’t look anything like the essays you’ve encountered in the past. Yes, your statement should, as a rule, use standard grammar and punctuation. Beyond that, you are completely free to tell your story any way you’d like.

* Many students use the format of a **letter** for their personal statements; they find the letter format allows them to address directly and involve the individuals who participated in the incident they’ve chosen. I’ve lost track of how many students have chosen to write their essays as a letter; it’s that numerous. I reference numerous “letter” style essays in this lesson and the next. (Formally, this style of writing is called “epistolary.”)
* Others describe a **dream** in which the incident itself or symbols of it appear. Then they explicate that dream for the reader and reveal their inner workings in the process. One of the model essays that I reference extensively in this section is just such a dream explication.
* Still others write their statements as **instant messaging**: chats back and forth between themselves and a loved one discussing the emotions and details surrounding the incident that they’ve chosen. Or, their essay is an instant message feed between themselves and the key antagonist in their story.
* Others find that the transcript of a **phone conversation** best suits their storytelling technique. This, too, is risky but can be quite effective. Dialogue that depicts a raw encounter can move the reader if you clearly infuse it with your personal philosophy and psychology.

I’m not trying to influence you to choose one of the above forms of delivery. I’m trying to inspire you to think outside the box, way outside the box. Think of burning the box and dancing in the light of the flames. For, it’s the dance that matters. It’s the flaming hot emotion and conviction that will move the reader. They find the box as cumbersome as you do. You can tell your story however you like. **In truth, the most unconventional methods of delivery are often the most effective, but only if you find that they come naturally.**

How are you most comfortable telling your story? How do you normally tell stories? Instagram, Snapchat, or via texts? Think about how you tell stories to your best friend. Think of the writer as your best friend. How would you go about telling the story of the incident that you selected in the last lesson?

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Why have you chosen this particular method of telling your story? What does it reveal about your personality and how your mind works?

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I certainly don’t want to predispose you for or against one method of delivering your story, but over the years I’ve found that students have had a great deal of success creating essays as letters. There is something very intimate and immediate about a letter.

Consider the following excerpt from an essay written as a letter. Rather than talking about the pros and cons of certain forms of advertising in a formal essay, this student chose to write to an actual advertisement:

**You try to make me feel small, colorless. But, I’m on to you. You relentlessly try to plant the seed of insecurity in my growing mind and shower me with false versions of myself to weaken my self-esteem. It won’t work. I know myself well enough; I love myself well enough not to fall for your lies. “Without me, you’re empty,” you call out in your sharp voice. “Gain yourself through me,” you announce to the world. I’ll construct my identity without your input, thank you.**

I believe that in this case and many others, a letter allows the writer to develop a direct relationship with the reader more effectively than other forms of communication can. That’s not to say you should write your statement as a letter; no, I give the example above to show you that nonstandard forms of storytelling work effectively as a personal statement.

**2)** **Point of View**

Students often assume that they have to be the narrator of sorts. Even if they are a third-person omniscient entity, they are the ones telling the story. But that’s not the case. You can tell your story from numerous points of view.

Imagine a scene in which a bully is beating you up. You can tell the story from your point of view as you are beaten. You can tell the story from the bully beating you up. You can tell the story from the bully’s fists slamming into you. You can tell the story from the floor as it is showered by his sweat and your blood.

There are infinite points of view. None is more correct than another. Each views the action differently. Each participates in the action differently. As such, each conveys an entirely different story.

The efficacy of this technique was driven home by a series of books that tell standard fairy tales from the “villain’s” point of view. The “wicked” Queen was, in fact, trying to help Snow White by sending her into the woods to gain a deeper appreciation of nature. The “wicked” stepmother was trying to get lazy Hansel and Gretel to get out and explore the world when she devised the scheme to have them abandoned in the forest.

For those of you who like film, the director Kurosawa uses a similar device in his film, *Rashomon*. The movie tells three versions of a particular murder: from the point of views of the accused, the victim —channeled through a medium— and an eyewitness. Each story is compelling and seems like it depicts the truth. On a side note, this is one story that does not have a clear resolution: The viewer is left to decide which version of the story is true.

I try to “see from the other person’s point of view” when I experience conflict with someone. They must be telling themselves a story in which their behavior towards me is completely justified, I tell myself. Going through this exercise teaches me compassion and usually defuses or defangs my anger.

Briefly tell your story from your point of view:

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Now, briefly tell the same story from a completely different point of view:

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From which point of view have you chosen to tell your story? Why?

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If you are up to the challenge, consider telling portions of your story from different people’s points of view. It may be difficult to keep the points of view separate, but that is part of the appeal and challenge.

**I breathe in. My stress immediately disappears. Why did I wait so long? Comfortable, peaceful, warm once again. I’m my best when you are with me. You clear my mind. You’re an apple. You’re cinnamon. You are my friend. You dance with me. You hold me tight. You play with my hair. I feel loved. Why can’t I feel this way when you are not with me?**

**You may want me, but you don’t need me. You are capable and lovable all by yourself. I just remind you of the peace you already have inside you. Clear your own mind.**

The essay jumps back and forth between the point of view of the smoker and the point of view of the cigarette being smoked. The interplay of these two views allows the writer to reveal aspects of himself and a depth of self-knowledge that he may not have been able to reveal from a singular point of view.

If you want to write about your devotion to a musical instrument, consider writing from the instrument itself as in:

**Is my memory too shallow to forget your frustrating attempts to elicit joy from my unwilling metal? You pluck me roughly, abrade me, and then expect me to create beautiful music.**

You can often be more direct and unvarnished when you speak from another’s point of view. Many people have difficulty talking about themselves. If that is the case for you, perhaps describe yourself from something you interact with or care for deeply.

In one unique use of point of view, a student wrote the entire essay from a medication he took. At first, the pill has a separate point of view as it maintains its structural integrity, but as it is digested, the point of view of the pill and the patient become one.

**Creative use of point of view can surprise and engage the reader.**

**3)** **Who Are You Talking To?**

Many schools teach students not to use the pronouns “I” or “you” when writing essays. When it comes to writing this particular personal statement, however, toss that advice out the window.

Which has a greater impact?

1. **“Father robbed many aspects of my life.” Or: “You stole my life, Father.”**
2. **“Plastic surgery is all the vogue.” Or: “Knife your face. I’m happy with mine.”**
3. **“Traditional mores have gone by the wayside.” Or: “Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me.”**

The former are formal, neat, and wound tightly, as much good scholastic writing should be. The latter packs an emotional punch that compels you to keep reading. Pay close attention to the pronoun “you.” Using “you” effectively is like casting a lightning bolt that can strike a nerve in the reader.

**“You” is so powerful because it is so versatile. When you use “you,” you can address the reader, an actor in the drama you are relating, an aspect of yourself that was changed by the incident you are describing, or the individual you are relating the story to — or some or all of these the same time!** It is one of the most magical words in the English language, yet it rarely, if ever, appears on most personal statements. For that reason alone, it would behoove you to use it, simply to set your statement apart from others.

I cannot stress this enough. Effective use of “you” can transform your essay. **But, use it judiciously. If overused, it can lose its power.** I suggest interjecting it only at moments of heightened drama in your story. It is much more powerful, even transformative if it is used in that manner.

Who are you telling your story to? Certainly, you are telling the story to the reader, but who else is it addressed to? If you did feel comfortable using the pronoun “you,” when would you use it and who would “you” refer to?

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Even if you are relating your story to the reader conventionally, it may be useful to insert a single line or two where you do address another character in your drama. Doing so usually catches the reader off guard and can highlight the importance of the character you are addressing in your drama.

Look at how the writer does just that in the following paragraph. It starts out relating to the reader the changes she and her brother have undergone. Then, suddenly, she starts talking to her father. The sudden shift is so jarring that you, the reader, are served notice that she is revealing a very deep part of her being:

**And since he has left, I’ve changed. He sure has. He has lost 40 pounds, he has a 14-inch tattoo that reads: D I S C I P L I N E, and he uses the F-word like an assault rifle. Have I changed in response to his changes? I don’t know. But I have changed, that’s for sure. For one thing, I’ve started to lie to him more. Perhaps I am just protecting my heart or transferring my pain. Whatever the reason, since I’ve never deceived my brother before — it’s true! — I feel guilty. And I resent my parents more. But I’ve matured fast; I have to admit that. I’ve become “the man of the house;” let’s face it, Dad, where’ve you been?**

The abrupt change in address works so well here. The writer’s pain and frustration come bursting to the fore in such a visceral way *because* she is talking directly to her father. It’s perfectly fine to shift who you are addressing in your statement as she does in the example above.

I have already provided numerous examples of the use of “you.” In the following sample, “you” refers to no less than seven people or things. That pronoun takes us on a wild ride as it jumps from person to person.

**Boredom pushed me out of the house, underground, and onto the subway platform. Don’t follow me. All those faces, sitting on sweat-soaked bodies, just staring into the haze. Alienation, you are master here. I too began to get lost in the fog until you tapped my shoulder. I turned around with my half-opened eyes and saw you in your business suit with those glasses, which made you look so reputable. Thinking about possible matters of business that could have made you brave enough to talk to somebody whose face was so clearly stained with annoyance, I asked you what religion you were selling.**

These seven references to “you” or “your” may be far more than you are comfortable using, but they do allow the writer to shift seamlessly from a philosophical discussion about alienation to a disquieting confrontation.

Keep in mind: You are talking to the reader; no matter who else you involve in your story, you are continuously addressing the reader. Let the reader know you are aware of that. Involve the reader in your story if you can. The best example of this is a line from the essay I quoted above where the writer suddenly starts talking to her father:

***She slows down, Amy does, that is. She gives me a long, tired look, taking in my white t-shirt and black pants. Are you judging me?***

It’s not clear at all who she is talking to when she asks, “Are you judging me?” But certainly, the reader is judging her. She is trying to impress this reader. She has spent a great deal of effort revealing her innermost secrets to the reader, a stranger, and she resents being held up to such scrutiny. She conveys all that by her vague use of “you” in this sentence.

**Sample Essays:**

**(1) You Breathe In**

**Prompt: What is your worst habit? Why do you hold on to it? What are you going to do about it?**

I breathe in. My stress immediately disappears. Why did I wait so long? Comfortable, peaceful, warm once again. I’m my best when you are with me. You clear my mind. You’re an apple. You’re cinnamon. You are my friend. You dance with me. You hold me tight. You play with my hair. I feel loved. Why can’t I feel this way when you are not with me?

And you say: You may want me, but you don’t need me. You are capable and lovable all by yourself. I just remind you of the peace you already have inside you. Clear your own mind.

I exhale. I’m alone again. Empty again. Don’t abandon me. Why can’t I love myself the way you love me? Why can’t I love me more?

You respond: Because you don’t know yourself well enough. I clear the smoke that clouds your inner sight. Stop dwelling on disappointments. Stop cutting yourself down. Picture yourself as a room that you have piled high with junk. Now, breath by breath, one by one take away from the picture anything that limits your creativity, anything that limits your ability to love. What do you have left? A you who is compassionate. A you who is sincere. A you who is curious. That’s the you I know and love.

I breathe in. Not to feel sexy. Not to look good. Not to seem mature. Because I need a friend. Mom, you left me all alone. But, I always had you. I always have you. You are a part of me.

Then you whisper: Be your own friend.

I breathe out. I am hollow again. Pour your love into me. Fill me with your truth.

And you conclude: Find your own truth. It’s there inside you. It’s all around you. Stop using me as a crutch. Throw me away. The longer you rely on me, the harder it will be to find the truth on your own.

**(2) You Try to Make Me Feel Small**

You try to make me feel small, colorless. But, I’m on to you. You try to plant the seed of insecurity in my growing mind and shower me with false versions of myself. You relentless attempt to weaken my self-esteem. It won’t work. I know myself well enough; I love myself unconditionally enough not to fall for your lies. “Without me, you’re empty,” you call out in your sharp voice. “Gain yourself through me,” you announce to the world. I’ll construct my identity without your input, thank you.

You brutally compare me to others who have given in to you. You show me pictures of other women, better dressed, brighter teeth, whiter skin, clutching your hand as they parade down the red carpet of your false dream. “Look what you’re missing out on,” you hiss at me from your luxurious cage. I stuff up my ear holes against your song of seduction and see you for who you are: a merchant of distorted fantasies.

You, on the other hand, inspire me to embrace the best of myself. You acknowledge that I have all I need within me. “Represent your own standard of beauty on your own terms,” you declare. “I can neither add to nor subtract from your inner beauty.”

You challenge me to confront my prejudices and self-imposed limitations. “Don’t escape the pain you experience, the imperfection around you. Grow from it,” you plead. I first saw you hugging a light pole beside a busy bus stop. At first, I didn’t realize the gun you waved was pointing back at you. Then, your anti-war message hit me, breaking through my well-constructed defenses far more effectively than any slick sales pitch ever could.

Advertisements can broadcast false versions of reality and undercut the viewer’s sense of self; most seem to do just that. In particular, ads seem to target women’s self-worth, exploiting their fears and insecurities. The very purpose of most advertising, it seems, is to shout out to women, “You are not sexy enough or accomplished enough on your own. Look how flawed you are, how incomplete you are. If only you only had me, your life would be complete.”

Ads also challenge women’s individuality; they demand: “Unless you brand yourself with me, you have no style, no taste.” When I see herds of Gucci-wearing lemmings walking the streets, I see victims of modern advertising who have surrendered to this repressive message and allowed themselves to be branded.

On the other hand, ads can inspire viewers, even dare individuals to consider a reality where others’ suffering counts. I believe all art, and advertisements as commercial art, should aim to do that. Fundamentally, unless a viewer feels encouraged and touched, she will not have the inner strength to make meaningful changes in herself or in society.

I want to make commercial art that promotes meaningful ideas. I want to challenge the current standard of marketing that undercuts women.

**LESSON SIX**

**Storytelling Process and Techniques Part II**

**4)** **Structure: Rising Action/Climax/Crisis Resolution**

No matter how stream-of-consciousness or conversational your statement is, it still needs some structure. Most stories traditionally have an **exposition** or introduction of the problem, **rising action**, **climax**, **falling action**, and **resolution**. Over time, however, I have found that three of these structural elements are more critical than the others. You are dealing with a somewhat abbreviated story, after all, in quite limited space.

I have found that an effective story needs: some **rising action**, in which the dramatic elements of your story start to become increasingly more intense; a **climax**, the turning point of the story; and some **resolution**. **It is entirely possible that your story has no clear resolution; in life, few do.** But even acknowledging that your story has no resolution gives your essay some closure. You certainly don’t need your story to flow in a linear manner, but a story that has these three structural elements in some order is more likely to convey your message more effectively than one that doesn’t.

Most films and most fictional works have at least these three elements in place to one degree or another. Think about the stories you tell yourself and others; most will have these three structural elements. And because they do, they give the reader, listener, or viewer some framework to better understand and digest the work. Subconsciously, the reader expects these elements and may be confused if they are not there. I suggest trying to write an essay that has rising action, a climax, and crisis resolution before you try something entirely experimental.

What is the rising action of your story? What led to the crisis or moment of heightened drama that you have decided to write about?

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What is the climax of the story? When is the drama at its most intense?

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How does the drama resolve itself? Is there a clean resolution to it, or do elements of the crisis still linger on?

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Consider the following excerpt. It is taken from near the end of a student’s essay. Up to this point, the action has been slowly rising. The first paragraph quoted here continues with that rising action. Then, quite suddenly, the action reaches a crisis. The last two lines serve as the resolution to that crisis.

Rising action

Crisis

Resolution

**I enter a PC room and log onto *Final Fantasy XI*. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**And I say…**

**Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Empty the trash. Cut the wires. End the games.**

**Be your own Final Fantasy.**

When he writes: “And I say…” we get a clear sense the story has reached a turning point. The crisis that has been slowly building has boiled over. Notice that the paragraph that starts with “Knife your face” is much more brutally constructed than the preceding paragraphs: The sentences are shorter, the verbs are more direct, and the action is heightened. Almost everything about the writing shifts when it enters the crisis stage of the essay. The tone becomes much more urgent. The sentences become shorter. The syntax becomes more compact. While your statement may not have such clear rising action, crisis, and resolution, it should have some element of each.

**5)** **Order**

There is no correct way of ordering a story. You can begin at the end and work your way backward. You can begin at the moment of crisis, thus surprising and confusing the reader a bit. Or, you can take a more conventional approach and order your story with a clear beginning, middle, and end.

Truthfully, you can hop back and forth between sections, but doing so heightens the risk you are taking because it may disorient the reader.

It is often quite powerful to thrust the reader right into the moment of heightened crisis. I am reminded of the film *Swordfish* starring John Travolta. It begins with an explosion. The viewer has no clue what is going on and is thrown back in his or her seat with the impact of the blast. Then, the director pans out and explains what led to that moment of crisis and, only much later, provides some resolution to it.

That sort of order is highly effective. It builds mystery and suspense. Reflect on how you order things: your music, your clothes, your room, your language, your thoughts, your energy, your time, your relationships, and your emotions. That should provide an effective guide for how you should order this essay. **Do you prefer strict order? Does defined structure give you a sense of safety and comfort? Or, do you thrive in the midst of chaos?**

For your story, what order do you wish to have the rising action, climax, and resolution?

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Here is an excerpt from an essay that begins with the crisis, as many good essays do.

**A sweaty elbow connects with my jaw. I hit the ground hard and get kicked in the rib cage three times. An arm snakes through the tangle of legs that are firing off like overheated pistons. It yanks me to my feet.**

We have no idea what is happening here. Is this a violent altercation? Who is reaching out to the reader? It is only later that we find out that he is at a punk rock concert and having the time of his life. An essay that has a crisis first has the added benefit of grabbing the reader’s attention in a way that essays that start with rising action may not. But, you can’t keep up such a fast pace, or you will exhaust the reader emotionally. Order your statement how you feel comfortable telling your story. The above example is merely meant to illustrate that you can order your essay however you like.

**6)** **Description vs. Philosophy**

One more thing to keep in mind before you start writing: **Even if you have elements of descriptive writing in your statement, this is NOT a descriptive essay.** Even as you describe aspects of an event that took place, that description really should not be the star; your personal philosophy should. The descriptive writing should be a means to describe your internal world.

The admissions reader is not looking for a descriptive essay. He or she is not all that interested in what happened to you. The reader wants to know how some significant aspect of your being was shaped by the incident you describe. Therefore, limit how much description you have. Instead, focus on how the event you describe affected your philosophy, psychology, and outlook.

Often students spend far too many words describing what happened and not enough time describing why what happened matters to them.

Ideally, after you describe the details of an incident or event, you pull back and reflect on how that description reflects on your personal philosophy and psychology. A good example of this is the essay from which the previous example on tone was taken. After giving a playful description of the kissing styles of two women he has known, the writer shifts into philosophical gear:

**Each of your kissing styles, each of your love has become a part of me. I’ve become a man with explosive energy balanced with patience and meticulousness. I’ve become a free man, yet faithful and loyal. I laugh more but have learned to value and enjoy solitude and meditation. A cultural wall has fallen down in my mind, yet I’m still painstaking in what I open up to. I’ve come to embrace my own culture and respect that of others. You’ve both expanded my capacity to love.**

The description should serve a clear purpose: Reveal your inner workings and philosophy. If you find yourself getting lost in the description, you are likely to lose the reader as well. This is especially true when it comes to the “hook” or opening of the essay, which we will discuss later.

**Sample Essays:**

**(1) Kissing**

**Prompt: Compare the experience you have kissing.**

When I kiss you, I feel the way a lioness must feel; threatened with extinguishment. You demand obedience. You demand surrender.

You, on the other hand, were the passive one. Perhaps it was an act, and it’s certainly a cliché, but in our case it was true: if I didn’t make a move to grab your hand or stroke your hair, you would remain a Rodin statue – yes beautiful, yes timeless, but cold and unapproachable.

You bite back when I kiss you. In fact, you taught me that pleasure and pain are intertwined; I can’t think of joyful whispers with you without also recalling the screaming matches. You throw your whole face into a kiss: your nose jabs me; your cheeks demand that I take notice of them. You want more and more of me.

You, on the other hand, were the innocent one. You were mysterious. You pulled back. Where were you fleeing to? You said I betrayed my heritage, our heritage, but what does that mean? We aren’t slaves to our race, our color, or our skin.

You, with your Irish, Serbian, German blood and heritage, yank me further and further away from the Kimchi-laden offering table of my ancestors. But we always use seaweed as a metaphor for our love: intertwined, flowing, and impervious to the underwater storms that swirl around us. You give me a root far deeper than one I have to return home to.

You, on the other hand, were home. You represented the safety of 5,000 years. When I saw you, I saw the best of who I can be. Perhaps I was afraid to change any more than I already had.

Each of your kissing styles, each of your love has become a part of me. I’ve become a man with explosive energy balanced with patience and meticulousness. I’ve become a free man, yet faithful and loyal. I laugh more but have learned to value and enjoy solitude and meditation. A cultural wall has fallen down in my mind, yet I’m still painstaking in what I open up to. I’ve come to embrace my own culture and respect that of others. You’ve both expanded my capacity to love.

**(2) Sweaty Elbow**

A sweaty elbow connects with my jaw. I hit the ground hard and get kicked in the rib cage three times. An arm snakes through the tangle of legs that are firing off like overheated pistons. It yanks me to my feet.

That was my first experience at a local punk show. Although I woke up sore and with a pounding headache the next morning, I will forever cherish that night. For the first time in my life, I felt an incredible sense of unity and release. The combination of the intense music and bodies smashing into one another made me forget all about the restraints on my personality — the code of decorous behavior that I am expected to adhere to.

For a brief moment, my anger, hate, and insecurity poured out of me, and in their place freedom rushed in. It was the most therapeutic experience of my life. I walked out of the cramped club feeling like a new person with only one thought in mind: I’m starting a band. Three and a half years later, I am not just another body in the pit being tossed around like a rag doll; as base guitarist in my own band, I am now the therapist on stage releasing the torrent of pent-up emotion.

Am I on an ego trip? Hell, yes. To me, being on stage in front of a bunch of people I’ve never met, manipulating their emotions, is an intense, fulfilling experience. Being in a local, underground band is bliss to me. I feel as though I am one with the crowd. The crazier they are, the crazier my band and I are. We feed off of each other’s emotions, and, by the second song of the set, I feel so empowered. So alive.

Am I just inciting violence? Yes, but in a controlled environment with like-minded individuals. No one is in the pit that doesn’t want to be there. If I were to ask a kid coming straight out of the pit how he feels, despite the possible bloody nose and lumps on his body, he would say, “A lot better.” There’s something about causing destruction that heals. We all have a destructive impulse imprisoned within us, and that animal will debilitate ourselves if we don’t release it. Suppressing our emotions or even denying that they exist is terribly limiting. If I can help a bunch of teenagers release their negative emotions without them venting in public, then I feel like I have accomplished something.

So as the set comes to an end, I jump off stage and float on a sea of energetic, open-minded, emotionally cleansed people, and I too feel what they’re feeling. Sweat pours down everyone’s faces, the brave ones are crowd surfing, our singer screams the last chorus at the top of his lungs, and then, it’s over. There is a sense of unity throughout the room, and, as Tyler said in Fight Club, “There’s hysterical shouting in tongues, like at church, and when you wake up Sunday afternoon you feel saved.” Except this is no church.

**LESSON SEVEN**

**Storytelling Process and Techniques Part III**

**7)** **Tone**

Before you begin the actual writing process, it’s important to take a moment and contemplate tone. The tone is the attitude of the writer. It can be cheerful, angry, or optimistic. Just as you convey your attitude through the tone of your voice, you convey your attitude through the tone of your writing.

You can convey tone by your choice of words, the length of your sentences, the grammatical complexity, the point of view, and even the formality or informality of your writing. We will discuss each of these in more detail as the lesson proceeds.

In an example given previously, the writer uses graphic words, short sentences, and tight grammar to convey an attitude of urgency and determination:

**Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

This example, by contrast, conveys a philosophical and playful attitude through softer word choice and more elongated sentences.

**You bite back when I kiss you. In fact, you taught me that pleasure and pain are intertwined; I can’t think of joyful whispers with you without also recalling the screaming matches. You throw your whole face into a kiss: your nose jabs me; your cheeks demand that I take notice of them. You want more and more of me.**

Both have to do with the face, yet the tone is dramatically different.

If you were *telling* the story, when would you add excitement to your voice? When would you use a slow, more somber voice? Certainly, the tone will vary from section to section, but there should be some overall cohesiveness to the tone of the story.

At the end of the last lesson, you designated the genre of film or fiction that you see your story fitting into. If your story depicts loss, the overall tone should be somewhat subdued, or even pained. If it depicts triumph, it is only fitting to use a more exuberant tone.

Just keep your attitude clearly in focus. After you write each line, ask yourself: Do the elements of this sentence contribute to the tone that I wish to convey or are they incongruous with the tone of this section of the essay and with the essay as a whole?

What is the most appropriate tone for your statement?

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**8)** **Syntax**

The syntax is how you choose to arrange the words and phrases on the paper. Manipulating syntax is one of the more effective ways to establish or change the tone of your story.

**Most people don’t write the way that they speak. Use that to your advantage. You are telling a story, but you are also writing a story. Accordingly, it’s completely acceptable and natural to use conversational syntax in one line and much more formal syntax in the next.** Doing so shows a level of maturity as a writer and shows that you have a firm grasp of the patterns of spoken and written English. Furthermore, juxtaposing sentences with varied syntax makes for exciting and stimulating reading.

Think of the poor reader who has to read hundreds or even thousands of these essays; have mercy on him or her. Make your story compelling. Make your statement entertaining.

Look what I just did in the last paragraph: I led off with a statement that included a semicolon to offer support for what came before the semicolon. Then, I fired off two short imperative sentences directly addressed to you, urging you to take a particular action. The first sentence is 22 words long; the following two are four words each.

Have you ever watched a boxing match? If you haven’t, pull up footage of a Muhammad Ali fight on YouTube. Ali varies his punches to increase the efficacy of each and to increase the likelihood he will catch his opponent off guard. After a flurry of jabs, Ali will strike with a left hook. As you write, think of your sentences as punches. By varying the length and complexity of them, you are more likely to move the reader and catch him or her off guard!

An example from a student’s essay that illustrates this:

**It’s not that I’m not patriotic; I’m not, but that’s beside the point. I want him near me. I need him.**

The two short sentences at the end are rendered that much more effective because they follow a more syntactically complex one. As for sentence length, **try to include one four-word sentence per paragraph. It should be the most dramatic blow you strike that paragraph, and as such should contain the key point or emotion you wish to convey to the reader.**

It is quite powerful to have a short sentence follow a more complex one. Doing so accentuates the strength of both. Consider using semicolons to create this effect. The previous example uses a semicolon to create syntactic contrast as does the following example:

**I’ve come to terms that you’ll just never know how to love me; either you simply lack the ability or you lack the inclination. Nothing I do can change that.**

Think of a meal: eating food with the same texture and flavor of each course would be horrible. For that reason, the variety of each dish highlights its flavor and that of the others. Keep that analogy in mind when you arrange your sentences: You are serving up a meal to the reader who has feasted on thousands of essays already. Can your words, your sentences excite his or her appetite?

Write out the first paragraph of your essay in sentences that have the same basic length and syntax.

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Now, write that same paragraph using sentences that vary in length and syntax.

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**9)** **Opening Lines**

Including the hook that starts the first paragraph, the lines that start each paragraph should pack a punch. If possible, use active verbs in these lines. A verb is like the driver of a vehicle: He can give the car more gas or slam on the brakes. He can swerve in an unexpected direction or maintain a steady course.

**An active verb is robust and can move the sentence in any direction at any speed.**

**A linking verb is like autopilot set to one speed: slow.**

**A passive verb is even more decrepit — it’s like having your car towed to the junkyard.**

Compare:

1. **It is hard to have faith after all that I’ve been through**. This contains a linking verb. It is not too weak, but it doesn’t convey much strength or conviction either.
2. **Life is valued by me.** This contains a passive verb that undermines the strength of the sentence.
3. **If life is distilled down to duty, God, take it back.** This contains an active verb that allows the writer to express his point forcefully.

The opening lines of each paragraph control the tempo and flow of the entire essay. If they lack power and direction, your essay will as well. Look at the opening lines of one essay I found especially effective. It is about how heavy metal informs and shapes his identity and worldview:

* Paragraph 1: **I love metal: the intensity, the clarity, and the rage.**
* Paragraph 2: **Anything can be heavenly or demonic.**
* Paragraph 3: **I lead a moral life.**
* Paragraph 4: **I worship God differently than they do.**
* Paragraph 5: **The shoemaker worships God by using his creativity the best he knows how.**
* Paragraph 6: **Let me create as I see fit.**
* Paragraph 7: **Metal is my therapy.**

All but two of the seven verbs in his opening lines are active. And the linking verb in the last line works effectively because it is part of a four-line thunderbolt of a statement. If you just read these opening lines, you would know what the essay is about. You would know the examples he is offering to demonstrate the impact metal has had on him. The sentences are crisp, short, and up-tempo.

**The Hook**

The opening line of the first paragraph is a unique animal. It sets the tone for the entire essay. Slam into the reader and grab his attention. First impressions matter. They matter a great deal.

One of my favorite nonfiction books is *Blink* by Malcolm Gladwell. In it, he posits that people make decisions in nanoseconds. They know almost instantly if something is a threat or benefit to them. He gave one example in which an expert on Greek antiquities was shown a work that was purported to have been recently unearthed. One glance told him it was a fake. All the evidence pointed to it being authentic. Tests showed that the marble was from the correct period. It was sculpted in exactly the right style. But it was a fake. He just knew it. And he knew it within seconds of examining it from quite a distance away.

I offer this example because your essay should be an authentic work of art. The reader knows within seconds if it is or is not. Don’t you know after listening to the first few notes of a song whether or not it will move you? Some songs may grow on you if you listen to them repeatedly, but you don’t have such a luxury with this reader.

So, make your opening line count.

Consider the following hooks from students’ essays:

**A.** **You say loneliness is my master.**

**B.** **Bits and pieces of my dream lie scattered on my face and pillow like a picture torn to shreds by our rambunctious Chihuahua.**

**C.** **A sweaty elbow connects with my jaw. I hit the ground hard and get kicked in the rib cage three times.**

**D.** **When I kiss you, I feel the way a lioness must feel: threatened with extinction.**

After reading such opening hooks, the reader should feel a strong compulsion to keep reading. The reader should get a gut feeling that these essays just feel right, just feel like works of art.

**Note: Most of those hooks start with the climax of the story and then work back to the rising action and resolution.**

What is a good hook to introduce your story?

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A hook really should not be more than three lines. If it is any longer than that, it loses its power to grab the reader.

Now, write down the opening lines for your subsequent paragraphs. Make sure each has a dynamic verb.

Paragraph 2:

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Paragraph 3:

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Paragraph 4:

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Paragraph 5:

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**10)** **Thesis Lines: Active Verbs/Transitions**

The last line of each paragraph should contain some direct reference to the key emotion, incident, or theme of that paragraph. It should also lead the reader seamlessly on to the next paragraph. It doesn’t have to be as formal a thesis line as you may be used to writing, but it should leave the reader with a clear indication of where you’ve come from and where you plan to go. You don’t want to put too much descriptive writing in your thesis line; you should be drawing some conclusions about your inner workings from everything else you wrote about in that paragraph.

Furthermore, **it’s rather important to avoid passive verbs and linking verbs in your thesis lines; if possible, use active verbs exclusively.** It’s a great exercise to go back over a paragraph you’ve written and to rewrite each line using only active verbs.

If you just read the last lines of each paragraph, you should be able to get a clear idea of the outline of the story. Indeed, if you simply took the thesis lines from each of your paragraphs and combined them into one paragraph, you should have an excellent summary of your essay.

Earlier we looked at the opening lines of each paragraph of an essay about heavy metal. Here are the thesis lines of that same essay:

* Paragraph 1: **That’s like saying Harry Potter is satanic because he uses magic and doesn’t overtly worship god.**
* Paragraph 2: **If I listen to music to break out of my chains, then there is nothing more constructive.**
* Paragraph 3: **Intense joy and intense pain are just two sides of the same coin – with my face on it.**
* Paragraph 4: **Those make me feel numb, and I hate feeling numb.**
* Paragraph 5: **Think of all the children he may have comforted.**
* Paragraph 6: ***I love you, but don’t make me hate you.***
* Paragraph 7: **It allows me to lead the productive life I do.**

A majority of the verbs, which are highlighted in yellow, are active verbs. The few that aren’t are linking verbs. All but the first and fifth thesis lines specifically refer to some aspect of the writer’s identity. All but the first three are ten words or fewer. Just by reading these theses, the reader gets a pretty good idea of what the writer is saying in this essay.

What are the thesis lines from each paragraph of your essay? Does each have an active verb? Does each segue nicely to the action of the next paragraph (except the last line of the last paragraph that is)? If you combined these theses lines into one paragraph, do you have a powerful summary of your entire essay?

Paragraph 1:

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Paragraph 2:

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Paragraph 3:

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Paragraph 4:

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Paragraph 5:

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Keep in mind, with very few exceptions, this is NOT a descriptive essay. If too many of your thesis lines don’t reveal your inner workings or aspects of your identity and contain, instead, details about an event, then consider shifting the emphasis of that paragraph away from describing an event towards describing yourself.

**11)** **Choice of Words/Sentences**

You spend much time memorizing difficult words for the SAT; why not use them on your personal statement, right? Well, only if you are comfortable doing so. If you have just learned a new word, however, how comfortable are you using it? It takes time and practice to use any word well. The reader is highly attuned to words that appear out of place, so play to your strengths when it comes to word choice.

And truth be told, simpler is usually better. If you can use a ten-cent word to say the same thing as a ten-dollar word, you should. Think back to Sun Tzu’s admonition to act weak when you are strong. If you feel confident about what you are saying, then say it as simply and as directly as you can.

It often takes great discipline not to overwrite. You want to express things perfectly, so you may work and rework a line over and over until it tastes like over-chewed and tasteless meat. Two of the most moving pieces of spoken or written word are Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address and the Sermon on the Mount.

Lines from Lincoln’s Gettysburg Address:

**But, in a larger sense, we can not dedicate — we can not consecrate — we can not hallow — this ground.**

Lines from Christ’s Sermon on the Mount:

**4 Blessed are those who mourn,**

**for they will be comforted.**

**5 Blessed are the meek,**

**for they will inherit the earth.[iii]**

Both are rather simple; yet, it is their simplicity that gives the lines great weight and meaning. Err on the side of simple writing. Simple, clear writing will move the reader far more than complex writing will.

**Ungrammatical Sentences/Colloquial Writing**

You should follow standard rules of grammar and punctuation. As a rule. Look what I did in that last sentence: I used a fragment to underscore a point. The reader’s eye will naturally stop at ungrammatical sentences. Such lines are unexpected and not a little bit jarring. Used VERY sparingly, they can be quite useful. If you are going to use such sentences, it is ideal to juxtapose them with sentences that have a pristine grammatical structure.

For example, in an essay that describes a nightmare, a student writes about one of the most important symbols that appear in the dream:

**And the water. Are those your tears or mine? Do you realize that you’ve lost us?**

“**And the water.**” is not grammatical. Because it isn’t, the reader is drawn to it. That is exactly what the writer wants: to indicate the importance and significance of this element of her essay. If you use ungrammatical sentences in such a manner, they can work well.

**That being said, avoid colloquialisms or slang at all costs.** It’s one thing to throw a speed bump into the paragraph to jolt the reader some; it’s another thing entirely to alienate the reader. You are very likely to do just that if you pepper your personal statement with slang or jargon that the reader may not understand or be offended by. **Even if such language is used in quotation marks as part of dialogue, you should still practice discretion. This essay is, after all, one measure of your ability to write on the collegiate level.** That goes for profanity as well; the lazy writer or speaker tends to resort to profanity because he or she is unwilling to come up with a more creative way to express things.

**12)** **The End**

End with a bang. Finish your essay with your strongest line. It should also encapsulate the main point of your essay. Ideally, it should act as the bookend to your hook. Some examples:

**A.** **I want him back, Father.**

**B.** **Be your own Final Fantasy.**

**C.** **I say, Loneliness, come be my master.**

Write the last line of your statement:

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**Final Thoughts**

We know how good stories work; we’ve been exposed to them from the earliest age, and we tell ourselves and others multiple stories each day. **If you have trouble *writing* your story, try *telling* it. Relax and speak into a recording device and later transcribe what you’ve said.** We often become paralyzed when we see a sheet of blank paper. When we speak, we feel safe, more comfortable to express ourselves.

**Risk vs. Reward**

One thing I would like to add while on the topic of storytelling: You must decide how much risk you need to take before you write the essay. If your dream is to attend Yale, but you don’t have the grades or test scores to get in, you may need to create an essay that pushes the grammatical and syntactic boundaries quite a bit. You may need to tell your story from a very unexpected point of view. You may need to shock or surprise the reader as you relate your story.

If, however, you are applying to a school that you have a very good shot of getting into, you may not need to push the envelope so much. That’s not to say you should submit a clichéd statement under any circumstances; you should be prudent when it comes to the storytelling risks you take.

**Sample Essays:**

**(1) Metal Madness**

*He is the Painkiller*

*This is the Painkiller*

I love metal: the intensity, the clarity, and the rage. Some people have art through which to release their pain and frustration. I used to have sports. Well, that’s gone. Some people find escape in drugs or video games. I measure all escape mechanisms by one criterion: are they constructive or destructive? My mother and my church friends say that Metal is demonic. That’s like saying Harry Potter is satanic because he uses magic and doesn’t overtly worship god.

Anything can be heavenly or demonic. It all comes down to purpose. If I listen to music to alienate myself, then the purpose is destructive. If I listen to music to break out of my chains, then there is nothing more constructive.

I lead a moral life. I’ve done everything my parents have asked of me. And as a result, stress and resentment do pile up at times. Would they rather I rage at them or against my wall? I love intensity. Intense joy and intense pain are just two sides of the same coin – with my face on it.

I worship God differently than they do. They sing holy songs. Those make me feel numb, and I hate feeling numb.

The shoemaker worships God by using his creativity the best he knows how. The clown. Is he less holy than the priest? Perhaps he whispers a blessing each time he gives a balloon away. Think of all the children he may have comforted.

Let me create as I see fit. I know my purpose and my motivation are constructive. I imagine that each generation goes through a similar struggle. The young tell the old: *“I control an instrument and it’s called myself. Don’t play my instrument. I love you, but don’t make me hate you.”*

Metal is my therapy. It is the lullaby of my life. It is the most constructive escape I have. It allows me to lead the productive life I do.

**(2) There You Are**

There you are. I’ve seen you so many times, but I don’t know anything about you. You’re a mystery attached to my mind by a picture on a magnet. As I open the door, you vanish and I lose you once again. I grab the plate of pickled cucumbers and sneak a quick bite, savoring the crunchy, spicy explosion of flavor. I shut the door and I see you again, imploring me to find you. I see the resemblance to my grandmother, mother, and to me. Why won’t anyone tell me who you are? You can’t just be a random girl if you’re always hanging in grandma’s house.

You are embedded in the mystery of my life, and yet you are so elusive. Grandma strolls near me waiting for me to hand her the condiments. Finding me in front of you, her face stiffens. Almost rushing, she takes my small hands and pulls me away saying she needs help with the soup. I do not want to leave you alone.

I am determined to discover your real identity and what you mean to our family. I take the courage, finally, to talk about you with grandma. My attempt is, nonetheless, unsuccessful; she says I am too young to know about you. It is as if I already knew that she was going to hide you from me. She always keeps secrets to herself. My family is steeped in secrets – and tragedy. Disappointed, I let you go for now and walk to the stove. When I see inside the pot, the soup is cooked already. I tell grandma that she doesn’t need my help, but she doesn’t answer. I look back and see her, eyes locked with yours, arms extended against the refrigerator for support.

Your eyes say: Be braver than they are. Be bolder than they are. You have the strength to face life’s uncertainties head-on. Do so. Let me live on in you.

**LESSON EIGHT**

**Part III: The Revision Process**

Most essays require multiple revisions before they are suitable for submission. Most of the outstanding essays I’ve been involved with were revised up to twenty times. Indeed, you should expect to spend far more time revising your essay than you did writing it.

**If you don’t already own a copy of Strunk and White’s *Elements of Style*, please pick one up. It will help you immensely in the writing and revision process. You can find an electronic copy on the publisher’s website:** [**http://www.bartleby.com/141/**](http://www.bartleby.com/141/)

The exhortation to use active verbs comes from the pages of that book as does the imperative to “Omit needless words!”[iv] Because of that book, I think of every word that I cut as money I put in my pocket. I want to shave words off each sentence. For that reason, I look forward to the revision process.

The revision process is largely one of taking away: You are cutting away words that don’t convey some aspect of your character or philosophy. In the example I offer below, there are four versions of a student’s essay. These aren’t the only four by any means; he came up with over 15 drafts before all was said and done. **These four are separated by a month each**, so they show a snapshot of his editorial thinking along the way.

As I offer some general editorial guidelines, I reference certain aspects of one or more of the drafts. In the end, I will offer a detailed analysis of the final draft.

**1)** **Word Count**

The first thing I’d like to point out is that the word count drops steadily as the drafts progress. This is perfectly normal and welcome. For that reason, **write as much as you can in the first draft with the clear intention of eliminating excess baggage as your journey continues.**

Too many students feel that they have to use all 650 words that they are given to write the Common Application essay. And because they are under that misconception, they include lines that are, quite simply, filler.

Here is the prompt for the essay which we will look at below:

**Describe the world you come from — for example, your family, community or school and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.**

July 14 Version (463 words)

**The first thing I encounter right after I get off the subway is the smell of Dunkin Donuts coffee. The next thing that slams into me is a 60-foot high sign offering sex changes by Ivy League graduate doctors. I think I will pass on that today. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? Every face seem altered, sculpted and knifed. We are whiter than the Americans are now. We are more American than Americans now. Skirts are so high, what’s the point of wearing them at all? Women’s bones poke against their flesh attracting confused young men. With her butt overflowing into the gutter is the ‘duk’ grandma with piles of traditional colored rice cakes. They are dusty now, dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

**Down the street, a mob is chanting anti-American slogans as they hold up the effigy of a sick American cow. Protect our people! They yell. Protect our diet! Many are unemployed workers from the automotive industry. Some are students. A few are farmers. A small whirlwind of wrappers and cigarettes is swirling in front of them. I pass an agency specializing in importing foreign women as wives for farmers; no Korean woman wants to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is too hard. Plastered on the window is a government sign offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the industrial world. Women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. I can understand why; they’ve been treated badly the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**I enter a PC room and log into Final Fantasy XI. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a cloud blocking out the light. We are in the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you. You’re wired to me. And, we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**Is this our Final Fantasy?**

**And I say…**

**Drink your Dunkin Donuts coffee; I am content with my Bori cha. Emasculate yourself; I celebrate my masculinity. Knife your face; I am happy with my squinted eyes and small lips. Bleach your skin; I am yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me. I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Douse your burning effigy. A wise man once said, ‘It’s not what goes into your mouth that matters, but what comes out.’ Pick up the trash that surrounds us. Honor the land that sustains us.**

**Cut the wires. End the games.**

**Be your own Final Fantasy.**

July 23 Version (393 words)

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of Starbucks mocha frappuccino. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seem altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than the Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Skirts are so high that there’s no point in wearing them at all. Boney women walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A ‘duk’ grandma sits with her butt in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

**Down the street, a mob is chanting anti-American slogans as they hold up the figure of a sick American cow. They are yelling, ‘Protect our people! Protect our diet!’ Many are unemployed workers from the car industry, some are students, and a few are farmers. I pass an agency that imports foreign women as wives for farmers. No Korean woman wants to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is simply too hard. Government signs cling to poles offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the industrial world because women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. And, I can understand why. They’ve been treated badly for the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**I enter a PC room and log onto Final Fantasy XI. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**Is this our Final Fantasy?**

**And I say…**

**Drink your fancy coffee; I’m satisfied with my Bori cha. Knife your face; I am happy with my mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Pick up the trash that surrounds us. Honor the land that sustains us.**

**Cut the wires. End the games.**

**Be your own Final Fantasy.**

August 1 Edition (354 words)

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of Starbucks mocha frappuccino. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A ‘duk’ grandma sits with her butt in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

**I pass an agency that imports foreign women as wives for farmers. Few Korean women want to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is simply too hard. Government signs cling to poles offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world because women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. And, I can understand why. They’ve been treated badly for the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**I approach a PC room. Two garbage cans stand guard. They throw up half-eaten fries, soda cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. I enter and log onto Final Fantasy XI. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**Is this our Final Fantasy?**

**And I say…**

**Drink your fancy coffee; I’m satisfied with my Bori cha. Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Pick up the trash that surrounds us. Honor the land that sustains us.**

**Cut the wires. End the games. Be your own Final Fantasy.**

Final Version (312 words)

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A grandma sits in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

**I pass an agency that imports foreign women as wives for farmers. Few Korean women want to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is simply too hard. Government signs cling to poles offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world because women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. And, I can understand why. They’ve been treated badly for the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**I enter a PC room and log onto Final Fantasy XI. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**And I say…**

**Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Empty the trash. Cut the wires. End the games.**

**Be your own Final Fantasy.**

The final version of this essay is 312 words. That’s 33% fewer words than the first draft of the essay! Every word counts. Every word carries its weight. I am reminded of a scene early on in the movie *300* when the king of the Spartans is questioned by the Athenians why he brought so few men. He responds that unlike the Athenians who were potters, sculptors, and blacksmiths by trade, EVERY man he brought was a soldier. And therefore, even though he brought far fewer men than the Athenians, he brought more soldiers than they.

Each of the 312 words in the final draft of this essay belongs in the essay. Yes, it is short. Keep in mind it was written when the word limit was 500 words, so it isn’t as short as it may seem.

**Your goal in editing is to challenge each word to see if it belongs in your essay. If you can eliminate it without affecting the meaning, do so.**

**2)** **More Action**

The next thing I wish to point out is that even though there are fewer words as the drafts progress, there is a lot more action. This is accomplished in part by drafting much more dynamic verbs in place of effete ones.

For example, the first few words of the first draft read: **“The first thing I encounter ….”** Compare that to the opening of subsequent drafts: **“The first thing that hits me ….”**

There is a HUGE difference between encountering something and being hit by something. Encounter is benign. Hit is threatening. If you encounter a friend on the way to the park, he might offer to give you a lift. If your friend hits you on the way to the park, you might not make it to the park.

The best way to achieve more action is to action-ize your verbs. Go through your draft and highlight all of your verbs. Most should be active verbs. But even among active verbs, try to choose verbs that are more dynamic. That’s not to say you have to write an action thriller. No, even if you are describing an encounter with your friend in the park, chose verbs that tell the reader exactly what you intend.

**Vague, lifeless verbs kill essays.** Simply transforming your verbs will transform your essay. Cutting any excess fat out of the essay will also do wonders to give your essay more action.

**3)** **Isolate JUST the Verbs; Then JUST the Pronouns; then JUST the (Descriptive vs. Philosophical) Sentences; then JUST Punctuation**

The previous point asked you to transform weak verbs into dynamic ones. As I will point out later, that is critical when you reach the crisis section of your essay. But it is next to impossible to analyze all of your verbs unless you isolate them somehow. Look at the first paragraph of the final draft:

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A grandma sits in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

All the verbs highlighted in blue are active. All the ones in yellow are linking. Look at the distribution of JUST your verbs. Look at the proportion of JUST your verbs.

When you isolate out and color code JUST your verbs, you can get a much better sense of what you’ve used **and you can decide if you need to put more action in them.**

Most people are quite oblivious to any one part of speech in their essay. They don’t intend to affect mood or action by changing one part of speech. Your essay will stand out if you make sure every word has a clear function.

Isolating and analyzing pronouns are just as important.

**First paragraph of the final draft:**

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A grandma sits in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

You can draw the reader in or push him or her away simply by your use of pronouns. Don’t pay too much attention to the nitty-gritty when you write. Just write. But when it comes time to edit, go back one by one and isolate verbs, pronouns, and sentences to determine if each serves your overall purpose.

This technique will also help you avoid costly mistakes. You are, after all, making a case to a college that you are qualified to be there. A punctuation mistake will, therefore, be costly. Truth be told, my comma usage has always been suspect. I used to sort of hurl them into a sentence at random places like a panicked soldier hurling a hand grenade into oncoming troops. Highlighting just my punctuation marks allows me to make sure I used each mark correctly.

**LESSON NINE**

**4)** **Structure**

In the lesson on storytelling techniques, we discussed the need for some rising action, climax, and resolution. In the editing process, you can make sure that your statement clearly has each of these three structural elements. Go through and delineate these three portions of your essay. For example:

Rising action

Crisis

Resolution

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A grandma sits in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

**I pass an agency that imports foreign women as wives for farmers. Few Korean women want to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is simply too hard. Government signs cling to poles offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world because women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. And, I can understand why. They’ve been treated badly for the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**I enter a PC room and log onto Final Fantasy XI. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**And I say…**

**Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Empty the trash. Cut the wires. End the games.**

**Be your own Final Fantasy.**

This sample essay is quite tricky in that the rising action consumes much of the essay. That is NOT recommended. You should spend far more of the essay on the crisis and the resolution of that crisis than you do on the rising action.

I was hesitant to use this as the sample essay in this lesson for that reason alone. The reason I overrode myself is that the walk that this individual takes is a metaphorical one. Yes, he is walking through downtown Seoul, but he is also walking through his psychological and philosophical world. And each person or item he encounters in this winding rising action sets up the sudden announcement of his values.

All of the lines in the crisis stage of your essay have to be very **dynamic**. If a word, phrase, or the entire line does not reek of crisis in that section, think of editing it out or placing it elsewhere. If you look at only one thing in this lesson, look at how he edits that section of his essay. Anything that interrupts the flow gets cut. Anything that softens the blow he is striking gets cut. Sentences get shortened. The syntax tightens up.

Make sure your essay has a clear structure. As I’ve indicated multiple times, you can start with the crisis. Heck, you can even start with the concluding point of the essay. He could have started with his conclusion: **“Be your own Final Fantasy.”** It would have been quite a difficult task to generate as much drama in the essay if he had done so, however, but he could have pulled it off. Wherever you start, have a clear structure to your essay. In the editing process, you can make sure of that.

**5)** **Less Description, More Personal Philosophy**

**Be very suspicious of description that does not specifically tell the writer anything significant about your worldview or inner workings.**

Almost half of the descriptive lines that appear in the first few paragraphs of the first draft don’t make it to the final draft. The description simply does not communicate enough about the writer’s personal philosophy and psychology. And therefore, it distracts the reader and detracts from the personal statement.

The first paragraph of the first draft: The red text is a description that is eliminated in subsequent drafts.

**The first thing I encounter right after I get off the subway is the smell of Dunkin Donuts coffee. The next thing that slams into me is a 60-foot high sign offering sex changes by Ivy League graduate doctors. I think I will pass on that today. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of street like angry bridesmaids. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? Every face seem altered, sculpted and knifed. We are whiter than the Americans are now. We are more American than Americans now. Skirts are so high, what’s the point of wearing them at all? Women’s bones poke against their flesh attracting confused young men. With her butt overflowing into the gutter is the ‘duk’ grandma with piles of traditional colored rice cakes. They are dusty now, dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

The second paragraph of the first draft: The red text is a description that is eliminated in subsequent drafts.

**Down the street, a mob is chanting anti-American slogans as they hold up the effigy of a sick American cow. “Protect our people!” They yell. “Protect our diet!” Many are unemployed workers from the automotive industry. Some are students. A few are farmers. A small whirlwind of wrappers and cigarettes is swirling in front of them. I pass an agency that specializing in importing foreign women as wives for farmers; no Korean woman wants to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is too hard. Plastered on the window is a government sign offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the industrial world. Women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. I can understand why; they’ve been treated badly the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**It’s not that the descriptive lines that end up being cut are poorly written. They just don’t relate directly enough to the writer’s personal philosophy and psychology.**

Too much clutter on the set detracts from the point you, the director, are trying to make. That’s why the leading actor is usually set apart or highlighted in some manner in most shots. Surrounding them with too many extras may get them lost and therefore get the reader lost.

Remember, this is NOT a descriptive essay. Even though this particular essay seems to go against that caveat, it reveals a great deal about the writer’s personal philosophy and psychology.

I highlight the lines of the first paragraph of his final draft in blue. Even though most are descriptive, I explain how each pertains to his personal philosophy and worldview:

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers.** (The rot assails me from all directions.) **Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids.** (A foreign aesthetic of beauty seduces us.) **Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed**. (Many have given into this false notion of beauty and allowed themselves to be butchered in the process.) **We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now.** (We’ve taken Americanism to a new extreme.) **Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie**. (We kill ourselves in pursuit of this false notion of beauty, and we sell our souls for brand-name products.) **Welcome to Seoul 2009.** (Leave if you can. Get away from here as fast as you can away from here before you are tainted too.) **Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence?** (I bemoan the loss of traditional mores that once underpinned our culture.) **A grandma sits in the gutter.** (We have discarded our elders.) **In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes.** (We have discarded our tradition.) **They are dusty and stale.** (We have ignored our values.) **Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?** (Korea needs a champion of the old ways.)

If you use descriptive writing in your essay, it should be directly related to some aspect of your philosophy or psychology. Too often I encounter descriptive writing that does not pertain to what should be the central focus of the essay: who you are and how you got that way.

**6)** **Use of Questions**

Several questions that appear in earlier drafts are eliminated in the final draft. That includes the rhetorical question: **"Skirts are so high, what’s the point of wearing them at all?”** Rhetorical questions rarely work well. There are plenty of other questions that he poses throughout the essay that are genuine questions.

Questions that appear in the first paragraph of the first draft:

**The first thing I encounter right after I get off the subway is the smell of Dunkin Donuts coffee. The next thing that slams into me is a 60-foot high sign offering sex changes by Ivy League graduate doctors. I think I will pass on that today. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? Every face seems altered, sculpted and knifed. We are whiter than the Americans are now. We are more American than Americans now. Skirts are so high, what’s the point of wearing them at all? Women’s bones poke against their flesh attracting confused young men. With her butt overflowing into the gutter is the ‘duk’ grandma with piles of traditional colored rice cakes. They are dusty now, dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

There is a clear philosophical point being made with each of the questions in yellow text, less so the question in magenta.

**Where have you gone, Tradition? (I bemoan the loss of tradition)**

**Where have you gone, Innocence? (I bemoan the loss of innocence.)**

**Skirts are so high, what’s the point of wearing them at all?**

**Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it? (I will champion the old Korean, what’s left of it.)**

Too many questions make the writer seem timid. If you chose to insert questions in your writing, make sure they lead the reader to some definitive conclusion; you need to provide a clear answer.

**Final Thoughts**

**Print it Out**

It is next to impossible for me to edit on a computer screen. Sure, a computer is useful for certain aspects of the editing process like highlighting verbs and pronouns a certain color, but when it comes to the real editing, I suggest printing out a copy and editing on it.

**Getting Feedback**

Getting feedback can be good or bad. In my experience, I have to contend with a ton of negative feedback. “You can’t submit that!” one parent will declare. I often get calls from angry or concerned parents **BEFORE** their child submits an essay. (Once their child is accepted, those same parents are overjoyed.)

I take that as a sign that the essay is highly effective. I often have to plead with the parents to let their child submit an essay written using the guidelines outlined in this curriculum. Sometimes I succeed, but often I fail. If I do fail, their child inevitably submits a much more conventional essay that does not have a very strong impact and therefore will not help them get in. I have had students discard absolute masterpieces because their parents didn’t feel it made them look “good” enough. It is heartbreaking. I KNOW that a particular essay will give the student a much better shot of gaining admission, but I can’t submit it for them.

Parents mean well. Your English teachers mean well. They love you and want the best for you. They do. But they are often terrible judges of what constitutes an effective personal statement.

Show me a mother who won’t flinch when she sees in her son’s essay: “**Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it.”** Perhaps a VERY open-minded mother would celebrate that sort of statement from her child, but, sadly, most aren’t so open-minded.

So, expect pushback. If you won’t fight for your essay, it is unlikely it will get submitted. And, to fight for it, you have to believe in it. Believe in it enough to stand up to people who have more education and power than you. But when it comes to this statement, be confident that if you’ve followed the guidelines I set forth, you will have a much better shot of getting in than if you had taken a safer, more conventional approach.

That’s not to say you shouldn’t get feedback. The best feedback may come from your peers. They may enjoy and appreciate edgier writing than adults might. They may have some insights that could benefit you a great deal. But then again, they may think your writing doesn’t fit their notions of a standard essay.

Accept all feedback with a grain of salt. Stand firm against the forces of compromise and conformity. Think about how hard you fought to find a compelling incident that reveals your inner nature. If the story moves you, it’s very likely to move the reader.

**Lastly…Take a Break**

When I write without taking a break, after a while, the words on the page don’t necessarily reflect what I think are there. The four drafts above are from a four-month period. The individual didn’t touch the essay for weeks. He couldn’t. He was simply too close to the material. By taking a step back and then re-engaging your essay, you are likely to see it from a new, fresh perspective and catch things you may have missed the first time.

**LESSON TEN**

**Analysis of Final Draft of the Sample Essay**

Final Version (312 words)

**The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie. Welcome to Seoul 2009. Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? A grandma sits in the gutter. In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it?**

**I pass an agency that imports foreign women as wives for farmers. Few Korean women want to live in the countryside anymore. Life there is simply too hard. Government signs cling to poles offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world because women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. And, I can understand why. They’ve been treated badly for the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape.**

**I enter a PC room and log onto Final Fantasy XI. The room is packed. Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct. Who’s going to defuse this time bomb?**

**And I say…**

**Knife your face; I am happy with mine. Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it.**

**Empty the trash. Cut the wires. End the games.**

**Be your own Final Fantasy.**

My analysis of the final edit:

The first thing that hits me when I exit the subway is the smell of half-eaten fries, beer cans and greasy cheesesteak wrappers. **(This is not a standard hook.** **It doesn’t grab you, really demand your attention the way many other hooks do. And yet, it sets the tone of rot and disappointment very well.)** Plastic surgery clinics line both sides of the street like angry bridesmaids. **(This contains an effective simile. It also serves notice that this will be a very descriptive essay. In previous lessons, I warned you not to include too much description in your essay. Well, the exception to that is if your description also reveals a great deal about your identity: The writer doesn’t need to say he opposes the current aesthetic of beauty; he shows us he does through his descriptive writing.)** Every face seems altered, sculpted, knifed. **(This is the type of brutal line that does serve well as a hook. Embedded this far into paragraph one, it catches the reader off guard.)** We are whiter than Americans are now. We are more American than Americans are now. **(These two sentences starting with “We are…” Serve to cleanse the palate after the brutal morsel of the previous line; they also serve to sum up or draw a conclusion about what has taken place so far in the paragraph. The proximity of these two “boring” lines to the sharp line that precedes them is the type of syntactic variation that makes all three lines that much more effective.)** Starving women holding Gucci bags walk the streets like extras in a horror movie**. (This contains another effective simile. Two similes in one paragraph are normally one too many, but these two echo nicely off one another.)** Welcome to Seoul 2009. **(This is a great four-word sentence. It is powerful punctuation of his point. It tells us where the action takes place and does so in a manner that catches us off guard.)** Where have you gone, Tradition? Where have you gone, Innocence? **(His placement of these two questions gives closure to the paragraph and reveals a great deal about his inner workings. Also, note the use of direct address to the personified qualities of Tradition and Innocence.)** A grandma sits in the gutter. **(Another short line effectively alters the flow of the paragraph and keeps us on our toes.)** In front of her are piles of traditional rice cakes. They are dusty and stale. Who will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it? **(I don’t normally suggest ending any paragraph with a question. Doing so is not normally an effective thesis line. And a question does not normally segue well into the next paragraph. That being said, this particular question reads very much like the declarative: I will champion the old Korea, what’s left of it. And that is a fine thesis line.)**

**Pay attention to the pronouns that I highlight. They form neat couplets. Look how he proceeds from “I” to “we” to “you” to “her/they/it.” Varying your pronoun use in such a manner signals to the reader that you are acutely aware of their use and are employing them with a specific goal in mind.**

I pass an agency that imports foreign women as wives for farmers. **(Again he continues with far more description than I am normally comfortable with, but this has clearly become a metaphorical journey as well as a descriptive one.)** Few Korean women want to live in the countryside anymore. **(This simple declarative series perfectly sets up the next, short line.)** Life there is simply too hard. Government signs cling to poles offering $3000 to any couple that has a child. **(The active verb “cling” propels the action forward.)** Korea has the lowest birth rate in the world because women don’t want to be bothered by marriage or family. And, I can understand why. **(Perhaps you’ve been taught in school not to start sentences with “and” or “but.” By starting this sentence in such a conversational manner, he interjects himself back seamlessly.)** They’ve been treated badly for the last 5000 years and now is their chance to escape. **(Again, as far as thesis sentences go, this one hardly sums up the action or presents details about his identity the way that you would expect a good thesis line to do. But it does introduce the concept of escape, which is a perfect segue to the next line and the conclusion of the essay.)**

I enter a PC room and log onto *Final Fantasy XI*. **(So far he has been walking, but now he enters a clearly delineated space. Rooms matter. They matter very much. They are symbolic of areas of his psyche that he is exploring and revealing to you, the reader.)** The room is packed. **(Another four-word sentence is a clear indication of heightened action.)** Cigarette smoke hangs like a storm cloud in the air blocking out the light. **(This is the third simile he has used. It points to an impending crisis.)** We are the most wired nation in the world. I’m wired to you, you’re wired to me, and we’re all wired to self-destruct**. (Wonderful use of pronouns! Superb.)** Who’s going to defuse this time bomb? **(Another question in the thesis line is a huge risk. But it pays off here.)**

And I say… **(The world needs more three-word paragraphs!)**

Knife your face; I am happy with mine. **(Great use of the semicolon. Nice reference to the elements introduced in the first paragraph.)** Bleach your skin; I’m yellow and proud of it. **(Good mirror structure of the previous line.)** Grandma, rise up out of the gutter and dance with me; I’ll champion the old Korea, what’s left of it. **(Here is the declarative answer that was presaged in the previous thesis lines.)**

Empty the trash. Cut the wires. End the games. **(Great three-barreled exhortation. But to whom? Who is he is telling to do these things?** **He is talking to you the reader and talking to himself.)**

Be your own Final Fantasy. **(One of the best endings I have ever read. It brands him as the “Final Fantasy” essayist. When the admission committee members refer to this essay and this candidate, all they have to say is “the Final Fantasy guy” and everyone will know to whom they are referring. A superb last-impression to leave the reader.)**

[i] http://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/common-application-announces-2016-2017-essay-prompts

[ii] http://www.businessinsider.com/colleges-are-dropping-the-sat-2015-7

[iii] Matthew 5-7New International Version (NIV)

[iv] http://www.bartleby.com/141/strunk5.html#13

***The Art of Essay: “Why” Essays***

**Chaim Durst**

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There are two primary types of “why” essays: “Why your major?” and, “Why this school?” Some supplemental applications ask you to complete both types of “why” essays in separate essays; many schools combine both in a single essay; and some just ask you to complete one or the other. In order to effectively answer both types of “why” essays, it is important to first brainstorm your purpose, aptitude, and goals.

Just as the Common Application essay deals with identity, so too do the “why” essays. Your Common Application essay should answer the questions: **Who am I, and how did I get this way?** The “why” essays should answer the questions: **Who do I desire to be, and what steps do I need to take to become that person?** While it may seem as if those questions pertain more to the “why your major?” essay, they are also central to the “why this school?” essay. For that reason, once you have considered those fundamental questions, you can better address how a specific major or school can help you become the person you desire to be.

Many students rush to write the “why” essays without considering who they desire to be. Function follows purpose. So, how you function follows from your purpose. Rather than jumping into the specifics of majors, research opportunities, or professors at a given school, it is a worthwhile exercise to consider the more fundamental issue of your purpose.

So far, The Art of Essay curriculum asked you to brainstorm factors that shaped your identity. It then outlined storytelling techniques to help you reveal key aspects of your identity in a compelling manner to move the reader.

Now, let’s turn to who you desire to be. Once you have done so, you can then identify what major or aspects of a specific school can help you become the person you desire to be. It’s fine and natural not to know what you want to do in the future. You can better answer what you want to do or where you wish to study if you first consider who you want to be.

**LESSON ELEVEN**

**Who You Want to Be**

**Exercise One:**

**Describe five qualities of the person you want to be. Then, describe how those qualities would impact your growth.**

**1)** **I wish to be (feel) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**Being (feeling) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will impact my growth in the following ways:**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**2)** **I wish to be (feel) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**Being (feeling) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will impact my physical and mental health in the following ways:**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**3)** **I wish to be (feel) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**Being (feeling) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will impact my physical and mental health in the following ways:**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**4)** **I wish to be (feel) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**Being (feeling) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will impact my physical and mental health in the following ways:**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**5)** **I wish to be (feel) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**Being (feeling) \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ will impact my physical and mental health in the following ways:**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

One way to learn about who you want to be is to study the qualities of the people from literature, film, history, and life you admire most. To a certain extent, each reflects some quality you resonate with, see latent in yourself, or see yourself able to embody.

**In Literature and in Dreams**: I am drawn to a certain character type in literature, and it so happens that that same archetype commonly appears in my dreams: the sensitive, unpolluted, undamaged artist. She represents everything I admire and want to protect. This is the childlike, innocent self I’ve kept safe all these years deep within myself. This is a part of me I feared I had lost. So, I went searching after it regularly in my dreams and in fiction.

**In History**: I am fascinated by history, World War II in particular. I believe that World War II is the most significant event in history. We still live with the consequences of that war, be it events in the Middle East, Ukraine, or China.

Churchill, perhaps more than any other person in that conflict, exemplified those qualities I would like to embody: steadfastness, compassion, unbending devotion to justice, honor, and courage. Yes, he was deeply flawed – he stood for empire and class and was extremely arrogant – yet, he stood up to one of the greatest evils that has ever existed. And he defeated it.

**In Real Life**: The people I long to be around are at peace with themselves; they seem to exist within their own skin conflict-free. Their energy is elevated rather than tortured. Furthermore, I like to be around humble people, for they disarm my natural defensive mechanisms. I like people who are firm yet not pushy. I admire people who inspire, ennoble, and empower others.

All these qualities I recognize and admire in others – peace, elevated energy, humility, clarity, and vision – exist in me, even if these qualities are buried deep beneath the layers of self-doubt and insecurity I experience at times. They exist as seeds of potential that must be watered by healthy physical, emotional, and mental habits, which include study and work.

**Exercise Two:**

**Whether it be a literary or cinematic figure, a historical one, or someone you know, who inspires you? What qualities does that person have that you would like to embody?**

**From literature or film you admire \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**You admire that person’s:**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**From history you admire \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**You admire that person’s:**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**From life you admire \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**You admire that person’s:**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**What do you admire most about yourself? What are your strengths? What are you most proud of? When historians write your biography, what aspects of your character will they celebrate?**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

I have found that this exercise is an indirect way to answer: “Who do I want to be?” No matter where my life has taken me, I’ve never stopped loving Churchill. And just as he fought a great historical darkness, I can and will continue to fight ignorance in myself and in society. Just as he used his language to uplift and inspire others to champion the democratic ideals, I too can use my language to empower, uplift, and inspire myself and others to champion the best within ourselves. The scale and context may be vastly different, but I can embody the characteristics I admire most in others because I have the ability to recognize and honor them in others.

Because I am inspired by literature and language, it only makes sense that I chose a major that required me to learn multiple languages and delve deeply into literature. I am inspired by ideals and ethics, so it’s logical that I took multiple courses on philosophy and religion. And, because I am deeply moved by heroic characters in history, I took two semester’s worth of history courses.

**Based on the answers you provided in Exercise Two, what major or field of study and research can help you embody the qualities you admire most – in others and yourself?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**How can this major or field of study and research help you embody those qualities you admire most in others and yourself?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**Growth**

Fundamentally, we seek to learn in order to grow some aspect of ourselves. I often tell students who work with me, “I can’t necessarily affect what college accepts you. What I can do is help you grow as a person, thinker, and as a writer if you are interested in growing in those areas.” Few of us, however, stop to consider how we wish to grow. The clearer we know how we wish to grow, the more clearly we can identify a school, courses, and professors who can facilitate that growth.

**Exercise Three:**

**In what ways do you desire to grow the most?**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**You desire to grow your mind in the following ways:**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**You desire to grow your character in the following ways:**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**You desire to grow your aptitude or skills in the following ways:**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**What kinds of courses can help you grow in the areas you indicate above?**

**A)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**B)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**C)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

As a student of language, I wanted to grow my understanding of how the mind encodes and stores information. For that reason, I took courses in cognitive psychology. And because I was intent on broadening my understanding of “the good life,” I studied the work of ancient and modern philosophers.

**Aptitude Test**

Students often feel daunted by the prospect of life after high school. All of a sudden, they have unlimited choices, unlimited directions they can head in. It is often useful, before setting out on the post-graduation journey, to take stock of your aptitude and skills. That process can often give a good indication of the most advantageous direction to go in

To that end, I often urge students to take an aptitude test. Doing so can reveal aspects of yourself, in particular strengths and predilections, you may be unaware of. I would like to include the first few paragraphs of one of my favorite “why” essays a student wrote after taking such a test.

***Why Northwestern***

**I took a 485-question aptitude test this past week and the top three recommendations were: funeral director, pipe layer, and printing press worker. What do these three occupations have in common? Seemingly nothing. But a closer examination reveals that each requires the need to understand and care for clients. That’s psychology.**

**No matter what field I choose, I need an understanding of how the human heart and mind function. Since childhood, I’ve thought about becoming a diplomat to resolve disputes: I’d need to see from each side’s point of view and convey empathy. I’d like to work for the United Nations. And, to thrive there, I’ll need to read people well.**

**Recently, I saw and was fascinated by a documentary on how music affects the mind, called *The Musical Brain*. I was pleasantly surprised to find the course Music and the Mind in Northwestern’s psychology department course listings. Courses like Psychology of Beauty, as well as Consumerism and Consumer Behavior: A Psychology Perspective, caught my attention because of their cross-cultural implications for human psychology. Whether in the East or West, music, art, and entertainment are deeply embedded in today’s modern society; how they impact the mind and psyche of individuals and groups are what I’d like to learn more about.**

**----**

**I am not sure what I’ll be doing five or ten years from now. I may very well end up being a funeral director, but at least I’ll know that Northwestern prepared me to understand and care for my clients – dead or alive.**

As you can see from this essay, evaluating your capacity or strengths can reveal possible paths to follow in college and your life beyond. You can then elaborate on these paths and link them to specific aspects of a school in the “why” essay.

**Exercise Four:**

**What are you best at?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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**What is your greatest skill? In what ways do you demonstrate this or use this skill?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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**When do you feel most empowered or “in the zone?” What activities are you performing when you feel that way?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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**What type of profession will allow you to perform at your best? What type of work will allow you to thrive?**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

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I took an aptitude test while I was in college. The test I took indicated I would thrive as a teacher. I don’t like fortune tellers or palm readers, and I considered aptitude as a form of divination. So, I disregarded the results of the test I took. After I graduated, I launched a career in business. It wasn’t until many years later that I tried teaching after becoming increasingly disillusioned by business. I loved teaching from the very first class I taught. And I love it still some twenty years later. So, from my experience, I think aptitude tests are often imprecise, but I’ve come to trust them far more than I used to.

**Purpose**

Purpose gives us strength. It underscores the choices we make. It reinforces our will and is the destination that guides our internal and external GPS system. I have found that the ideal way to reinforce my self-worth is to find something I can dedicate myself to. **I gain a sense of meaning the more I align myself with and dedicate myself to that purpose.**

Even though purpose plays such a central role, few people stop to evaluate or define their purpose. People tend to live aimless lives because they don’t aim their lives.

Purpose does not need to be something grand. In fact, I’ve defined my purpose quite simply: grow. Grow my compassion. Grow my understanding of my inner workings and the human condition. Grow my capacity to overcome. Grow my capacity to create. Grow my capacity to love and grow my circle of love.

Even though I have defined my purpose as growth, I chose to grow at a safe pace.

It takes constant vigilance to keep my purpose front and center of my consciousness. I liken it to a morality play. Purpose is the protagonist fighting to stay on stage while he is being yanked offstage by very real and very forceful antagonists: Fear, Self-doubt, Attachment, etc. Unless I identify and reinforce my purpose, I will most certainly lose sight of it and lose balance.

In many ways, **growth is the opposite of escape.** I choose to live without constantly escaping who I am and how I feel.

Because growth is my purpose, I chose activities that help me fulfil it: Even though I graduated college over twenty-five years ago, I still fill my day with activities that will help me grow. When I am faced with a choice, I ask myself: Will this help me grow, or is this a form of escape?

**Exercise Five:**

**What is your primary purpose?**

**1)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ contributes to or strengthens your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**What is your secondary purpose?**

**2)** **\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ contributes to or strengthens your \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.**

**What activities, specifically what kinds of courses or research opportunities, will help you align yourself with your purpose?**

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**How will that field of study or research help you align yourself with your purpose?**

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**This is perhaps the most important question in the “why” section of the Art of Essay; for, the more clearly you envision your purpose and imagine how your studies or work can help you accomplish that purpose, the more convincing your “why” essays will be to yourself and the admissions readers.**

It is important not to put too much pressure on yourself regarding your purpose. Purpose is flexible; it can change based on your specific circumstances. And, no matter how you define your purpose, that is the correct answer for you at this time.

**LESSON TWELVE**

**Why Your Major?**

In the previous exercises, you have detailed your purpose, aptitude, and goals. By doing so, you have painted a picture of who you desire to be and begun to touch on what major, profession, or research will allow you to become that person. In this section, you will clearly make the connection between your major and your ideal self.

Note that the “why” essays are an opportunity for you to tell a story. The mind is conditioned to expect a beginning, middle, and end for stories, so it may help you to write your essay using that framework.

**Exercise Six A: The Genesis of Your Interests**

**When did you first begin to experience joy exploring your intended major?**

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**How did you discover you liked what you intend to major in? Did you observe or interact with a parent, teacher, mentor, or friend who helped foster your interest?**

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**Exercise Six B: How You Currently Pursue Your Interests**

**How have you demonstrated your interest in your intended major or field of study? List specific hobbies or activities related to your interest.**

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**Exercise Six C: How You Plan to Pursue Your Interests in the Future**

**How do you see yourself engaging in your field of interest post-graduation?**

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Special Note:

It’s normal and understandable not to know what you want to study. Many people enter college undecided. College is a time to explore a range of interests to determine what brings you the most joy and what you have aptitude for. Colleges are not necessarily looking for you to make an ironclad commitment in your “why this major” essay. They want to learn more about you: your personal philosophy, your world-view, and your inner working by learning how you express these in tangible ways.

If you don’t have a specific field in mind, consider this question:

If you have a free day and can spend your time any way you choose, what would you do? Be specific. Instead of surfing the internet, say where you would travel online.

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Now that you have created an outline of a story that has a beginning, middle, and end, consider possible majors or fields of study that correspond to or include your core interests.

**Major A: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

**How does this major correspond to or include your core interests:**

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**Major B:**

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**How does this major correspond to or include your core interests:**

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Consider this first draft of a “why this major” essay that a student wrote after answering the above questions:

**Vino**

**As a kid, I spent most of my summers entertaining myself. I didn’t go to camp and didn’t have video games, so I went looking for adventure in the woods and tinkered with things around my house. One summer day, I went with my parents to visit a bankrupt winery. While playing in the empty production rooms and unpruned vines, I fell in love with wine and winemaking. While my parents didn’t buy the winery, it stayed with me, and I began to immerse myself in a world of wine.**

**In middle school, winebusiness.com became my most visited website. On some days, I would spend entire afternoons tracking grape prices on my laptop and fantasize about buying wine racks to store my homemade wine. In my thirst for more knowledge, I toured countless wineries in the Hudson Valley, and bugged their vintners with my questions. During these trips, I even managed to embarrass my then thirteen-year-old self, referring to Merlot as “Mer-Lot” and struggling with pronouncing Gewürztraminer, which I ended up just calling the “German grape.” After I had harvested sufficient knowledge, I started to make wine myself.**

**Starting with kits off of Amazon, I progressed to fresh juice, and then finally to grapes. I went on Craigslist and bought used equipment: a couple dozen carboys (big glass fermentation vessels), pumps, and an old cast iron wine press. My unfinished basement became my winery, with cases of empty bottles lined up against the walls. Packets of yeast, sodium benzoate, and potassium metabisulphite were strewn across an old wooden table in the far right corner, with graduated cylinders and their accompanying hydrometers always nearby. Carboys, littered the middle of the room, were full of colors ranging from blackish-purple to greenish-gold.**

**During my self-described “bottling days,” I would rush home from school, excited to bottle thirty bottles of Pinot Noir. I loved pumping the rich purple liquid into my shiny spinach-green Bordeaux bottles under the yellow light of the incandescent bulb overhead. While bottling, I was in heaven amidst the wonderfully rich aromas of sweet, semi-fermented grapes. After corking the shiners (finished bottles without labels), I would slump on the floor, tired, but content with the two-and-a-half dozen finished bottles by my side.**

**While I couldn’t drink my creation because I was eight years under the age limit, I could smell it. After perfecting the swirl of wine in my glass, and opening an untold number of bottles, I trained my nose to detect the tropical notes in Sauvignon Blanc and the dark fruit flavors in Cabernet Sauvignon. I kept a tasting -or in my case, smelling- journal to record my findings. After a while, I started collecting heavy reds to age, knowing that they would be ready when I was thirty or so. Once, I begged my dad to drive an hour and a half to the nearest Trader Joe’s to buy a caseful of the infamous Two Buck Chucks (grocery stores can’t sell wine in NY), so I could experience it myself.**

**This love eventually led to my business, and to all that I’ve accomplished so far. I could have never have connected the dots that led to Raw Beverages at the time, but in retrospect, building a grape juice business was the perfect next step. Back then, however, I was just following whatever I thought was natural for me to do. I didn’t know why exactly I pursued wine; I just did, and I was happy while doing it. In the future, I will continue to follow this intuition, without knowing where it’ll eventually lead. I have faith that I’ll end up exactly where I’m supposed to be. Even if I don’t, at least I can enjoy the process of getting there, wine in tow.**

I found elements of that essay compelling but a bit one-dimensional, so I urged the student to merge this with insights into his personal philosophy and inner-workings. The result helped him gain admission to an Ivy League university. The more you can reveal about your identity, the more likely you can move the reader. Furthermore, you want to stand out. Keep that in mind when you craft your “why” essays.

**The Magic of Creation**

**I fantasize about grapes, not women. Transforming one thing into another is magical. It amazes me each time I do so; I keep waiting for the trick to be revealed, for the act to end. But it never does.**

**Packets of yeast, sodium benzoate, and potassium metabisulphite are strewn across an old wooden table in the far right corner. Graduated cylinders and their accompanying hydrometers stand guard nearby.**

**I don’t feel the need to drink, but I do feel the urge to brew. I brew because I love the feeling of creating value. Remember when you were a child. Dad would set up that artificial tree. It was naked and vulnerable. One day, it was simply a plastic tree. The next it bore presents. There was always some otherworldly presence at play. Even if it were just your father. Especially if it were just your father. Dad did something magical: He changed your world.**

**The rich purple pours into my shiny spinach-green Bordeaux bottles under the yellow light of the incandescent bulb overhead.**

**Magic is crafting the world around me to reflect myself. I don’t mean imposing my will on the world. Rather, to birth beauty out of my subconscious – its ambitions, worries, and archetypes. When I create, I transfer my life essence into my work. There is a super-human aspect to this, something godly. That wonderment gripped me as I stared at the unpruned vines and abandoned production rooms in that bankrupt winery: Rome in decay, echoes of greatness, majesty I could resurrect.**

**I trained my nose to detect the tropical notes in Sauvignon Blanc and the dark fruit flavors in Cabernet Sauvignon.**

**Creation is power. As a kid, you don’t feel that you have a say in the world, that you can incite change. After all, you are just a kid. That’s what first attracted me to brewing. I suddenly felt as if I mattered. I was capable, no longer insignificant. I could change things. I could carve my initials on the tree of life.**

**I embarrassed my thirteen-year-old self. I referred to Merlot as “Mer-Lot” and struggled with pronouncing Gewürztraminer, which I ended up just calling the “German grape.”**

**But creation causes suffering. I was rejected in many ways. They were rejecting the raw me, not Raw Juice. People would hang up on me mid-sentence and escort me out of their stores. And the rejection extended to my social circle as well. After my TEDx talk had gone online, people started to mock it. Creation is confronting. It’s a mirror to reveal how you are or aren’t using your creative energy. Some don’t take kindly to the image I reflect back. That, and the herd ostracizes the outlier.**

**I was just following whatever I thought was natural for me to do. I didn’t know why exactly I was pursuing wine; I just was, and I was happy as I did.**

**But my psyche interprets rejection as success. I’ve given life to a pure, good part of myself, and in doing so, I’ve transformed. I look forward to a lifetime of such transformation, one bottle at a time.**

This is a very sophisticated, artistic version of his “why this major” essay. Essentially, he is describing what he loves doing: the business of brewing. You can see how he lifted elements of his “Vino” essay and placed them in the indented paragraphs in his “Magic of Creation” essay. He intersperses these indented paragraphs with un-indented paragraphs that reference his personal philosophy and inner workings.

**Putting It All Together**

Look back over your answers to the questions in exercise six. Pick essential details about the genesis of your interests, the maintenance of those, and future plans you may have that involve them. The more detailed you are, the more sincere you will sound. And that is key: Be sincere.

Always write what is truthful and meaningful, not what you think the reader wants to hear. Don’t try to inflate your interests or your pursuit of them. The reader can tell if you are exaggerating. Always be true to who you are. The reader will be moved by the expression and pursuit of your truth.

**Exercise Seven:**

**Pick essential details about the genesis of your interests, the maintenance of those, and future plans you may have that involve them.**

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**Then, try to link these to specific aspects of your top-choice school. Is there a professor, project, or course at the school that can help you explore and develop your interests?**

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Here is a sample “why this major” essay that highlights the author’s key interests and effectively links them to specific aspects of a university:

**Why My Major at Penn**

**Though not practically apparent, mathematics plays a pivotal role in improving society. Take, for example, the ways math contributes to the field of medicine. While math alone may not cure cancer, it is instrumental in the development of the tools and medications that do.**

**The work of research mathematician Kristin Rae Swanson sheds light on this potentially profound connection between math and medicine. Swanson developed an equation that predicts a tumor’s growth path by analyzing the speed of tumor division through brain tissue. Her software program can pinpoint where a tumor will grow and predict how long a patient is likely to live. The work of those like Swanson and the overarching symbiosis between the fields of math and medicine have inspired me to pursue applied mathematics at the University of Pennsylvania.**

**While Swanson’s expertise is in brain cancer, I hope to develop mine in the field of sports medicine. As an avid swimmer who trains with a team that competes nationally, I have experienced firsthand how much of a toll competitive sports can take on athletes’ bodies. As professional athletes continue to improve, amateur athletes face the pressure to keep up. I witness this on my own team, Ridgefield Aquatic Club, where we train up to ten times a week.**

**Our fault is that we over-train and, as a result, often get injured. Most athletes do not understand that hard training breaks the body down. It is actually rest that makes the body stronger. Typically, we try to “train through the pain,” which only worsens our condition. Though my studies and passion for sports medicine have helped me become a spokesperson for the importance of rest, my own brother suffered a related injury. He started swimming young, excelled, and joined the varsity team as a seventh-grader. Within two months of relentless training, he suffered a hip flexor tear. My brother was pushed too hard, underplayed his pain to avoid ridicule, and never took enough rest. Now, as a high school freshman, while his hip has healed, he is constantly playing catch-up; he still faces the effects of that injury and of nine months of lost training.**

**I am passionate about educating the public at large about the importance of rest and recovery, but first, I need to educate myself. I am specifically interested in majoring in mathematics because I believe it will provide me with the fundamental knowledge and background to pursue future research in sports medicine. I wish to combine math and sports medicine to speed up both the rest phase of training and the recovery phase of an injury. I hope to uncover ways to use the rate of synthesis of glycogen stores and mitochondrial enzyme systems within muscle cells to determine the optimal amount of rest needed – enough to safely return to training, but not too much as to allow the muscles to atrophy. While athletes’ well-being should be of utmost importance, it is often their results that are the main focus. I want to help make athletes’ road to success as painless as possible, and I believe I need rigorous quantitative research and insights to support my mission.**

**At the University of Pennsylvania, I plan to embark on a path of mathematical training that will enable me to abstract a problem and explore it further. Upon developing a solid foundation, I am eager to pursue Undergraduate Research in Mathematics and take advantage of Penn’s interdisciplinary academic opportunities. I will be able to integrate the ideas from the courses in my major and at the School of Nursing to gain the medical insight I need to meaningfully combine mathematics and medicine.**

**Mathematics has the ability to heal, solve, build, and predict. Swanson’s model has been accurate in predicting cancer progressions in over 400 patients. I aspire to benefit as many people and more by helping athletes reach their full potential while preserving their health and well-being.**

**Concluding thoughts on “why this major” essay**

The “why this major” essay is your opportunity to link your aptitude and interests to your purpose. As you discuss what you wish to do, you need to reveal who you desire to be; every line should pertain to your personal philosophy and inner workings. Furthermore, make your essay a work of art. Everything you create reveals who you are, so infuse your essay with your idiosyncratic personality. Finally, be sincere. Write what is truthful and meaningful to you, not what you feel the reader wants to hear.

**LESSON THIRTEEN**

**Why This School?**

**Detective Work**

Now that you have determined what you are best at, what aspects of yourself you desire to grow, and what your purpose is, you have to do some detective work to find what institution or program can best facilitate your growth and your purpose. Some students choose schools based on fame or reputation. I recommend, however, that students do detective work to find a school and a program within that school that best matches their aptitude, ones that will help them grow most in areas they desire to grow in.

The “why” essay is your opportunity to tell a school admissions officers why you wish to go there. In order to sound convincing, you need to find legitimate reasons why that school is a good match for you – the more specific those reasons, the better.

Imagine if you wanted to date a person for the next four years. First, you would need to find out if the person was a good match for you. Then, you would need to convince that person you are a good match for them. The more specific your proposal, the more convincing it would be. Admissions readers are on the lookout for “cut and paste” essays, ones that could be submitted to any school. Just so, a prospective date would surely reject you if your proposal letter was general enough that it could be sent to any number of people simply by substituting a different name.

**Finding a Good Match**

Looking back over the answers you gave in the previous exercise, you should have a general idea of the field you wish to pursue. If you are still undecided, then pick the top two or three fields you are considering. Once you have done so, look through the course listings of the department(s) you’ve chosen and identify several courses that you are excited to take. Then, write down the names of the professors who teach those courses.

**Exercise Eight Part A:**

**Your top choice school:**

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**The department or departments that you feel will help you grow and fulfil your potential the most:**

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**The three most interesting courses within that department or those departments.**

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**The professors who teach those classes:**

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What makes a university great? What makes it unique? While some universities have world-famous labs, most universities have similar facilities. Primarily, it is the professors that make a certain school unique. So, one by one, look carefully at the professors you just wrote down and study what they have written and what projects they are currently conducting. They may also be notable for the work they have done or other accomplishments. Naturally, if you wish to go into art, music, or architecture, it will be helpful to look into what that professor has created.

**Exercise Eight Part B:**

**A professor you wish to study with at that school:**

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**Something the professor has written and why it inspires you: (If you are an art or music major, please mention a work of art or music that the professor has created instead and why it inspires you.)**

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**A project that professor is working on and why it inspires you:**

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I realize it may take time to look up what a certain professor has written in a scholarly journal and read it, but if you do such research, you can genuinely find out who is doing work in areas you are passionate about. Doing such research will allow you to pre-screen teachers, classes, and the school itself – before you get there. I wish I had done this type of research before I went to college. I had no idea what my professors’ strengths were or in what areas of research they were focused, so, I floundered about a great deal, wasting time, energy, and money.

Exercise Eight is the heart of the “why this school” essay. But it is best to complete it after you have taken the previous steps of identifying areas you wish to grow, your capacity, and your purpose. You can do a much more convincing job of discussing a department, class, professor, or project if you can convey how those will further your growth and your purpose.

**Personal Contact**

Over the years, students who reach out to professors, alumni, club directors, or others at a university with GENUINE questions, find out if the university is a good fit and can craft the “why” essay far more effectively than those who don’t.

When I have students who are interested in hacking, I urge them to email the head of the hacking club at their desired university. When I have students who are interested in architecture, art, or design, I urge them to look up alumni in these areas, study their work, and contact the alumni with specific questions. Aren’t you interested to find out how graduates feel their time at a school helped them grow? Sadly, most students do not take the time to do this type of detective work. And it shows on their “why” essays.

A letter to a professor does not have to be long; it does not have to be flattering; it just has to be sincere.

For example:

**Dear Professor \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_,**

**I am currently a rising senior at \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and have had a longstanding interest in Artificial Intelligence. I have particular concerns about the ethical considerations of AI in the field of medicine; I’m planning on majoring in computer science and minoring in pre-med. From the research I’ve done, it seems you have similar concerns about the applications of AI. Your paper “The Potential and Peril of AI in the Operating Room” raised numerous issues I had not considered such as the gamut of emotional responses machines elicit from surgical patients.**

**As a freshman, can I take your class “The Brave New World of AI”? I’m also wondering what prerequisites are necessary before I could participate in the project you co-direct with Professor \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. Finally, I’m wondering who else in the computer science department is also doing research in the field of machines in medicine.**

**Thank you in advance for your help.**

**Sincerely,**

**\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**

Will the professor respond? Perhaps not. But that’s almost beside the point. In order to write such a letter, you have to have done the very research necessary to determine if the university is a good fit for you. You have identified a professor you would like to study with and a project you would like to work on. It is likely by reading up on topics in your field of interest you can gain insights into real-world applications or issues related to that subject. And by doing so, you can better direct the time and energy you spend in college.

And, as it pertains to the “why” essay, this type of research will allow you to answer sincerely why you wish to attend a certain school using specific details that only fit that school. You can rephrase your letter to the professor as the core of your “why” essay.

**I am eager to study with Professor \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. I have had a longstanding interest in Artificial Intelligence. I have particular concerns about the ethical considerations of AI in the field of medicine; I’m planning on majoring in computer science and minoring in pre-med. From what I could research I’ve done, it seems Professor \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ has similar concerns about the applications of AI. His paper “The Potential and Peril of AI in the Operating Room” raised numerous issues I had not considered such as the gamut of emotional responses machines elicit from surgical patients. While I cannot take his class “The Brave New World of AI” as a freshman, I will as soon as I can. I am also interested in contributing to the project that Professors \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ are conducting in the field of machines in medicine.**

This explains exactly why you wish to attend that university. It is clear to the reader that you have done the research to determine if this school is a good fit for you. There is NO way this content could fit in a “cut and paste” essay; almost every line references the university in a natural and organic way.

That last line is especially important. While it is important to make your “why” essay specific to the university, you should do so in a natural and organic way.

**Exercise Nine:**

**Draft a letter to a professor that references a class they are teaching, a work they have published or created, or a research project they are conducting. Ask a specific question that will genuinely help you determine if the field, department, professor, class, or project will help you grow and fulfil your purpose.**

**You may also choose to contact the director of a club you find intriguing. Ask a specific question about the club to determine if it is an organization that can help you grow and fulfil your purpose.**

**You may choose to contact an alumni of that school. To do so you may need to contact the alumni office at the school to find a graduate in a specific field, particularly one open to talking with prospective students. Ask the alumni questions about their work, specifically how their studies affect or inform their career and work.**

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**LESSON FOURTEEN**

**Things to Consider While Writing the “Why This School” Essay**

**Avoid Hyperbole and Superlatives**

There is no “best” when it comes to colleges. So, “I’m interested in \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because it has the best computer science department” rings flat. When I edit students’ essays, I challenge every superlative or hyperbolic statement.

What sounds more sincere:

**“You are the most generous person in the world.”**

**Or,**

**“I was moved when you rolled down your window outside Whole Foods and gave a bag of chips to the lady holding the ‘Need Help’ sign.”**

The first statement is not true. It’s likely Bill Gates or Warren Buffet is the most generous person in the world. The second statement is understated yet filled with specifics that are real.

The first statement is intangible. The reader does not know how you define generosity. The second statement tells the reader exactly what kinds of generosity moves you.

So rather than writing, “I want to attend \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_ because it has the most outstanding computer science department,” you might write the type of detailed paragraph I highlight above.

**Don’t Put Yourself Down or Exaggerate Your Ability or Accomplishments**

This point is an extension of the previous one. People tend to be put off or turned off by excessive humility or excessive pride. It is preferable to be measured in discussing your weaknesses or strengths.

You can rephrase your weaknesses as areas you desire to grow. For, that is the primary purpose of study. You can rephrase your strengths as tools that will allow you to grow. After you write each line of your essay, ask yourself: “Is this a measured expression of my strengths and weaknesses? Would I be put off if someone described themselves in this manner?

**Avoid Statistics/Does This Line Sound like It Comes from a Marketing Brochure?**

Your university graduates more Nobel Laureates than any other university.

Your university has the highest graduation rate.

Your university invested $\_\_\_ in research facilities.

All those read as if they were lifted from a marketing brochure for the university. While such lines can indirectly relate to your reasons for wanting to go to a certain university, they don’t tell the reader much at all about you. They certainly don’t convince the reader you’ve made much effort to research how the school is a good fit.

**Putting It All Together**

Once you have identified classes, professors, and/or projects that will help you grow the most, you need to reference them in an organic and natural manner. That forms the heart of the “why” essay.

Just name dropping won’t help you all that much. You need to establish a genuine connection to the classes, professors, and projects you mention. This is the general template I suggest my students follow:

1. Establish a central interest of yours.
2. Mention any contact you’ve had with professors, clubs, alumni etc.
3. Mention classes and professors and explain why they match your interests and goals.
4. Mention projects, ideally run by the professor you mentioned earlier. These projects need to further the interests and goals you previously mentioned.

Here are several paragraphs of a “why Cornell” essay that follow that template effectively.

**Why Cornell**

**One of the first things I did when investigating Cornell was to explore the hacking club. I immediately contacted them and solved the challenge offered as criteria for admission to the club.**

**I am excited to study at Cornell after researching the professors and the classes offered there as well. CS 5846 - Decision Theory I, a joint CS/ECON class, looks fascinating. I like that it combines CS, in particular, game theory, with philosophy, and psychology, and that it focuses on “decision theory paradoxes” revealed through experiments. I’ve found that experimentation is the best way to expose structural flaws in systems, including logical ones.**

**Another class that stands out is CS 6815 - Pseudorandomness and Combinatorial Constructions. I love game theory and combinatorics. I see everything as a game. I am often very specific in my goals; when doing any type of exercise, my goal is to improve by a specific, measurable increment. My mindset is such that when I encounter theoretical games, which are often much simpler than IRL games and only require thinking, I feel challenged yet unfulfilled.**

**Being so involved in hacking competitions, I desire to take: CS 6832 - Applied Cryptography. This sounds interesting, exciting, and helpful – well mostly USEFUL for ctf's. I rarely see applied CS in course listings for colleges. I am interested in doing research into applied cryptography. I desire to grow my ability in the area of research.**

**In terms of projects, PROJECT 4 (REU): Optimality and Uncertainty, directed by Alex Vladimirsky looks stimulating! "Optimal Control Theory" describes my very approach to problem solving: that is, a discrete approach to mathematical structures.**

The student establishes his interests early on; mentions contacts he has had with a club at the university; links specific classes to his interests; and references a professor and a project that resonate with his interests. Every mention of a specific class is sincere and links to the students interests in an organic and natural way.

In this next sample essay, the writer follows the steps of the template in a slightly different order:

**Why Penn**

**I read incessantly as a child; encyclopedias and scientific almanacs opened my mind and heart to science. In high school, I gravitated towards science. Its methodical, yet mysterious nature captivated my logical mind and incited my passion for discovery. I thrive in science classes, absorbing topics from electron configuration to the nervous system. In particular, I favor the hands-on nature of acid-base titrations and dissection labs.**

**Outside the classroom, I have explored science and sought to contribute to its advancement through medical research and patient support. Medicine exposed me to the human condition. I volunteer at a local hospital, where I experience the honor and responsibility that comes with caring for others. Research taught me the importance of patience and diligence. I didn’t make any grand breakthroughs in cancer research, nor did I expect to. But I celebrated each discovery I made.** (These first two paragraphs establish his interests. It starts out with a broad interest in science and then narrows to focus on why he is motivated to study medicine.)

**I hope to continue my scientific studies at Penn by majoring in Biology and benefitting from Penn’s renowned biology department and extensive research opportunities in biology. I admire Penn’s submatriculation program. I can benefit from the research experience and difficult curricula, which will undoubtedly prepare me for my future career. I wish to interact with professors such as Dr. Arthur Dunham, whose research on climate change fascinates me. With grandparents who live in a sea of smog and cousins who endured both floods and droughts, I would love to understand and combat this blight.** (The writer specifies what he wishes to study at Penn and makes a specific reference to a professor whom he desires to study with.)

**As an aspiring medical researcher and physician, I desire to foster change and help people in need. I can best do so by gaining a mindset that can understand and adapt to complex problems and varying viewpoints. Courses such as “Management and Economics of the Pharmaceutical, Biotech, and Medical Device Industries” will expand my perspective on medicine, allowing me to accomplish such goals.** (The writer references a specific course at Penn that will allow him to grow and that is aligned with his core interests.)

**In the summer of 2016, I participated in Penn’s Summer Medical Program. Attending lectures led by Penn clinicians, I empathized with their sleep deprivation and resonated with their purposeful passion. Program director Dr. Gregg Lipschik introduced me to numerous opportunities for medical research at and around Penn, including Penn’s Center for Undergraduate Research and Fellowships, and the nearby Children’s Hospital, VA Medical Center, and Penn’s hospital. I hope to shape my understanding of scientific research and expand my laboratory skills at Penn.** (The writer mentions several direct contacts he has had with the university and professors at the university.)

**With access to submatriculation program and numerous research opportunities, I believe that Penn can empower me academically and afford me the opportunity to achieve my goals.**

Final Checklist:

* Can this essay be submitted to numerous schools just by substituting different names?
* Do you reference the work of a specific professor? Do you make a compelling case to study with a particular professor?
* Do you reference any contact you have had with professors, club leaders, or alumni? Does the contact sound genuine and organic?
* Do you reference a specific project or lab you would like to participate in at the university? Do you indicate how the project or lab can help you grow in specific ways?
* Do you avoid hyperbole and superlatives?
* Do you Put Yourself Down or Exaggerate Your Ability or Accomplishments?

Concluding thoughts:

The “why this school” essays are your opportunity to express in clear detail: “**Who do I desire to be, and what steps do I need to take to become that person?”** This essay is your opportunity to express your interest in a school by noting contacts you’ve had with the school. You can further express this interest by referencing a professor, classes, and research opportunities at that school you envision will help you grow into the person you desire to be. Any such references should be organic and understated. Use this essay to show self-knowledge and vulnerability without putting yourself down. The more research you do into a school, the more sincere your statement will likely be. The more research you do, the more you can evaluate if the school is a good match for you.