

College Essays: It's a Process

Using the Art of Writing to Get What You Want

Instructions: This is a process. And this process is essential—trust it because it will make you think and help you produce an impactful piece of writing! Even if you only have 250 words to finish your college application, spend some time working on those 250 words to make your application stand out. Go after your dreams, get what you want, and use the essay to convince your audience to accept you.

STEP 1: Pre-Writing so Drafting is Easy

AUDIENCE—Who is your audience?

Who has power or influence to accept or hire you?	What do these people care about?

FORM—Look at the instructions to determine form. How many words should it be? _____
 What other rules or instructions do you see? Write them here:

TONE—This comes from your attitude, the way you think about the issue. How will your authentic and unique voice come through? You are writing a personal narrative with a more casual tone, academic and sophisticated, which would be appropriate for your purpose and audience. First-person and contractions are okay.

RESEARCH—Research the university. Below are research questions to get you started. You can think of others.

Research Questions	Answers
What is their mission and/or vision statement? What do they value? <i>For example, the Air Force Academy places an emphasis on leadership. Stanford wants students who are passionate about learning. A Christian or Jewish school will likely want someone whose faith is of utmost importance.</i> What clubs, activities, sports, and recreational activities will you want to do? <i>Be specific about what the school offers that you could potentially join. (This info will help you write your supplementary essay questions; for example: "Why do you want to attend Purdue University?"</i>	

BRAINSTORM—

1. You already thought about your audience, you've done some research, and you studied the prompt. Based on your knowledge, brainstorm and list qualities the institution wants in applicants.

Qualities the institution desires

2. Now let's brainstorm some of your best qualities. You can:
 - a. take a personality test at <http://16personalities.com>. What language is used to describe your strengths?
 - b. Ask three people that know you well to give you three words that describe you. Sort and categorize those words to write a phrase or word that describes you (e.g. a problem-solver).

Qualities that describe me

****Read sample essays to understand the form that helps people remember you.****

GENERATE STORY IDEAS

Think of as many examples or stories from your life that demonstrate you have those qualities.

INITIAL IDEAS:

We often grow the most when we are in pain (e.g. a car accident, another hard event, struggle, or something where you experienced loss). Or think of something that changed your perspective or where you learned something about life or yourself.

STORY IDEA-GENERATORS: *Think of a time you had big emotions (thinking of times when you had extreme emotions will generate ideas). Ask yourself these questions in two different ways. Example: 1. What was the happiest moment in my life? (Answer: The day I got a car for my birthday). 2. When am I most happy (Answer: When my whole family sits around the dinner table together).*

Happiest Moment/Great joy—

Scariest moment/Fear—

Worry/stress/anxiety—

Sad—

Filled with hope—

Excited—

Surprised—

When did you learn something about life?

When did you grow up a little?

Relationships (choose one person you are closest to)—Think of a special memory. What did you learn from this person? What character traits does this person have?

Relationships (choose another person you are close to)—Think of a special memory. What did you learn from this person? What character traits does this person have?

PROMPT & PURPOSE—Now you have a story idea! Think about your purpose in telling that story. What are you trying to accomplish with this essay?

☐ Look at the prompt. Write it word-for-word:

- Make sure you understand every word of the prompt. Look words up you don't know. What elements do you need to include in your essay? List them:

☐ Persuade them! Convince them:

- I'm awesome.
- I'm a good fit.
- I will be successful.
- I will be a "value-add" for the institution (I have something to offer).
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Getting to the significance of Your Story—

After watching how to take it to the next level, think about how you can narrow your story to just a snippet (one conversation, one moment in a larger event, etc.). Below are different activities to move you forward.

☐ **ACTIVITY 1:** Write your level 1, 2, and 3.

1. LEVEL 1—The facts. What facts about yourself are you trying to show. How can you show these facts?

Where in life do these characteristics show up?

2. LEVEL 2—The story. Think of a place. A snippet of time. What happens?

3. LEVEL 3—The big reveal. The big reveal! How did this change you?

☐ **ACTIVITY 2:** Answer these questions:

- a. Where does your story take place?

- b. Who was there?

- c. When did this happen (year? Time of day? Season?)

- d. What happened? Briefly describe it using this template:

1. First, this is how things were:

- ii. Then, this happened:

- e. IMPORTANT! What did you learn from this experience? What a-ha moment did you have? How did this event change you?

- i. Then, I realized:

- f. IMPORTANT! How will your future be different as a result of what you learned or how you changed?

- i. So now, I will be:

☐ **ACTIVITY 3:** The Five Why's

Explain your story idea to other people. After each statement you make, they should simply ask "Why?" You have to give an answer. They ask "Why?" again (five times total). They say it takes Five Whys to get to the hear of the matter! Give it a try!

Organize Your Story: An Outline Blend

You can also think outside the box—consider writing an extended metaphor or analogy. Be creative.

	The Old You How Things Were	Something Happened	The New You THE REVEAL	CONCLUSION
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep it short • Show, don't tell 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Something sparked a period of growth • Obstacle(s) / Hardship • Found an area of study 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Show, don't tell • How did you grow/change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Look to the future • Vivid image • hypothetical anecdote
SETTING				
ACTION				
DIALOGUE				
THOUGHTS / FEELINGS				
DESCRIPTIONS				
MOTIF?				
PERSONALITY RESULTS				

**a motif is a symbol, an object or something (a sprinkler head, a clock, a mirror, a pennant, soccer cleats, etc.) that represents something else (you, your growth, a change, a realization, a changed perspective)*

STEP 2: Draft the Essay!

This step can be intimidating. Here are some tips for drafting that may help:

- I know this sounds redundant but go re-read the instructions and prompt for your piece. You would be shocked how often people stray from the prompt, which is very annoying if you're evaluating the essay!
- Go back and read from the beginning of this document to refresh your memory on the ideas you generated.
- Think of a draft as a "brain dump." Don't worry about it being perfect—this will paralyze you. Writing is thinking and thinking is writing. Remember, it's a process.
- Use speech to text.
- Picture your audience sitting at your dining room table. Now tell them the story. Keeping your audience in mind will help keep your writing real.
- Don't worry about rigidly staying within your word-count requirement, but don't write five pages if you only need to write 250 words. You will revise and edit later.
- This does not need to be perfect!
- BLEND--

DIALOGUE / ACTIONS / THOUGHTS / FEELINGS / DESCRIPTION

STEP 3: Revising

Making Big Changes!

- ☐ A. Revise word choice while keeping conventions and formatting in mind
 - Check every verb and make sure you are staying in a consistent verb tense
 - remove passive voice—replace "to-be" verbs with action verbs by changing the subject
 - Consider the following:
 - It's okay to use a thesaurus if you understand what the word means and it reflects your personality
 - no dull and boring words and no general words like *stuff*, *things*, *nice*, etc.
 - no abbreviations if your audience doesn't know what they mean.
 - Show, don't tell
 - check for overused words—use synonyms or try to describe it another way.
 - strong verbs
 - vivid imagery—did you use the five senses to create images in your readers' heads? What about figurative language? Add in a metaphor, simile, alliteration, or even personification!
- ☐ B. Revise sentence fluency while keeping conventions and formatting in mind
 - Count the number of words in EACH sentence and plot them on a graph. Do you have variety in your sentence length?
 - Write down the first five words of EACH sentence. Do you have variety in how your sentences begin?
 - vary your sentence structure (flip the sentence, start with a prep phrase, participial phrase, etc.). Make sure your sentences aren't all—subject/verb/object.
- ☐ C. Revise voice while keeping conventions and formatting in mind
 - make sure the "personality" and tone of your paper is appropriate for your audience and purpose.
 - Does your piece have a "soul?" In other words, are you vulnerable, honest, and authentic?

STEP 4: Editing

Fine Tuning!

Part 1: Re-read the instructions for your piece, including the prompt. Yes, again. Do it again. Edit your paper for form and word count. If you are pasting into a text box, this is not much of a concern. Should it be double-spaced? Font? If these aren't specified, make sure you use a font that all computers can "read," like Times New Roman. Use 1.5 line spacing if they don't tell you otherwise. Keep one-inch margins. If you have to attach a document, attach a .pdf so the formatting will be exactly how you want it.

Part 2: Have two editors read your piece out loud to you—when they read to you, you can hear how they interpret your words, syntax, and conventions. You will notice parts to fix. At least one of them should be an adult. Get feedback. Make sure they are not making changes for you! That's a great way to kill your unique voice.

Part 3: Look at what AI, like Grammarly, says about your paper. These supports can be helpful, but they are often wrong! Don't trust them completely, because you are smarter! Sometimes you may want to write an incomplete sentence as a matter of style and voice Grammarly will tell you it's wrong, but it's not!

Part 4: Put the essay aside for a few days or even a couple of weeks. Then come back and read it with fresh eyes. You will likely find things to change or to make even better.

STEP 5: Submit!

If your heart is displayed in black letters on a white piece of paper, you are ready to submit.

Do it!

Now celebrate!