

Post Title: What To Do When Your Essay Is Too Short

Post Body: Many students sit down with their topic, draft an essay, and end up with 100 or more words too many. [I've shared some advice and strategies for paring an essay down](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9dp4u7/what_to_do_when_youre_over_the_word_count/), but I haven't seen much for stretching a short essay up.

****How Short Is Too Short?****

It's fuzzy, but I think below about 70% of the word limit is where reviewers start to feel like the essay was a little short. So for a 650 word essay I would feel better about submitting something over about 450. That's going to vary from one reviewer to the next and it will also depend on the content and style of your essay, but I think 70% is a good rule of thumb. It's possible to have an outstanding essay below that, but if you want a threshold to have in mind, that would be a good one to use.

If you find yourself finished but you think it's still too short, here are some ways to meaningfully beef up your essay. Feel free to share more in the comments.

1. ****DON'T go to the link above and just reverse all of those strategies****. Make sure you aren't saying less with more. One thing I have experienced and observed when you do this is that it is very likely to give you a high degree of awkwardness within the structure of your sentences and could even possibly dilute the value of what you are trying to communicate with the world and get off your chest as a member of the society in which we live. Hopefully you see what I mean.

2. ****Brainstorm new angles to add to the end of the essay to give it a more compelling finish****. [Examples of this](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/8upen2/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/) could be adding analysis or reflection at the end, delving into your motivations and "whys", connecting back to something you referenced earlier in your essay, or zooming out to show a bigger picture view of your topic (but keep the focus on **you** if you do this). Note that this is the easiest of these tips because you can usually just tack this stuff on at the end with minimal transition or editing.

3. ****Redo your introduction****. It's probably lousy anyway. Seriously ~90% of college admissions essays have terrible introductions. The most common advice I give in essay reviews is to scrap the entire first paragraph because the good stuff usually starts right after. ****"Wait, I'm already UNDER the word count, and now you want me to cut something?"**** Yes, probably. Remember that your goal is **not** to have an essay that meets the word count and responds to the prompt. Your goal is to have an outstanding essay that showcases yourself to the reviewer in a powerful and attractive way. Most introductions contain a lot of filler, empty setup phrases, and unnecessary verbal scaffolding. Replace all of that with a direct example, a story from your life, an explanation of a memory or thought process you've had, or some additional background on one or more of the people/ideas in your essay. Jump right in with it and go straight to the parts that matter. Use the extra words to go deeper with those.

4. ****Add more detail or examples.**** Specifics make essays stronger and more interesting. Instead of saying "This was hard for me," explain what specifically about it was hard or how/why it was so hard. What was the impact, lesson, emotion, change in you, etc? Don't be too direct with this or it will feel weird. So instead of saying "This was hard for me," or even "This made me feel so alone and lost. It was hard to find hope, and ever since I've had thicker skin," use the details of your story to show that it was hard, that you felt hopeless, and that it made you tough, resilient, or callous (e.g. "The thousand yard stare set in", "The jeers didn't matter anymore," etc). Note that adding more details and examples can be especially valuable in a "Why [School]?" essay because it shows that you've done your research and you actually love the college rather than simply being drawn (or pushed) there by prestige or future success.

5. ****Look for the parts of your essay that are closest to home for you and expand them.**** These are probably the best parts of your essay anyway, so go deeper with them. Keep the focus on you, but show more of the reasons it was significant, why it's there in the core of who you are, and why it will always be a part of you.

6. ****Start doing a comprehensive review of your "final draft."**** Read it out loud, have a friend review it, read it backwards, read it in the context of your whole application and examine what is missing or underemphasized. As you do this, you may find holes or other issues that require additional material to polish it up. Often the editing process will add words or uncover a missing aspect or angle on your life you can expound upon.

7. ****Look for ways to replace mundane words with more colorful or unique phrases.**** These will help your essay stand out and sometimes they require more words to execute well. One example of this might be the phrase in point 3 above, "unnecessary verbal scaffolding." It's not a phrase many people have read before, but it clearly communicates the concept. Another example might be describing your parents frustration with you in terms of their gray hairs, or the lines on their face, or the way you amused yourself picturing a caricature of them rather than going straight to their frustration directly. It's great for these to be detailed, odd, and clever, and if you're looking to add some words, it can be a great way to use them. They liven up the writing which is important because reviewers have to wade through a depressingly deep stack of indistinct and monotonous essays and this can help yours stand out.

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of Post

Post Title: How to Approach the Common App Essay - Part 2

Post Body: Yesterday's post was really well-received, so we're keeping the train moving with Part 2 on How to Approach the Common App Essay. Today's post is to help connect the personal qualities you want to portray to an anecdote or topic that can be used as a narrative vehicle to demonstrate those qualities.

If you haven't checked it out already, please click the link below to read Part 1 of this four part series. Reading them in order will make a little more sense.

[Part 1: Understanding the Common App Essay + Demonstrating your best qualities](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/heic2o/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_1/)

Part 2: **What to write about**

[Part 3: What NOT to write about](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hfqung/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_3/)

[Part 4: Demonstrating grit](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hgbcai/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_4/)

What to write about

Start with a problem

The secret to a good essay is the same as the secret to any good story: problems. Everyone's got problems, and they're the perfect thing to talk about. Why? Because it is through our handling of problems that we demonstrate our deepest, most resilient selves.

Now that you have a list of stories that you are considering, look for a problem at the heart of each story. Here are some basic types of problems that everyone encounters:

- * **Failure** * I tried really hard to qualify for the state chess championship, but I didn't.*
- * **Mistake** * I accidentally sprayed weed-killer on my neighbor's flowers and killed all her plants.*
- * **Challenge** * I wanted to get my best swimming time before the county meet.*
- * **Move** * My dad got a new job and I had to change schools.*
- * **Obstacle** * I had to give a speech in front of my classmates as part of my final grade.*
- * **Flaw** * I was too stubborn on my math team, and as a result, we lost the competition.*
- * **Obsession** \- * I became consumed with learning how to do a backflip.*
- * **Change** \- * My brother left for college and I had to take over his responsibilities.*
- * **Phobia** * I had to confront my fear of open water to go on the class boat trip.*
- * **Conflict** * My best friend and I started working at the same summer job and our relationship changed.*
- * **Misunderstanding** * I spent six months setting the tables wrong at the restaurant where I work before I learned that I was doing it wrong.*

Places to look for problems

Problems are all around us, all the time. But for your problem to pique the interest of an admissions officer, you should strive to think outside the classroom. Why? It's not that a school story is inherently wrong or that your problem is illegitimate. Rather, it's the case that almost every person applying to college has undergone a similar classroom experience. This is your big opportunity to set yourself apart and show how you are unique, so why not let your setting set the pace?

Here are some places to look for inspiration for problems:

- * **Extracurricular activities** *dance, yoga, pool*
- * **Hobbies** *chess, gardening, programming*
- * **Summer jobs** *bussing tables, lifeguarding, working retail*
- * **Family activities** *cooking, playing cards, driving*
- * **Times with friends** *at the beach, eating froyo*
- * **School clubs** *FFA, Spanish*
- * **Your bedroom** *Posters on your wall, mementos*
- * **The Internet** *Photos on Facebook, bookmarks*

It's not what you write about, it's how you write about it

These last couple of examples demonstrate that **your topic of choice does not need to be profound**. In fact, it shouldn't be. This is REALLY important. It is not through our outlying experiences that we learn to be ourselves. It is through daily challenges and the problems that they present. **Instead of choosing a profound experience, try to focus on a profound truth that was revealed by your response to your problem.**

I can't emphasize this enough. There are a ton of students that I work with that can't even get started on a draft because **they create an impossible expectation in their mind for how amazing their anecdote or experience has to be**. Didn't cure cancer? Didn't start a non-profit that raised millions of dollars? Then you must not have anything good to write about. I definitely see this prevailing attitude in A2C, sometimes in good fun, but oftentimes not. Good stories are everywhere, and though you might not recognize it at first, the best stories are often in the mundane. Consider the following examples of main essay topics:

- * Washing cars
- * Having frizzy hair
- * Collecting junk
- * Your TI calculator
- * A broken thumb
- * Riding a public bus

Things to note

Although everyday, slice-of-life stories are ideal, be mindful about how the overall story ties into your [Admissions Angle](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2019/01/15/whats-an-admissions-angle/>), spike, hook, or whatever you want to call it. Your application materials require a degree of synergy so that the admissions officer gets a good idea of who you are as a person and isn't left with questions about your interests, motivations, and goals. Consider how your story can connect to your Admissions Angle and if it doesn't, it might be good to choose a different story.

Other qualities to consider when choosing your story is leadership. Some of the best essays are those that demonstrate a degree of leadership, even if it's indirect. Think about how your story reflects upon your ability to take charge of a situation and collaborate with others. Grit is also a quality that many educators connect with future success. This is really important, so it'll have its own section in our Friday post.

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****Note: If you can't wait, the full Common App Essay guide can be found****

[here**](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2020/06/16/what-should-i-write-about-in-the-common-app-essay/>) **on our blog.****

***** End of Post

Post Title: The ScholarGrade Essay Series Part 3: Conquering The "Why [School]" Essay

Post Body: There have been an increasing number of juniors visiting this sub asking for advice about writing essays. I will be posting a new installment every week or two with more insights and advice - these are all excerpts or digests of my step-by-step essay guide. This is also a great place to ask questions because *I will answer every single question in the comments.* You can find out more about me at www.bettercollegeapps.com. Here are links to the first two sections.

Part 1 - [How To Start An Essay And Show, Don't

Tell](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/baotoj/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_1_how_to_start/)

Part 2 - [Throw Away Everything You Learned In English

Class](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bdyf1d/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_2_throw_away/)

#Part 3 - Conquering The "Why [School]" Essay

Why do you want to attend Stanford? Why is Mechanical Engineering the perfect major for you? Why do you want to be a part of the honors college? Many students struggle with where to start, what attributes to highlight, and how to express their desires and motivations clearly and

persuasively. Approaching this essay incorrectly is perhaps the single biggest mistake top students make in applying to college.

#The Secret

The secret to this essay is that it's actually about ****you****. Why are ***you*** a good fit for this school? Don't just spew a list of great things about the school - everyone does that, and they already know they're a good school. You need to stand out from the stack.

This would be like trying to land a date with an Instagram model by commenting on their posts. Sure, you could compliment their ridiculously sculpted "prestige," curvaceous "campus community," and immaculately ~~photoshopped~~manicured "rankings", but there are already 1,000 other comments that say the same thing. Instead you need to stand out from the crowd. Find some more unique ways to connect, get attention, build a relationship, and be noticed.

For this essay, use details and explain why you are right for them - don't just say the same tired, trite things everyone else says. Show how they will benefit you, why it's a fit and better for you than other schools, and why you will thrive and achieve more there than elsewhere. What about you makes you want to go to that school? How will you be better if you go there? How will the school be better if they have ***you***?

Put those things in the context of the school/activity/major and what you love about it. Show how the school/major will help you achieve what you really love and want in life. If you do this well, you won't really need to have a groundbreaking or creative style - you can be straightforward and let your self-expression keep the essay meaningful and interesting.

#Things AOs look for in these essays:

1. What does it reveal about you, the applicant? (Note that they look for this in every essay.) They want to see depth of thought, intellectual vitality, engagement, leadership, individuality, creativity, etc. Do you have what it takes to be successful at that school?

2. How interested are you in their school? If they admit you, will you attend? Have you done your research and are applying because you think this is the best school for you, or are you just shotgunning them or applying aimlessly based on impersonal factors like rankings and prestige? Do ***you*** actually want to go here or did someone else make you apply? Are you treating them as a backup or safety option?

3. Are you a good fit for their school and culture (and vice versa)? Will you benefit by going there, and will the school benefit by having you in their student body?

4. Do you have a real plan for what you want? Are you building toward something? Do you have goals, dreams, and a vision for your future?

#Doing the Research

Actually doing the research is one of the best ways to stand out over the hundreds of other applicants who write about the same things in this essay. It's helpful to put together some specific information about the school so you can really show how you and that school fit together. As far as resources go, I always recommend starting with the school's website. It can give you some great baseline info. You should also check out the website for the department of your intended major.

From there you can Google specific questions you have, check out forums specific to the school (on Reddit, CC, Facebook, or elsewhere), and check your network to see if anyone you know went there. If so, talk to them about their experience. If not, find a couple people on LinkedIn or Facebook who go/went there and send them a brief message saying you're considering their school and you'd love to get their take on it. People love to talk about their college so most people will oblige you. Make sure you ask questions specific to your major, the activities you hope to be involved in, or other unique programs/characteristics that draw you to the school so that the conversation gives you plenty of ammo for the essay.

If possible, go on a campus tour. If not possible, explore it on Google Earth just to get a different flavor for what it's like there. Look up reviews of professors, food, housing, transportation, local businesses, etc. You're investing 4 years of your life and 6 figures of someone's money in this, so you should consider everything carefully and really do your homework. Don't just rely on the rankings or an isolated source or anecdote. Get as much real information as you can.

Speaking of professors, email a couple of the ones in your intended department. There are a couple great posts on this sub about how to do that well. Look up what they've published and what their specialties are. See if you can find some that align with your interests. If you have really done this right and gotten a response from the prof, you can mention it in the essay. Don't namedrop a prof just to namedrop a prof though because that tends to be pretty transparent.

It can also help to list out things about that school that make it very different from the other schools you're looking at. Then list some things that are unique about you or things you might add to the student body. Draw from both of those lists as you show how you are a match for that school. Make sure a person reading your essay could make similar lists if they had to - especially a list of things it says about you.

If you've done all of this and you're happy with it, you'll probably be the best essay your AO reads that day. Good luck!

***** End
of Post

Post Title: AdmissionsMom's Last Minute Guide to Super Quick and Super Personal, Personal Essays

Post Body: If you're a procrastinator like me, then you might have put off writing your personal essay until now. It's not too late! Let's get this party started.

Follow this guide and you will end up with a personal essay that demonstrates who you are. These are the exact steps I follow with my clients. It works. Time tested. Student tested.

****STEP ONE: STOP READING ANY AND ALL ACCEPTED ESSAYS****

****STEP TWO: I LOVE... ONE MINUTE EXERCISE****

Set a one minute timer on your phone and list out loud things you love. Do it with a friend or do it on your own. It doesn't matter. It's a good warm up. (Idea from College Essay Guy)

****STEP THREE: GO WITHIN****

Here's the deal about the personal essay. It has to be just that — super, incredibly, deeply personal. The essay needs to be about inner you — the you they can't get to know anywhere else in your application. So, you have to peel off your onion layers, find your inner Shrek, dig in super deep, and get to know yourself like you've never done before. It's not easy. Ask yourself (and write down these answers) some really personal questions like:

What do I believe?

What do I think?

What do I value?

What keeps me up at night?

What do I get excited about?

What comforts me?

What worries me?

What's important to me?

Who are my superheroes?

What's my superpower?

What would my superpower be if I could have any superpower?

What's my special sauce?

What reminds me of home?

Just play with these. And learn a lot. Become the expert on you because you are really the only person who can be the expert on you. Look for themes that tell about you. Then, you'll be ready to teach the lesson about who you are and what you believe and value to the application readers. The vehicle you use to get your message across really isn't as important as what you're saying about yourself. This doesn't have to be (and, in my opinion) shouldn't be a complete narrative. I think the essays need to be more reflection and analysis than story. Those are the essays that stick with me after reading a few thousand of them.

I'm not saying don't use a story. Use one if that's what feels right for you. Just remember the story is only the vehicle for getting the message of who you are across the page. I like to see more commentary and less narrative, so for me the Show, not Tell isn't really effective. I prefer show and tell — like kindergarten. I don't want a rundown of your activities — if something is discussed elsewhere in your application, to me, you don't want to waste the valuable space of the personal essay.

****STEP FOUR: FUN WITH WRITING AND QUESTIONS****

This is fun: Pick three or four of the questions above www.themostdangerouswritingapp.com. I like the super hero one, the what do I believe, and special sauce, but but you pick the one you like most. Give yourself five minutes only to write as much as you can. The cool thing about the most dangerous writing app is that if you stop, you lose what you write, so be careful. I've had many many students end up using what they wrote in those five minutes as the catalyst or largest part of their essay. Copy and paste those paragraphs to a google doc so you can use them if you want.

****STEP FIVE: WRITE YOUR ESSAY****Take what you've written on tmdwa and use that to get yourself going. Write your essay. Focus on who you are — not what you do. Your job is to build a connection with your reader. You build a connection by allowing someone in and being vulnerable. So take what you learned about yourself and share that knowledge. The easiest way to move forward with it is to use a This I believe type format. Some focus on one believe that you thought of and then write about it. You can use the words I believe, I think, I value, I wonder, I know. If they fit in your essay then you know that it's personal.

****STEP SIX: EDIT****

Edit the shit out of your essay. Make sure you read it on your computer, read it on your paper, and read it out loud, and have at least one other person you trust look it over. Here's a [story I just posted on Medium](<https://medium.com/@admissionsmom/admissionsmoms-quick-and-dirty-tips-for-editing-college-essays-49dbcf555504?sk=744bcf34e8f0cc44714558a751477d45>) that goes over how to edit essays.

****STEP SEVEN: BREATHE****

Pat yourself on the back, sit back, and smile.

****MORE RESOURCES:****

Check out these web pages, [www.collegeessayguy.com](<http://www.collegeessayguy.com>) and [www.thisibelieve.org](<http://www.thisibelieve.org>) for lots more info on the personal essay, and be sure to read what u/ScholarGrade has to say.

I'll be happy to share my essay resources with you, including the essay chapter from my new book, if you email me at admissionsmoma2c@gmail.com

Good luck and have fun with it!

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of Post

Post Title: What to do when you're over the word count

Post Body: Just-use-a-bunch-of-hyphens.

No, don't do that, and don't just submit an essay that's too long either. It will probably be truncated, but even if it isn't, you risk giving your reviewer a laborious exercise in tedium. You may feel that every golden word you've spun is worthy of careful analysis, *nay, enjoyment*, but the fact is that busy AOs don't like essays that are obviously too long. At best, it means more work for them and at worst you get judged for not following directions or submitting an essay that ends too abruptly mid-sentence due to truncation.

It's also ineffective to try to "fool the system" by adding white underscores between words or similar gimmicks. Most application aggregation software (e.g. ApplyWeb) renders all submitted text in a standard font, size, and color. If the words are counted by software, then they are probably also parsed and rendered by the same software and your over-limit essay will get truncated.

There are a variety of approaches for legitimately getting under the word count, so try as many of these as it takes.

****1. Hyphenate, abbreviate, or use contractions where appropriate.****

****2.** Replace passive voice or long descriptors** with active voice and direct verbs because they are punchier and usually less verbose. Also cut hedging phrases like "I think," "maybe," or "perhaps."

****3.** Cut unnecessary introductory sentences, set-up phrases, and anything else that isn't directly building your story or your point.** Most essays have introductions that are too long, generic, and meandering. They usually don't add much of value. You would be surprised how often I read an essay and recommend that the entire introduction be stricken.

****4.** Replace phrases or idioms with single words that convey the same concept**, for example "confessed" instead of "spilled the beans," "got it off my chest," or "let the cat out of the bag." It's usually better writing anyway.

****5.** Remove clichés, adjectives, and adverbs.** If you used the words "very," "really," or "that" anywhere in your essay, you can probably cut them out.

****6.** Look for sentences or phrases that repeat or reiterate and remove them entirely.** Most writing, especially a first draft, has an alarming amount of redundancy.

****7.** Consider rewriting a new draft of the same essay from scratch.** If you cut and hack the existing text too much, you'll probably end up with an essay that feels choppy and disjointed or flows in a stilted manner. A good way to avoid this is to start over with the same topic and take a slightly different approach. Use a shorter or more direct anecdote and be more judicious with details and descriptions.

****8.** Have someone else read it and tell you what to cut out.** Sometimes it's hard to sacrifice your own writing at the altar of the word count. You might be tempted to save the wrong parts because you've become too attached to a particular phrase or paragraph that you really labored to perfect. An uninvolved third party brings fresh perspective and a sharper axe.

****9.** Start cutting mercilessly and cut it down to well below the limit, then go back and rebuild your way up again.** This avoids the problem of your essay being too choppy but also prevents you having to start over.

****10.** Consider replacing a section of text with a bulleted list.** This is probably not useful in a narrative essay, but in something like a supplement or additional information section, it could work wonders.

****11.** However you decide to cut, save several different versions as you make your edits.** This will help you be bold and decisive with your changes because you will know that they are not permanent and you can always go back to a prior version. No one wants to cut something brilliant and then accidentally lose it. Even the fear of that can make the process tentative and plodding. Save frequently, and chop with a vengeance.

****12.** Remember that you can often make additional cuts after stepping away from editing for a while. ****** If you try to do it all in one sitting, you will inevitably become over-attached to certain pieces or structures. Take a few hours or even days off without looking at your writing at all, then come back to it with fresh perspective. You might be surprised at what seemingly easy or obvious changes present themselves.

If you have questions or other tips & strategies that worked for you I'd love to hear them.

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of Post

Post Title: How To Choose An Essay Topic

Post Body: It's hard to find a good topic for your essay. Conventional wisdom says to start by brainstorming a list of potential topics, and chances are, you have already started a mental list of ideas. You might think you only have a few choices for topics, based on your activities or experiences, or you might have started writing a rough draft or two. Worse, you may have asked a teacher or guidance counselor what you should write about and been given a list of all the common topics which are often among your worst options. I advise, however, that you put down your initial list of topics and back away from it. Forget that exists for a moment. Seriously - thinking about this initial list tethers you to certain ideas that might not actually be your best options.

Now you can begin brainstorming with a clean slate. We're going to start over. And we're going to start with YOU.

Start with thinking about what you want to show in your entire application, not just one essay.

****Every single component in your app has one purpose – to tell more about YOU.**** Filling out the rest of the application by rote and focusing solely on the essay is short-sighted and will leave so much potential untapped in your application.

An admissions officer's goal is to understand you fully, in the context of your background and the rest of the applicant pool. They will begin this with assessing your academic abilities and potential. Then they will evaluate how you will fit into the student body they're trying to curate. All of this can be somewhat broad and diverse and touch on several institutional goals. But they will dig deep to find out what each applicant is like, what your core values and motivations are, what kind of student you will be, how you will contribute to the vibrant and intellectual campus community they're building, etc.

Your goal with essay brainstorming is to ascertain how to powerfully tell your story in a manner that will fit these criteria. The entirety of your application (again, not just one essay) aims to showcase your abilities, qualifications, and uncommon attributes as a person in a positive way. Before you begin outlining or writing your application, you must determine what is unique about you that will stand out to an admissions panel. All students are truly unique. Not **one** other student has the same combination of life experiences, personality, passions, or goals as you do.

Your job in your application is to frame your unique personal attributes in a positive and compelling way. How will you fit on campus? What personal qualities, strengths, core values, talents, or different perspectives do you bring to the table? What stories, deeper motivations/beliefs, or formative experiences can you use to illustrate all of this?

It is always helpful to start with some soul-searching or self-examination. You might not immediately know what you want to share about yourself. It's not a simple task to decide how to summarize your whole life and being in a powerful and eloquent way on your application. Introspection prior to starting your application takes additional time and effort rather than jumping straight into your first draft. But it is also a valuable method to start writing a winning application that stands out from the stack.

Following is a list of questions that will help you understand yourself better and narrow down your list of topics. I also have a [blog post on this](<https://bettercollegeapps.com/essay-guide-how-to-brainstorm-your-essay/>) and a full worksheet with over 100 such questions which I plan to share [on my website](<https://www.bettercollegeapps.com>) in the next few weeks.

It's often easiest to start thinking in terms of superlatives — what are the most meaningful things about you? Here is a list of questions to help you brainstorm broadly before you narrow down your focus for writing:

- What are your interests?
- What sparks your curiosity?
- What are your favorite books ? What are your favorite movies and why?
- What websites do you visit frequently?
- What are your hobbies?
- With whom do you enjoy spending time? Who has impacted your life the most? What are the most important relationships in your life?
- Reflect upon “superlatives” in your life. What moments were most memorable, formative, enlightening, enjoyable, or valuable? What physical possessions, experiences, settings, dreams, or lessons could make your superlatives list?
- Stop and think about what things, people, or circumstances in your life are really unique, fascinating, or outlandish. Are there any that really have a lot of “cultural flavor” (whatever your culture is)? Are there any that really capture who you are?

- What are your strongest opinions or beliefs, and have any of these changed since you started high school?

- What are your goals for your life in 10 years?

- If you could change any three things in the world, what would they be?

- What are your biggest strengths? What are the biggest challenges you have overcome?

****And now the biggest questions: WHY?****

- Why do you love the things you love? Why are they important? What led you to your answer?

- Why are you interested in and passionate about them? What compels you toward them?

- What do your answers reveal about your core values?

- Is there a story you could share that would demonstrate or explain why one or more of these is significant to you?

Your why needs to go beyond your desire to get into college, get a good job, or make your family proud. It should be driven from within – from the things that intrigue and excite you and make your life worth living. There is a big difference between applicants who do things just to boost their college resume and applicants who do things because they love them.

Jot down some notes on the questions listed above. Then go back and revisit your list of possible topics. Which ones can you use as examples of the above? Which ones will a reviewer naturally extrapolate to the next level? Which ones will give you a sounding board or platform for explaining who you really are and what matters most to you?

As you review these and other introspection questions, it can be very helpful to stay focused on the important characteristics that make up *who you are.* You've probably heard this a dozen times by now and you might be wondering what "who you are" even means. When asked directly, most students talk about where they're from, what activities they do, or other lame and meaningless things. Refocus this question by considering it in the context of the following:

- Passions

- Motivations

- Personal Strengths

- Core Values

- Aspirations
- Foundational Beliefs
- Personality Traits

If you still aren't clear on what those are, Google is here to help. For example, a search "list of core values" will yield hundreds of examples for you to choose from for inspiration. Once you have some ideas jotted down for what you want to say about yourself, you can start examining your life and experiences to identify stories that will illustrate who you are. Notice some of the key differences between this and your original approach, *even if the overall topic is similar*:

****1. It isn't forced.**** You aren't writing about your greatest accomplishment so that you can highlight its impressiveness. Instead you're writing about it to show *why* it's important to you and *what it says about who you are.*

****2. It's far more personal.**** You are using that topic or story as a lens to showcase yourself rather than because you feel you "should" write about it.

****3. You actually say something in your essay.**** SO. MANY. ESSAYS. end up saying almost nothing at all of substance. Students just don't know how to write about themselves in a meaningful and compelling way (partially because they are never really taught).

****4. Your essay will be far more distinctive and unique.**** You will submit the only essay the reviewer has ever read about your topic, written by the world's foremost expert on that subject - because it's about you.

If you have questions about this, ask in the comments *because I will address every single one.* Good luck!

***** End of Post

Post Title: Giving Away the Secret Sauce - How to Make Your Essay Outstanding
 Post Body: #Under the Hood of a ScholarGrade Essay Review

I thought many of you might benefit from seeing an example of an essay review. This is intended as a "master class" - a way for you to learn how to write better essays even though your essay isn't the one being critiqued.

Note that this is not *at all* how AOs review essays - they're much less comprehensive and far more evaluative. My goal in reviews is to help the author revise this into an outstanding essay, not to simply understand what it says about them and assign it a score. As such, this goes way deeper than an admissions office ever will. But this is the level of depth you need to craft a winning essay.

Note also that some of this sounds harsh. I'm not trying to roast the author or throw anyone under the bus, but a comprehensive review requires honesty and specificity. Sugarcoating does no favors to anyone.

****This essay was provided from an /r/Applyingtocollege student with specific permission to use it in a post like this. If you have questions, feel free to ask in the comments. If you would like your essay reviewed like this with detailed feedback that is generally ~2x longer than the essay itself, check out my services at www.bettercollegeapps.com/services.****

#The Prompt

Why do you wish to attend [College]? How would you contribute to the community? (no more than 250 words)

#The Essay

In reading your website and all the material you guys sent my way, I know for a fact [College] matches my intellectual pursuits. The in-depth, intense, practically momentary exploration of thought held so central to your education is precisely the education I want to attain. I plan to major in something entirely systematic and logical like physics or mathematics. Fully immersing myself into such an intellectual school of thought for three straight weeks sounds not only informative, but truly formative.

Then, in harsh contrast, to turn around and study some tangential, completely unrelated content for three weeks, solely because "hey that sounds cool." There's virtually no real-life scenario I can think of in which an intimate, exhaustive knowledge of the "History of the Roman Republic," (course HL214) would ever be meaningful to me; no time in which the career of physicist depends on knowing differences between the Senates of monarchical Rome and republic Rome. Yet here I am, eager to take such a course, simply because characters like Julius Caesar and Cato seem more legend than historical. The flexibility offered by your Block Plan can support my intense but fleeting interest in ridiculously unrelated studies like the Roman Republic, while still giving me a meaningful education and degree.

#Feedback Overview

****1. Content, topic, and theme**** - *How good is the actual content? Is it unique? Does it say a lot about you? Does the essay show depth of thought, intellectual vitality, initiative, originality, etc? Does it fit the prompt well enough, or does it feel like it was written for something else and shoehorned in?*

The content here is merely ok. While the self-expression was better than average, I don't feel like I got to know you quite enough from this essay. [A "Why College" essay is really about YOU](https://old.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/7j8son/conquering_the_why_school)

_essay/) - how do you and the school fit each other? So a mere listing of a couple of things you like about the school isn't quite enough. There is some good unique content in here but overall it doesn't stand out as well as it could. Imagine reading 20 other essays on this same topic in one afternoon - would this be among the one or two that shine the most? It needs something a little more personal or expressive to get there. It fits the prompt just fine, and the specific references to the program/coursework are a nice touch.

****2. Style and Structure**** - *Is the essay easy to read, authentic, creative, compelling, and engaging? Is the style consistent throughout the essay and is it consistent with the rest of the application? Is the essay organized well? Does it communicate clearly? Does it flow smoothly?*

The essay is easy enough to read, though at times the persistent use of larger-than-necessary words bogs it down. The biggest style issue is that it feels like two essays. The first paragraph feels like a [buddy film](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Buddy_film), while the second feels like an awkward attempt at [negging](<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Negging>). It doesn't seem to flow logically and the big words don't help. At times this comes across as contrived - I'm not completely sold on your passion for both physics and Roman history. It's possible that the rest of your application would resolve this though.

****3. Impression**** - *What does the essay say about you? What will a reviewer likely think of you after reading it? Is it compelling and gripping?*

As mentioned above, there is some good expression in this essay, but not as much as I would like. The big words are very off-putting and rob your essay of sincerity and personal voice. The essay is also not gripping or engaging. Even on a second read, it felt like I really had to focus to work through it. A lot of this can be improved with better diction. There is also an almost self-righteous tone in the second paragraph that is a bit off-putting.

****4. Diction, grammar, and syntax**** - *Are there errors or omissions, poor or clunky word choices, issues with word count, etc.*

The essay is 209 words, so it's below the limit. The wording of the prompt indicates this is a hard limit, so make sure you don't go over 250 with your edits. [As a general rule, you want your essay to be at least 70% of the limit](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aefjas/what_to_do_when_your_essay_is_too_short/), so you're good there too. There are a few other issues in this arena noted in the specific feedback below.

#Specific Feedback:

1. The first sentence feels weird. It's usually a bad idea to directly address the reader. This breaks the "4th wall" and jars them out of the essay right as it begins. It almost requires a double-take just to figure out where it's going. Remove the reference to the reader and instead turn it around on yourself. Say something about what you learned specifically about the school

that spoke to you, resonated with you, and attracted you. Perhaps something about how each new facet you discovered convinced you of the match? Don't just broadly reference the website and emails - zoom in and share what was in them that inspired you.

2. "Practically momentary exploration of thought" is a very awkward phrase. I had to read it a couple times to figure out what you meant. Reviewers may not take that time - they work quickly and might just gloss over it and move on. Don't worry so much about trying to sound smart or impressive. Instead focus on communicating clearly and being expressive. Remember that they will see your strong English grades, AP scores, and SAT EBRW, so they will already know that you're smart and articulate. There are five or six times in this essay where you use a word that is bigger than it needs to be. Instead of big words, try to think of clever or unique turns of phrase that might stand out more.

3. Once again, I don't like phrases like "your education" and "your Block Plan." Don't equivocate the college and the essay reader, address the essay to either, or refer to the college/reader in second person. It sounds too casual and almost nonchalant. I see what you're trying to do, but it needs to more adeptly tie your educational goals to the specific opportunities offered at the school. Go a little deeper with what specifically you like about the education and block plan and why it's such a good fit for you.

4. The sentence "I plan to major in something entirely systematic and logical..." is both weak and vague. It also implies an air of superiority, like you think math and physics are somehow better than other majors. You don't absolutely have to have an intended major nailed down, but it would be stronger if you just picked one for now. Then you could focus your application and your essays with that theme in mind.

5. It is **really, really common** to read essays from intended STEM majors who talk about how they love dabbling in humanities and vice versa. That doesn't stand out at all. Furthermore, literally every college ever will give you those opportunities for cross-discipline learning. Is there something more specific to this college that you could highlight? Or perhaps something more unique about you that would be more worthy of sharing here?

6. The first sentence of the second paragraph is technically a fragment. That's sometimes ok because people use fragments all the time in conversation and you want the essay to be in your voice. But this sentence sounds a little awkward. Try to rephrase it a bit to streamline that.

7. You say "no time in which the career of physicist" but you should say "no time in which the career of **a** physicist".

8. This is getting picky, but I feel like you should either say "monarchic Rome and republic Rome" or "monarchical Rome and republican Rome" instead of blending them. It makes it more consistent and easier to read.

9. The ending lands a little awkwardly. You essentially conclude that this is a good college for you because you can major in physics or math and still take one class on Roman history. As I mentioned, every college will let you do that. You should try to elaborate on something more specific, meaningful, or personal. Be sure to check out my guide for [writing a Why This College? essay](https://reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/7j8son/conquering_the_why_school_essay/) as well as [this one for Ending Essays Gracefully](https://reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/8upen2/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/). You can also see more details on this in my full essay guide.

Let me know if you have any questions - I look forward to seeing your second draft. Good luck!
***** End
of Post

Post Title: An analysis of why the "mundane topic" seems to work so well for college essays.
Post Body: I see this come up constantly here in two forms:

1. People complaining about mundane essays when *they* spent a summer helping starving children Haiti and scored the winning 3-pointer in their state basketball championship.
2. People blindly suggesting that others choose a mundane topic over, often, genuinely interesting and unique larger life events.

I have also personally read at this point probably over a hundred college essays from people I personally know, people here, and online and have found that the less interesting the topic seems, the better the essay turns out. I also personally wrote a few of these successfully myself.

So, that begs the question. Why do we see essays like the infamous "[Costco essay](<https://www.businessinsider.com/high-school-senior-who-got-into-5-ivy-league-schools-shares-her-admissions-essay-2016-4>)" making headlines for getting someone into 5 ivies — often followed by a heaping of salt from people who wrote about more "legitimate" experiences?

Here is an analysis of why these essays often work:

****1. They force the writer to be specific:****

One of the most common issues with college essays is their tendency to take too wide of an approach. You simply cannot tell some stories eloquently and effectively in 650 words. Conversely, you almost cannot spend *more* than 650 words talking about knitting mittens. The *good* mundane topics take a specific, concrete anecdote and use it as a tool to demonstrate a larger, often poignant quality about themselves. Now, mundane topic essays have their own risks associated with them, but they are a good option for students who feel their obvious major experiences are either cliché or not important enough to justify an essay.

****2. They encourage more introspection:****

If you climbed Mount Everest, then it is really easy to let the topic do the writing for you. That's cool, you know it's really cool, and because of that these essays often either come off as self-congratulatory or predictable with a lesson lazily tacked on at the end. An essay about something that is **not** innately interesting or impressive places the onus on the writer to **make it** interesting. It encourages deeper thought and more skillful writing. A mundane topic essay usually has higher potential, but they can also fall on their face harder than monumental event essays because, as I mentioned, the topic carries less of the weight for you.

****3. They are surprising, and often keep the reader interested:****

Continuing onto the predictability aspect, a lot of these major life events are not actually that unique to you. If you have a unique life event, I encourage you to write about it. But the reader already knows the ending to the mission trip story, the sports injury story, the mom and dad got divorced story, and the winning three-pointer story from about sentence 2. If you write **well** about your obsession with knitting mittens, the admissions officer is wondering "where the hell are they going with this?" Now the obvious caveat to that is that you have to actually justify your choice by the end.

****4. It shows your thought process and your potential, not just your present accomplishments:****

The reality is you are 17. Most people — even ones at Ivies — haven't done that much that is truly important by 17 years old. You don't have to, and you aren't expected to. Oftentimes essay writers will overstate their accomplishments and hardships because they feel big now, but remember your Admissions Officer is not in high school. Choosing a mundane topic and making it interesting is a way to cover up for what you may believe is an uninteresting life that you lead. This is because colleges tend to be very much concerned with your perceived potential along with your present accomplishments. You have the extracurriculars section to show off your accomplishments — use the essay to show them how you think and feel.

****5. They often feel more genuine and are usually more personal and unique to the applicant.****

I already touched on this, but a more run-of-the-mill topic forces the writer to write about themselves. You can genericize a lot of large common experiences, but it is very hard to genericize deeply personal connections you have with the world around you. If you draw some sort of legitimate inspiration from Costco hotdogs that will come off as much more genuine and be much more valuable to an AO than an essay that essentially boils down to "hey look what I did." There is no "standard" Costco hotdogs essay — or at least there wasn't before that one girl got famous for it. It is way harder to brag or throw a pity party in a mundane topic essay, but it is also easier to come off as pretentious or confuse the reader.

I hope this at least made some sense, and helped you decipher why seemingly mundane topics *can* make for great essays, and circumstances in which you should use them.

I would like to end with a list of common issues with mundane topic essays in case you are considering one yourself.



****1. Trying way too hard to be quirky:**** Yes, there is such a thing. You can go from "hm, that's an interesting perspective on life" to "oh this kid wanted to write a weird essay really bad" *very quickly.* Make sure you have genuine motivations, and stay somewhere in the realm of normal social conventions.

****2. Not having a point at all:**** Number 1 often leads to number 2. You run the risk of the admissions officer finishing your essay and thinking "what is this person on about?" A good essay of this type takes something seemingly mundane *and blows it up to demonstrate something larger than it really is*. The connection must be clear and explicit.

****3. Not technically executing the essay perfectly:**** Remember how I said that these essays encourage good writing? It's because they *need* it to be effective. You are trying to rope the admissions officer into something that they probably aren't naturally compelled to be interested in. If they are distracted by typos it will severely hurt you. Similarly, these essays can sometimes ramble. Get in and get out. You have to sell the reader on why they should care, and in order to do that, you have to be specific, concise, and write so artfully that they can't stop reading until they've gotten to the point. You cannot meander.

If you got to this point thank you for sticking with me. You deserve a ribbon.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Essay thoughts while in Essay Review Mode. (Just posted this on Instagram, but I thought I'd share with y'all too.)
Post Body: Good morning from the rooftops of sunny Venice Beach! I had totally planned to take the entire weekend off to enjoy my family and recharge my batteries, but the siren call of reviewing personal essays called my name while my kids are sleeping. It's incredible to be outside reading about amazing lives and personal heartfelt journeys on this beautiful sunny Sunday morning — in 69 degree weather! To this Houston girl, that's downright chilly in August.
 

. . .

I've had a few morning thoughts as I've read through a number of essays this morning, and I thought it might help some of you if I shared.

Here's what I'm loving so far:

- 1) a playfulness with language — not so much that I have to figure out what is being said, but enough to make what the intent behind the words is even deeper
- 2) a sense that the writer is having fun
- 3) sincerity — I love it when I can feel and hear the writer's voice and it's not being hidden behind a barrier of overwrought words and syntax
- 4) a good story that demonstrates a belief or value you have and then digs in way deeper with your commentary about how the anecdote or narrative affects you

Here's what I'm not liking, in fact sometimes I'm not even reading the full essay bc I'm finding it too boring to get to the end:

- 1) so many adverbs... to me they drag a story down
- 2) complicated syntax that is clearly not comfortable for you. Sometimes complicated syntax works and that's cool; it's all about your comfort level and how you approach it
- 3) thesaurus words. Don't sound like you've swallowed a thesaurus. It's off-putting to read when it sounds like someone is choking. Just say no to your thesaurus!! Both thesaurus words and overly complicated syntax can create a wall between you and your reader.
- 4) a rehash of your activities list and honors; I'm gonna learn about those in the application — this is your only chance to really connect with your reader. Don't blow it.
- 5) too much narrative — not enough commentary. Look, I know you hear again and again to "show not tell" and I even occasionally give that advice and it's good advice to a certain extent — but sometimes you just gotta tell me what you're feeling and thinking. I want to know about what's going on inside that amazing teenaged brain of yours.

Let me get to know you. Let me feel like I need to meet this kid — whoever and whatever you are — the amazing, nervous, complicated, simple, frustrated, excited, quirky, imaginative, crazy, funny, calm, serious, intelligent, beautiful you.

Edit — it's September 1!! 🐰 🐰 🐰 I thought it was still August! Major vacation brain!! 🤪 🤪 🤪

***** End
of Post

Post Title: One of your essays NEEDS to communicate a case for Academic Fit

Post Body: **Edit**: We're talking about this live rn. Join us!

<https://www.reddit.com/talk/86b257ad-fe9b-480b-bb21-50f255ac44aa>

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If you're applying to top schools for a specific major (like CS or biology) or a specific college within an institution (like engineering or business), one of your essays needs to point out your fit for that program.

Here's why.

At highly selective schools, the competition is real; they receive too many competitive applications each year. AOs at these schools deny [tens of thousands](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/vs2mgq/how_do_admissions_offices_actually_process_50k/) of highly qualified students with near-perfect academic records each year.

Top schools typically use a rating system to quantify the competitiveness of their applicants based on their academics, [ECs](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/vxeqri/how_top_schools_actually_score_your/), and fit for major. You want that major fit score to be high, especially in ultra-competitive majors like CS or business. The most reliable way to boost your fit score is to focus on fit in at least one of your essays.

****A common example****

Let's say you apply to a top-20 engineering school. You pass through an initial academic review, and the AO moves on to your essays. They read your beautiful personal statement about getting lost on your family trip, and a supplemental essay on your dedication to the swim team.

There's a good chance your writing hasn't given them any additional reason to admit you for engineering. Your application just became less competitive because you missed an opportunity to communicate major fit.

I was talking to u/Ben-MA about this recently, and he told me that when he worked at Vanderbilt, he regularly saw students denied who had a 4.0 unweighted GPA, perfect or near-perfect test scores, and impressive ECs... but didn't demonstrate a coherent fit for their intended major or school.

And sure, you can demonstrate fit to an extent through related extracurriculars and your coursework. But when the competition is sky-high, why leave any opportunity to stand out on the table?

****So...****

Consider how your essays do or don't make a case for your academic fit.

Don't tell your reader, "I want to study engineering because of my years on the robotics team." Instead, **show** the reader some evidence of related skills like problem-solving, tinkering, building, or design.

Maybe something like, "I was particularly proud of the collaborative work our robotics team did on the rocket project. Beyond winning the competition, I helped delegate responsibilities, kept

detailed notes that I shared with everyone on Google Drive, and soldered most of our PC Board. Other students were stronger with craftsmanship and contributed there. We all shared responsibility of our final presentation.”

You also could take a more direct approach by writing about a specific interest, inquiry, or activity that clearly relates to your intended major.

Lastly, know that this is most important when you are applying *directly to* a major. In my experience, this can carry less (not zero) weight when applying to a liberal arts college (or the liberal arts college within a university, like a college of arts and sciences). Still, showing technical or academic skill in a subject of interest never hurts.

Your AO's job is to decide if you are a good academic and social fit for their institution. Your job is to make their job easier. Do that by using an essay to communicate fit.

***** End of Post

Post Title: The ScholarGrade Essay Series Part 4: What Makes An Essay Outstanding?

Post Body: There have been an increasing number of juniors visiting this sub asking for advice about writing essays. I will be posting a new installment every week or two with more insights and advice - these are all excerpts or digests of my step-by-step essay guide. This is also a great place to ask questions because *I will answer every single question in the comments.* You can find out more about me at www.bettercollegeapps.com. Here are links to the first three sections.

Part 1 - [How To Start An Essay And Show, Don't

Tell](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/baotoj/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_1_how_to_start/)

Part 2 - [Throw Away Everything You Learned In English

Class](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bdyf1d/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_2_throw_away/)

Part 3 - [Conquering The "Why [School]"

Essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bgvslr/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_3_conquering/)

#Part 4 - What Makes An Essay Outstanding?

#What Colleges Look For

Colleges are curating a student body. So they want it to be diverse, engaging, stimulating, and unique. Sure they like high stats because it boosts their academic reputation and they serve as indicators for some of the below. But colleges really want to find students who:

1. Can cut it at the college level and won't fail out. Can handle many challenges at once and thrive in spite of them.
2. Can bring something to the table intellectually and contribute rather than drag down or detract from academic and intellectual progress. Students who will teach and learn from each other and stand out as excellent in the broader community.
3. Have unique perspectives, skills, values, vision, talents, abilities, etc and will use those to the betterment of the college and student body. Are distinctive, self-assured, confident, charismatic, and will contribute to the overall melting pot of backgrounds and ideas on campus.
4. Will be engaged in activities, in making things happen, in intellectual discourse, in achievement, in idea creation, in enriching discussion, and in building relationships.
5. Will be leaders in thought and action. Will get things done and make a mark on the college and the world. Will go on to do even greater things.
6. Have integrity and will do things the right way. Will build the colleges reputation and prestige.

Many applicants are unbelievably similar, predictable, and bland in what they choose to say about themselves. So cut out the cliches, show them how you fit in those six points, and go be you.

#What Colleges Seek to Avoid

In business, it is said that 80% of your problems will come from just 5% of your customers and this applies to colleges too. There are also some attributes colleges hope to filter out in the application process. They don't want:

- Freeloaders, or lazy bums who are just skating by to get their degree and move on
- Students who are exactly the same as everyone else
- People who lack integrity and moral fiber
- Hermits or simpletons
- Arrogant overachievers who are too full of themselves to work with others
- **They don't even want 2000 identical people with perfect stats** because that would completely go against so much of what they are trying to build in a student body.

#How to Have an Outstanding Essay

Outstanding essays, along with a good overall application, will show how you fit what they're looking for and why you would be a valuable addition to their class. Top essays showcase a vibrant personality, intellectual vitality, leadership & initiative, community engagement, or depth of thought. One essay can't really show *all* of these at once, but your entire application as a whole should try to speak to all of this.

To start approaching this the right way, think about the protagonists of your favorite stories and how they are introduced. Look at the details, traits, and other factors the author uses to get you to fall in love with the characters and deeply care about them. Here are three ways to make yourself the protagonist.

****1. Compelling characters are often shrouded in mystery**** and there is a lot that is implied but not fully explained. There is almost never a documentary style introduction explaining everything from the beginning. For example, Harry Potter is introduced as the boy who lived, but the details of his failed murder, identity, and background are only gradually unveiled throughout the series. By leaving some facets of yourself unexplained, you incite curiosity and make the reviewer intrigued to know more about you.

****2. They are believable and approachable.**** Most great protagonists seem realistic, if a bit polished. There are often flaws, mistakes, and challenges that are their own fault. They still handle them heroically, but they're there. Katniss Everdeen is a bit reckless, selfish, and has a mean streak. But her character builds throughout the story and she wins the audience's favor while always being relatable. By opening yourself up in your essay and being vulnerable you will establish rapport, show honesty, and build a connection with the reader.

****3. Their strengths and moral alignment are put on display.**** We learn very quickly that Sherlock Holmes has a dizzying intellect, an historic attention to detail, and a wholesome desire to use these skills to solve crimes and promote justice. The reader is immediately rooting for him to succeed and astound with his brilliance. By showcasing your strengths - the very best you on your very best day - and your personal values you can make the reviewer an enthusiastic advocate for your application.

#Be the Protagonist

Consider applying this to how you introduce yourself in your essay. Often this gives you a little more insight into showcasing a compelling and attractive personality on paper. Think through what is important to you, what you're most passionate about, who you want to be, and why all of those are true of you.

Select an anecdote, relationship, event, or whatever else you want to highlight in your essay, and use it to introduce ****you, the protagonist****, to the reader. As I highlighted in the examples above, use a cold open without much introduction, and focus on one or two aspects or attributes rather than everything about you. Build a connection, get them on your side, make them want

you to succeed, be likable, charming, and relatable. When you do this right, you'll have an essay only you could have written that stands out from the stack.

#Leveraging Other Characters

As mentioned above, it can be effective to use other characters in a story to share things about yourself. Often this is viewed as a more genuine, complete, disarming, or credible way of showcasing yourself. It's like the difference between a paid advertisement and a personal referral. Be careful not to lay this on too thick or make it too saccharine or you risk losing the entire point of this mechanic.

#Relatives and Friends

You will want to use caution in making your essay about a relative, especially a parent, grandparent, sibling, boyfriend, or girlfriend. For most high school students these are the closest relationships they have, so they can be a popular topic. Make sure your essay is actually about you, not your relative or significant other. You can use that relationship as a lens to show more of yourself, but don't let the focus of the essay be on anyone but you.

The point of the essay is not to encyclopedically catalog the relationship or talk about the other person, it's to showcase yourself through your explanation or narrative about the relationship. Think about why you are friends or why your relative is so significant to you. Think about what personal attributes that friend or relative brings out in you, what unique things about you are amplified by him/her, and what stories you could share that would put you on display as a protagonist.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Here's where you should be now with your supplemental essays... and a plan for getting (back) on track.

Post Body: It's October 6th. November 1st early deadlines are looming, and even if you aren't applying EA/ED/REA, you're probably getting antsy about your timeline.

There have been a lot of posts in the past week or so lamenting about essay progress, or lack thereof. I wanted to write this post to help anyone who is struggling to move forward or getting paralyzed by anxiety.

****Where should you be right now?****

In a perfect world, a student who is applying to 3-4 early schools should have a few things done right now. They should have:

1. A finished (maybe not final) draft of their common app personal statement
2. Their binding ED/REA application finished (again, perhaps not in final draft)

3. A plan for tackling the rest of their EA application essays throughout the next month.

If you don't have much or any of those completed, don't worry. There is still plenty of time to get it all done. The common app is a whole other can of worms, so for now I'm going to focus on how you can get the supplementals up to speed.

****Step 1 (tonight). Get all of your supplemental prompts on one Google Doc and organize them by essay type****

Half the battle with supplemental essays is getting organized. On the surface, supplementals look daunting because there are so many of them. But once you organize them and compare them side by side, you'll recognize that most of them fall into a few different categories that can be answered in more or less the same way.

Here are the categories that come up most frequently:

1. ****Why Us / Why Major / Academic Interest****: I used to break these out into three posts, but honestly the essays you write for each one can be pretty interchangeable. That's because your mission in all 3 is fundamentally the same: connect your personal academic interest with school research. With the "why us" part of your essay might be about cultural fit, etc., but even there you can connect back to
2. ****Extracurricular****: Essays that ask you to talk about extracurriculars or leadership experiences.
3. ****Community / Diversity****: These focus on your role in a community. Lots of people get hung up on the notion that these essays need to be about racial diversity or religious diversity, etc. In reality, you can write about almost any type of diversity / community as long as you make a clear case for why it's an active and meaningful part of your life.

I recommend using Google Docs and structuring the document around H1, H2, and H3 tags so you get a nice table of contents. Use the H1 tags for the prompt category ("Extracurricular"), the H2 for the school name ("Princeton"), and the H3 for the prompt text ("Students at Princeton are known for...". For the next school with an extracurricular prompt, drop that one in as an H2, on and on. Repeat with each topic area until you have everything organized in one place.

Why do it this way? Because it's easier to write essays when you're focusing on common topic areas, rather than going school by school. And organizing everything like this will change the framework on what you need to get done. You no longer "need to write 37 supplemental essays" --> now you need to "write five main essay types and adapt them."

****Step 2 (tomorrow night). Create a new document with the same categories that contains ONLY your early app prompts.****

Now make another document with the same tag structure, but only include your EA/ED/REA applications and prompts. Title this "November 1st Essays" or some such. This will be the document you're working in over the next month.

****Step 3 (tomorrow night). Leave comments on every prompt in your EA document outlining how you plan to approach it.****

If you haven't done ANY brainstorming, remember that all supplemental essays should do two things:

1. Showcase strengths. Every essay needs to focus on a core strength. It can be intellectual vitality, resilience, wisdom, compassion, whatever. Identify the strength that anchors the essay and stick with it.
2. (Likely) be based in your ECs. This is NOT necessarily true with common app personal statements, but with most supplementals, yeah, try to connect it up to something concrete you've done.

This framework will help you think about how to approach each essay. If you're answering Wisconsin-Madison's "Why Us" prompt...

> Tell us why you decided to apply to the University of Wisconsin-Madison. In addition, please include why you are interested in studying the major(s) you have selected. If you selected undecided please describe your areas of possible academic interest.

...you should be thinking of ways to connect your research experience dissecting owl pellets with the school's biology program. And across the whole essay, you should be trying to indicate how you're a strong student and a curious individual.

Make comments in the margins of your prompt document. You SHOULD end up with comments like this: "Reuse Columbia Academic Interest essay and connect up to school research for wisconsin - talk about their bird lab."

****Step 4 (tomorrow night). Create a to-do list at the top of the Nov. 1st supplementals doc with clear instructions for tackling your drafts.****

Once you have all those marginal comments in place and all your prompts are organized together, it's time to make a to-do list of steps you need to complete in order to move forward. Here's an example:

- * Finish the Columbia supplemental
- * Adapt the Columbia why us into a more general framework
- * Use Columbia Why Us for...
 - * Wisconsin
 - * Boulder II

* Write Boulder prompt I

****Note****: If you're REALLY pressed for time, you might want to abandon this and just drill out your ED first. There is really no/little cost for missing EA apps. But you lose a strategic tool if you can't submit good EDs. If you're reading this one October 20th and you don't have your ED done, you should probably start there and abandon the "assembly-line" process.

****Step 5 (Oct 10th-15th). Write first drafts of the common topics.****

So you have 5 "Why Us" essays, 2 "extracurricular" essays, and two annoying "unique" essays that can't be generalized (Miami Ibis anyone?).

* ****Start**** by blasting out a core draft of your Why Us essay. This might consist of an engaging hook that can be recycled for every essay and that segues into your academic interests. It might also have a couple of solid paragraphs that you can reuse and adapt for school research. E.g., one might be about professors, another about study abroad programs.

* ****Then**** do the same process for your EC essay. Pick a compelling extracurricular that says something good about you, find your angle, and focus on that strength.

* ****Next**** write the unique essays. Just go for it. Get drafts done.

****Step 6 (Oct 15th-25th). Adapt your core essays into the other similar prompts.****

You now have the rest of the month to pivot those core drafts until they align with the other prompts you have to answer. You will almost certainly have to adapt your "school research" paragraphs. You will also likely have to tweak the introductions and conclusions of your essays so they align more closely with the specific language of the other prompts.

Get this done so you have the last 5 days of the month to edit and improve. Submit your early apps before Nov. 1st!

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If you follow this process in October, you'll thank yourself in November and December. That's because you will be able to reuse your essays over and over on your RD applications. If you take this process seriously it may get you about 60-70% through the heavy lift... You'll be surprised at how versatile these essay drafts will be!

So what are you waiting for? Get writing!

***** End
of Post

Post Title: A Short Guide to Short Essays

Post Body: #Short Essays

A lot of you have started working on supplemental essays and find that the resources and tips available just aren't as detailed as [those for the common app essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/c6mckh/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/). I wanted to share some advice that I think will help you fine tune your approach. Note that in general, the shorter the word limit, the more direct the college wants you to be in your response. Don't waste space with flowery descriptions, literary devices, or meaningless details – get right to the point.

The UCs even specifically ~~plead~~ request that students do this. They want to be able to track responses and evaluate them on a rubric. A lot of standard writing advice says to be interesting and unique, but this frustrates the UC's efforts to get the answers they want. Remember that the UC system receives more applications than any other system (over 221,000). That's a ton of fluff to wade through, so you can see why they just want a clear answer.

Here are two sites you can read to get more info, straight from the horse's mouth:

<https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/how-to-apply/applying-as-a-freshman/personal-insight-questions.html>

https://admission.universityofcalifornia.edu/_assets/files/how-to-apply/uc-personal-questions-guide-freshman.pdf

Note that other colleges might be more lenient on how you approach this (e.g. UChicago is still fine with intellectual playfulness / quiriness), so tailor your writing to each application. Regardless of your approach make sure you use the space to showcase something new about you that isn't shown in the rest of your application.

#The Strategy

The word limits on supplemental essays can be crazy low (really Stanford? 50 words!?), but let me show you a strategy to really take advantage of these short responses. Keep this framework in mind for all of your short answer essays because it's a very effective model. It doesn't need to be formulaic, but referencing this as you write and edit will help you stay on the right track. Note that this same framework can be helpful for interviews too.

****Every response you give should have three parts:****

****The Answer.**** This is the actual response to the question. So if the prompt asks for your favorite subject, you say

>"Chemistry."

This is sort of bare minimum, but you already know how to do this.

****The Evidence.**** This is something that supports your answer, makes it credible, reveals more about you, and cements it into the reviewer's memory.

>"Chemistry, because I really admired my grandfather and he was a chemist."

Now you have a good response because it shows family is important to you and that you have a reason behind your answer. You also sound more like a real person with a real interest.

****The Interpretation.**** What does your answer mean? Why is it important to you? What core values, character attributes, strengths, or personal qualities does it demonstrate?

>"Chemistry, because I really admired my grandfather and he was a chemist. Sometimes he would show me stuff and it always seemed like magic to me. I still feel that magic in the lab."

Now you have a great answer. It feels personal and expressive of who you are. It shows how you think and is fully believable. It sticks with the reviewer and makes you stand out. There's passion, character, honesty, and likability in there. This will wow the reviewer and leave a strong impression.

This doesn't mean you have to give an epic treatise or divide your answer into chapters. You can still keep it simple and to-the-point. And you still have tons of room to elaborate, make other points, add more examples, take it deeper, or get creative with it. Your evidence or interpretation could be something you allude to rather than something you explain directly. In these short essays, try to connect your response to yourself somehow. Show something about how you think, what matters to you & why, your motivations, aspirations, core values, personal strengths, foundational beliefs, and personality traits. If you have questions feel free to reach out to me via PM or at www.bettercollegeapps.com.

***** End of Post

Post Title: How to Approach the Common App Essay - Part 3

Post Body: Hey guys. Part 2 of this series got buried yesterday (Thanks Shitpost Wednesdays), so if you missed it, make sure to check out the links for Part 1 and Part 2 below. Today's post is going to focus on ****topics to AVOID for the Common App Essay****. A lot of similar information has been posted on A2C about essay topics to avoid, but I just wanted to add my take on cliché or cringy topics.

Last thing before we get started - I've read some great essays that use some of these "bad" topics and have had students get into some top schools with them. There's not really such thing as an off limits topic, but there are some topics that will make an AO's eyes roll and still influence their overall assessment of you. Sure, a really amazingly written essay can overcome just about any snap judgement, but why take a chance on getting this reaction in the first place? This advice is especially important for students who don't feel particularly strong as writers.

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[Part 1: Understanding the Common App Essay + Demonstrating your best qualities](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/heic2o/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_1/)

[Part 2: What to write about](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hf4awf/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_2/)

****Part 3: What NOT to write about****

[Part 4: Demonstrating grit](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hgbcai/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_4/)

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What NOT to write about

Not all topics are created equal

Knowing what topics to avoid is just as important as knowing what topics to pursue. College admissions officers read stacks of essays every day during the admissions process, and based on our experience, some subjects work better than others. We have included those topics below along with explanations for why these subjects don't work well. Please note that these rules are not hard and fast. Rather, they are meant to serve as guidance for you as you narrow down your topic.

List of accomplishments

Some students turn their Common App Essay into an extended resume. They list accomplishments and add insight and context, but together, they fail to tell a story. Avoid doing this for two reasons: First, it sounds braggy, which is probably not the quality you chose to highlight in Part 1. Second, it does little to answer the question "who are you." You are not the sum of your accomplishments.

Tragedies

Many students are tempted to talk about life-defining tragedies, like divorces or deaths. These experiences are absolutely formative and legitimate, but they don't make for great Common App Essays. Again, rather than answering "who are you", these topics tend to involve a lot of circumstantial explanation, which uses up valuable word space. But besides that, you want to

leave your admissions officer nodding in interest when they put down your essay, not saying, “oof.”

Consider that many colleges have an [additional information section](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2019/09/20/how-to-utilize-the-common-app-additional-information-section/>) in which you can discuss any important factors you want the admissions officers to consider while they read your essay. If you have suffered a profound loss, especially one that influenced your grades or academic performance, it is a good idea to explain that in the optional essay.

“The most important thing/person in my life”

These subjects are a great way to demonstrate passion about the things you care about, but ultimately they tend to focus on something else, rather than you and your experience. You are the star of this story, not your role model.

Sports

Sports are not inherently bad to write about, but be extra mindful of cliché subjects. “My whole team was counting on me to score the winning goal, and when I did, I felt happy” is just as boring and irritating as “My whole team was counting on me to score the winning goal and when I didn’t, I was sad.” Themes of teamwork, discipline, and perseverance are all excellent, but consider how you can manipulate your sports story to be unique and avoid clichés.

“Do-good” experiences

So many students want to write about [Habitat for Humanity](<https://www.habitat.org/>), tutoring kids, caroling at nursing homes, or mission trips to developing parts of the country or the world. These essays often have the same conclusion: “[I thought that I was going to (place) to (perform act of service), but in the end, I got way more than I gave.”](<https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/14/opinion/sunday/to-get-to-harvard-go-to-haiti.html>) Unless these trips are part of an ongoing service effort that you can demonstrate over a period of time, admissions officers are skeptical of them. Many students use service trips to ‘check a box’ on their college resume, so mentioning it feels insincere. Moreover, it’s hard to not make them sound either self-congratulatory or fake-humble.

However, this is not to say that a service trip can’t serve as a setting for your story. If you went to build a school in Cambodia and want to tie your observations to your overall study of the socioeconomics of the Khmer Rouge, then of course it makes a good setting. Likewise, if you were inspired to action by something you saw at the tutoring center, then it’s okay to talk about the birth of this inspiration.

“I’m so lucky”

While keeping a journal of gratitude is a great life practice, it's not great for the Common App Essay. It can come across as privileged to make a list of all the things that have gone well in your life, so the central premise of your essay should not be that you are a lucky person.

However, if you are a student who comes from a family of means, you might have struggled with the following question: *Are my problems significant enough to write about? They seem very stupid compared to other people's problems.* First of all, everyone has valid problems, you included. But second of all, it's good that you are thinking this way, because being self-aware is very important in your main essay, especially if you're going to talk about something like a rare opportunity, horseback riding, a fancy internship, or other similarly exclusive experience. In this case, it is good to acknowledge the "I'm so lucky" aspect of your story, but be brief. Demonstrate some self-awareness and [self-discovery](<https://admissions.yale.edu/bulldogs-blogs/max/2016/10/28/self-discovery-admissions-process>), then proceed with your story.

Humor

Humor is awesome and so are funny people, but not everyone's sense of humor is the same, so telling a funny story is a risk. If the admissions officer doesn't think it's funny, then your ship has sunk. The Common App Essay is a place for you to demonstrate sophistication and maturity as a student, so building a story around humor may undermine these aspects of your personality. You don't want the officer questioning whether you are mature enough to handle college. However, one or two small quips can be a great way to show your personality. Just make sure that your jokes can't be perceived as offensive in any way.

Sensitive topics

For your Common App Essay, "[dinner conversation](<https://www.thespruce.com/dinner-conversation-etiquette-1216964>)" rules apply. It's risky to talk about polarizing topics like politics or religion, and don't say anything that would make your great grandmother blush. Something like political activism might be a great thing to talk about, but avoid turning your main essay into your manifesto. While the admissions officers are meant to be impartial, they are also human beings, and you'd hate for a disagreement of beliefs to be the reason you are rejected.

Illegal experiences

The time you were arrested or almost arrested is a bad thing to write about. Similarly, the time you tried or didn't try drugs or alcohol is a bad thing to write about. Likewise, the time you stole something (even though you felt super bad about it and came clean later) is a bad thing to write about. are you sensing the pattern? Don't do it!

The Un-Essay

These days, students are always trying to set themselves apart. They think that the best way to stand out is to take a non-traditional approach, like turning their essay into a screenplay, an interview, or a piece of code. We discourage these approaches. First, you are far from the first to try such things, so it will not be perceived as unique. Second, it's very difficult to do well. Third, you are often sacrificing quality of content for novelty of form. There are times to play it safe in life-- your main essay is one of them.

An essay about how essays are stupid

Yes, we know that it's hard to condense your whole being into 650-words, and it's even harder to use these words to argue for why you should be allowed to go to college. This is implicit in the process and you do not need to point out the faults in the admissions process. To do so makes you seem angry and immature, not wise and aloof as you hope it does.

Remember that these rules are not hard and fast, and there will always be circumstances that call for you to write about one of the things on the no-no list. These examples are here to help give you direction, not crush your dreams. If you are unsure about the story you've chosen, talk about it with your family, teachers, mentors, or friends. They know you well and might have great ideas about how to show off your best self.

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Note: If you can't wait for Part 4, the full Common App Essay guide can be found **here** (<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2020/06/16/what-should-i-write-about-in-the-common-app-essay/>) **on our blog.**

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***** End
of Post

Post Title: Last Minute "Why X" & Supplement Advice from a current Brown sophomore
Post Body: * Don't tell the college what they have and why that's so great. These essays are not a chance to jerk the college off.

* **BAD** I chose Brown because of the open curriculum and because the school has amazing professors that I could use to learn!

* This is bad because **Brown** already knows they have great professors and that the open curriculum is a drawing point. Find something more specific that truly says something unique about **you** and how you could positively affect the school culture / environment while furthering a passion.

* **GOOD** I chose Brown because of X club that I recently read about in the Brown Daily Harold; I am passionate about X, and would love to lead X to Y, Z.

* Brown wants passionate leaders and people who will change the campus for the better. They want to see that you'll improve yourself while also improving the environment and people around you. This applies for any college.

* Everything you write should say something about you.

* If you're writing something, and you're like "huh, this doesn't really say something about me, but sure does say something about X," then you need to erase what you wrote and structure it differently.

* The college you're applying to doesn't care about the intricacies of basket weaving; but they ****do**** care about how basket weaving has changed your life and has allowed you to do X.

* Write your essays with the admissions officers as the audience, and remember who they are.

* AOs probably won't understand everything you write about, if it's a really specific passion, and that's OK. ****Remember to keep your audience in mind.****

* We subconsciously fill in the blanks for our writing, but the AOs won't do that. ****Read your essay as if you only had common sense knowledge about everything****, and if it still makes sense and is digestible, then that's lit. But if you think they probably won't know what you're talking about, or they won't understand the significance of something, either explain it differently or remove it.

* Don't use flowery language.

* If you can say something in one word, don't say it in five.

* From my UI/UX course this year, "Using big words might not be helpful. Aim not to impress your reader with your vocabulary, but with the quality of your work. If simpler words make your work stand out more, use those."

Anyway, if you're reading through this, you clearly care about seeing yourself succeed. You'll do great :D

***** End of Post

Post Title: The "scum polisher" method: My system for getting through your worst essay ideas to find your best ones.

Post Body: Most of you are probably encountering the first of two massive writing hurdles that you ****must**** get through to apply to college. The first hurdle: ****Generating essay ideas****.

(The second is actually writing the essays.)

Today I'm sharing the method I use with my students for breaking through low-quality ideas to discover the stuff that actually works. I call it the "scum polisher" method of idea generation. Uhh, trademark.

It's a technique that I use in ****all**** my writing, not just college essays. It will help you break through the "Crap Idea Zone" that we all face as writers.

****First, though: What is the Crap Idea Zone?****

It's a white-walled room precisely the color of a blank Notion/Word/Pages document. It's a place where the lights are on—but they're dim and always flickering. The Crap Idea Zone is where **MOST PEOPLE** spend **MOST OF THEIR TIME** when they're trying to come up with ideas.

In the Crap Idea Zone our worst ideas rush at us, one after another. Unfortunately—because writing is hard—we often accept these first ideas as "good enough" and hold onto them for dear life. Or else, demoralized by our mediocrity, we stand up and walk away from the computer entirely.

But to write well, you have to stick with it. There's just no other choice. If you don't, you'll never break through to a truly powerful idea.

To escape your worst ideas, you must become a scum polisher

Bear with me for a short fable. Ahem.

I own an airstream trailer from the 1970s. When I bought it two years ago, it was caked with slime and rust. I still remember towing it home, looking at it with a mix of disgust and regret. What had I done? It was nasty and I had 0 faith that I could restore it. But I was committed. I bought a buffer kit, got up on a ladder, and started polishing. And slowly, inch by inch, the layer of grime peeled back to reveal a pristine aluminum surface.

****Folks, I submit that to find good, even great topics for your college essay, you too must become a scum polisher.****

Your best ideas are trapped under the greasy surface of your bad ideas. Whether you uncover them or not is a factor of little more than elbow grease.

Here's the process I use with my students that I want you to try.

Step #1: Get out every single bad idea

When you sit down at your computer tonight, I want you to open your arms to your worst bad ideas.

Embrace them. Write them out, one after another. Don't feel bad that the ideas suck—that's the point! Just go through them calmly, one by one. Fill the damn page with them.

As you get deeper into the scum, two things will begin to happen.

* The ideas will stop flowing so easily. You'll start having to ****dig**** to come up with the next truly terrible idea.

* As you start to dig for ****bad**** ideas, the ideas you do come up with will gradually start to get better.

Here's why I think this process works.

As you stare directly into the bright, sickening sunlight of your worst ideas, you will start to hone in on what makes them so bad. We are learning creatures. Even if you aren't a gifted writer, you start spotting (or smelling) the telltale signs of your own bullshit.

Are you a cliché fiend? Fond of bad metaphors that you saw in a science fiction movie? Prone to over-exaggeration and hyperbole? ****You can run, but you can't hide****. As your supply of easy ideas and half-baked connections dwindles, you'll find that the speed at which you can run from the truth lowers, and lowers, and lowers, until you can't escape. Soon you'll have no choice but to reach deep for something meaningful, genuine, and (likely) fairly simple.

(You may glimpse the seed of this idea in one of your earlier bad ones—it's OK to iterate and to work on your low-quality ideas until they become passable.)

****Sooner or later, you will land on an idea that gives you a warm little buzzing feeling inside****. This is the feeling we get when we've birthed something that's we are actually proud of—something we are genuinely thrilled to explore.

I obviously can't tell you whether your specific idea has merit or not. All I can say is you should seek out that little buzzing feeling and, when you find it, ****go** all in****.

Your decent idea might explore a connection between two areas of your life. It might go deep into the importance of your relationship with a family member. It might be about what you love about Hamlet's Ophelia. I have no idea.

Once you have it, though, take a break. Let the idea sit there on the page. I recommend taking at least 24 hours to mull it over.

Step #2: Take your decent ideas and keep polishing

Ok, you have your decent idea. Good job. Most writers never make it this far. They get tired or demoralized while they're still well within the Crap Idea Zone. They never break through to into the warm and fertile pastures that lay beyond.

But your work isn't over yet.

Ideas are like sentences or lines of code. They can be expressed with less or more elegance. You can usually polish a decent idea into a good one through time, revision, and outlining.

Over time, simple ideas take on new resonances and gain depth. This doesn't happen passively. That's why we have revision. Revision is as the active mechanism for deepening an idea. The more times you come back to an idea, play with part of it, add new things in, take them out—the better the idea will become.

(Of course, [you can take this process too far](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/p335ry/diminishing_returns_are_ruining_your_life_and/). Beware the point where tinkering no longer yields positive returns.)

Usually at this point, we aren't actually writing the essay itself. We are probably still be in outline mode. That's OK. The outline is where a lot of your structural issues, big concepts, and "so what's" should be worked out.

In the outline phase, you are trying to answer a few big questions.

* **Core idea**: What is the core value, or "thesis," that you are is at the center of your idea? If someone were to read your essay, what single quality or idea about you would they take from it? Be simple, simple, simple. Some people might cringe here, but what is the "brand" you're conveying with your idea?

* **Prompt alignment**: Which prompt do you think your idea could answer? Prompts are helpful tools for reverse engineering the structure and form of your essay. If your idea doesn't fit squarely within one of the Common App prompts, try **writing your own prompt** custom fit to your idea. You can always submit under the "choose your own prompt" option.

* **Narrative structure**: What are the key narrative moments you need to execute your idea? Not all essays have to be narratively driven, but **every** essay needs stories, characters, and events to anchor it.

Keep working that outline. Keep it simple. Talk to a (trusted) advisor, friend, family member. See how they react and see if your conversation sparks further ideas. Return to your outline and add or subtract.

Step #3: Prune and "kill your darlings"

Ok. Now take your outline and pause. Hopefully step #2 was productive and generated new possibilities and directions in which you could take your decent idea. In fact, you may no longer be working with a decent idea—but one that's actually good.

Here comes the hard part.

It's time to take a second look at those ideas and prune. You may have gone deep into some details or back-story. You may have added details into your outline that, on second inspection, don't really support the main point or idea of the essay. **Remember, we are striving for simplicity.**

It's time to follow Stephen King's advice and "kill your darlings." Let go of the side-narratives or non-essentials. Prune until you are left with a simple story, a clear guiding value, and a spare structure that aligns with a prompt.

This is painful. Especially if writing is hard for you. But you must do it. An over-bloated essay, even if it's built around a fundamentally solid concept, will do you no favors.

Conclusion: It's possible to polish your own scum without a writing advisor

If you think about it, "scum polishing" is an apt description for what a college counselor does. The art of essay consulting is no more than the ability to distinguish bad, easy ideas from deeper, better ones. Some of us have read thousands of essays. **We've seen all the bad ideas. We know scum when we see it. And we also know what polished aluminum looks like.**

But I'm telling you here and now that you can polish your own scum.

Sit down, start ideating, and just float around with your bad ideas. Give them a big smooch, then send them on their way. But make sure to write them down, or they may rear their head later on.

Above all, be patient and diligent. Be willing to put in elbow grease. You'll land a good idea sooner than you think.

\- Alex

***** End
of Post

Post Title: 8 of the biggest common app mistakes I've seen in 200+ essays by redditors

Post Body: Happy Early Application Eve!

To help ease your pre-submission stress, I want to give you a few concrete things to look out for as you do your final essay revisions.

These tips come from the most common mistakes I see students making in their essays. They're also relatively quick and easy fixes—you can usually resolve any of these issues with a few strategic changes, carefully-written sentences, or simply adding or deleting details.

And these are tips/mistakes drawn from reading over 200+ essays by Redditors, so they're relevant y'all.

****SHOW THE LESSON****: Make sure your essay gets to the point within the first couple of paragraphs — specifically by showing off why it's a personal essay as soon as you can. A lot of students write essays that are all setup — they tell a story or share an experience, and it takes a while for the reader to understand how these events helped the writer develop as a person / adopt new values / learn a lesson (you get the idea). It doesn't always need to be SUPER explicit, but your essay should have both story ***and*** reflection throughout.

****LIMIT THE NEGATIVITY****: Make sure your essay doesn't read as too "negative." What I mean by this is simple: essays about conflict, difficulty, mental health, or stress can be hard to pull off because they require the reader to digest more challenging content before getting to the glorious reveal about ****why**** these struggles have improved you as a person. If there's too much difficulty in an essay, it can turn the reader off. So a good phrase I use is "more phoenix, fewer ashes" — that is, introduce the problem quickly and then work hard to quickly shift the essay around to focus on how you grew from the experience. This is usually really easy to make happen. Just shift your focus a bit — mess with the ratios of the essay. Cut down on the challenge section and beef up the learnings.

****SHOW ACTION-STEPS****: Your reader should see the concrete actions you've taken to address the situation / get involved / help make a change in your community / learn more about the issue... You get the idea! Don't shy away from details! Your essay should explicitly describe the steps you took to address whatever problem it is you're writing about. If you aren't writing about a "problem," you can disregard this piece of advice — but there should still be action (not just intellectualization) in your essay.

****PROOFREAD****: Proofreading is an important step not to skip. If your language is unclear, then your reader will have a hard time understanding the overall message of your essay. You don't want that. Read your essay line-by-line and do detailed edits. If you need help with these, then ask for help from a trusted friend or mentor.

****STREAMLINE****: While details are good, some essays are overladen with details. If you're over the word limit, you likely need to heavily pare things down. Often this happens because you have separate threads going on simultaneously. If that sounds like you, you should try to streamline your examples to focus on a core theme. Too many details can be totally deadly to an otherwise high-quality essay.

****ELIMINATE INCONGRUITY****: College essays should revolve around one main theme. But some essays have a setup that doesn't match too well with the "conclusion." Sometimes, essays feel like they're written about two things: there's the first "act" of the essay, where someone might be telling a story, and then there's the second "act," where the writer suddenly pivots to a conclusion or to discussing a project that... Feels like it doesn't fit. If you read through your essay and realize that you're guilty of this, try to ask yourself, "What is the core message I want

to express with my essay?” Then dedicate EVERYTHING to bringing home that conclusion. It’s much better to focus on one main theme than to try to deal with too much in your essay.

****DON'T OVER-WRITE****: Numerous essays find themselves to be loquacious in their endeavors to relay a consequential moment of appreciable change a writer underwent. Wait...what?! That’s right, some college essays read like...well...Like you busted out a thesaurus! :) We’re all guilty of it from time to time (or maybe you’re just in the habit of writing at a very high level of diction). Either way, if your essay sounds like you’re trying hard to sound smart, focus on toning down your language a bit. Go sentence by sentence or read your essay aloud to make sure it sounds like your voice, and simplify when needed. If one of your essays is guilty of this, it’s likely that your others are, too.

****FOCUS ON YOURSELF****: If your essay is about how another person has significantly impacted you, then it’s worth making sure that the essay’s focus is ultimately on yourself. You don’t want your readers left wondering about what your story means to *you*. Remember that admissions officers want to know about you, not about your family members or friends. If you notice that your essay focuses too much on someone else, try asking yourself, “What is it that I want an admissions officer to know about me through this story?” You can also look for pronouns—you, he, she, I, etc.--to get a quick idea of who you’re talking about the most.

There you go! Write clearly, incorporate concrete details when you can, and keep your essay’s core theme in mind throughout. Most importantly, don’t be afraid to submit when you’re ready.

You’ve got this 🙌

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Hello Beautiful Seniors, It's GO TIME! Some Handy, Helpful Hints to get you through the next ten days or so :) (including Why College Essay tips and some Personal Essay Tips)

Post Body: It's been exciting watching so many of you getting those apps in, not to mention the many amazing acceptances and the strength and resilience of those of you who didn't get exactly what you were hoping for! Congrats to you all, and if you are finished with apps, please hang out here and offer some helpful advice where you can.

****First, a little A2C Housekeeping stuff:**** Let’s keep the memes and jokes down to a minimum or none until after the first of the year, so people’s legit questions and concerns can be addressed. I’ll be removing the jokes and memes as I see them, so don’t get your feelings hurt. Also, I’ll definitely remove any jokes about suicide I see. It’s not a joking matter.

So, here you go, my fellow procrastinators! I’ve tried to create a list of some helpful stuff for you as you head into this last week. Congrats and good luck to you all. 💙 🍀

****Here are a few reminders for finalizing your apps:****

*If you are still in the weeds or even if you haven't yet begun to dive in 🤪, I want to remind you to take time today and the next couple of days to just ****breathe.**** Write your little asses off and do the best you can, but remember to pause and breathe.

*DO NOT wait until the very last minute or even hour to submit. Something will go wrong. Your electricity will go out. You'll come down with flu. Internet will go out. The zombie apocalypse will arrive. Your credit card won't work. The website will crash. Your pet will have a crisis. Try to give yourself a day, but at the very least give yourself five hours cushion time.

* Get up from your computer and walk around every hour or so. Go outside. Let your brain reset occasionally. Those brain batteries definitely need time to recharge.

*If you are celebrating Christmas, Hanukkah, Kwanzaa, or some other holiday, celebrate. Take the break for that day or days and enjoy your family and friends. Even if you don't celebrate, take time during this vacation to enjoy your family and friends.

* Be sure to preview your essays after loading them into the app, and see that the spacing is the way you want it. Chrome will automatically bold your essays. You can easily unbold.

*For many colleges it's ok for your supplementary materials like LORs, transcript, and test scores to arrive after the app. Check the colleges' websites to determine their deadlines.

*If you haven't sent your test scores yet to schools that require official scores, do that today -- right now.

*Read your essays OUT LOUD — to someone else if possible. You will notice missing words and funny verb tenses. Listen and feel for bumps. That's where you need to edit. Make sure it sounds like you. For more editing tips, you can go to my list of editing tips [here.](<https://medium.com/@admissionsmom/admissionsmoms-quick-and-dirty-tips-for-editing-college-essays-49dbcf555504?sk=744bcf34e8f0cc44714558a751477d45>)

* If it sounds like you've swallowed a thesaurus 🦎, go back and use words you know and understand. It's really disconcerting as a reader to feel that bump with a word that just isn't right. Use words you know. And understand. Thesaurus words are actually one of the first clues to a reader that you struggle with writing and are not familiar with the process. Use. Your. Own. Damn. Words.

* Stop and breathe. You might start feeling overwhelmed while you're writing; just take 5 minutes and close your eyes and breathe. You will be amazed at how much better you feel.

* In your essays, your tone should be casual and conversational. Like you're talking to an older cousin you respect. It's ok to use contractions, and imo, you should.

*Eliminate adverbs, especially all verys, trulys, and reallys. Also, eliminate your thats

* After submitting, **look through and make sure all the parts went through. Especially check to make sure that your supplements were submitted. You often need to go back and send them after paying and sending the common app.**

****More Personal Essay Stuff****

Your essay should be about YOU and who you are, not necessarily what you do. This isn't the space to expound on your ECs. Focus instead on who you are, what you think, believe, and value. For more info about essays, you can go to my [personal essay post.](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/ee94l2/admissionsmoms_last_minute_guide_to_super_quick/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x) Here's a trick I use to see if an essay is personal enough. See if you can start sentences with at least one each of the following. If not, it might not be personal enough: I believe, I think, I imagine, To me, You see, I mean, You know, I value, I remember

****Why College Essay Hints****

*The most important thing to remember about a Why College essay is that it's really a Why You Essay. This essay is just as much about you as the college. Why do they need you on their campus? What will you bring? So, in essence, this should be an essay that only you could write about only this school. If any sentence could apply to any other school or applicant, scratch it.

*Here's an idea from College Essay Guy: take a sheet of paper and divide it down the middle. On one side list all the awesome stuff about you. On the other side list all the amazing stuff about the college. Where do you see overlaps? That's the substance of your essay.

*Make sure you include specifics in your essay. For specifics about your college, do your research:*If you've visited, say so. And talk about what you saw and liked and why it was specifically appealing to you.

*Read the student newspaper online. Find events and articles that appeal to you.*Follow the admissions department on social media. Mention something they've profiled recently and why it's specifically interesting to you.

*Read the website, especially the admissions website, carefully. Most college websites tell you exactly what they're looking for. Are you that person? If so, demonstrate to them why. If not, well, maybe this school isn't a great fit for you.

*Check out classes that look interesting to you. Look at course lists on the website. Tell them why this would be a great class for you. What will you get out of it? What can you contribute?

*Find professors that appeal to you and mention them by name and why they appeal to you. (ratemyprofessor.com can be your friend here).

*Check out clubs and activities on campus. What can you bring to the campus and how do you see yourself being involved? What do you bring to those clubs based on your background and experiences or interests?

*Even though these essays can often be short, they are super important and must show that you've taken your time, given thought, highlighted yourself, and done your research. Every word counts.

****EC and Activities Info****

Keep in mind that basically anything that you do outside of class work, homework, and test prep is considered an activity. That includes jobs, family and home responsibilities, elderly or child care, personal projects, interests, and hobbies, and independent research, in addition to the more typical research, internships, and in and out of school community service, clubs, and sports.

****Most Important Info****

Recognize that this learning process is what college admissions is really all about. Reflect on how much you are learning about yourself right now as you are going through this. No matter where you go to college, you will be more in tune with who you are for having gone through this journey of self-exploration. Be proud of it.

This is the part you can control. Show them the best you on your very best day.

Ok! That's a long enough procrastination break -- now giddy up; get back to work! 🙌🙌🙌 You got this!

Remember to breathe,

💙 admissionsmom

(Oh! One more thing - try using Chrome if you aren't using it already and you're having trouble submitting.)

***** End
of Post

Post Title: The ScholarGrade Essay Series Part 2: Throw Away Everything You Learned In English Class

Post Body: There have been an increasing number of juniors visiting this sub asking for advice about writing essays. I will be posting a new installment every week or two with more insights and advice - these are all excerpts or digests of my step-by-step essay guide. This is also a great place to ask questions because I will answer every single question in the comments. You

can find out more about me at www.bettercollegeapps.com. Here's a link to [Part 1 in this series - How To Start An Essay And Show, Don't Tell](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/baotoj/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_1_how_to_start/)

#Part 2 - Throw Away Everything You Learned In English Class

#Most Essays Are Not Very Good

Most essays AOs read are very boring. They are the same old tropes, overused topics, and standard style. I once had a discussion with a former admissions officer and we agreed that most application essays are not very good, even those written by top students. Students don't put in the effort, take advantage of the help available to them, or do the introspection necessary. They end up procrastinating and producing a shoddy product.

Most students aren't aware of the typical low quality of application essays. They love to rate their own essays highly because they get good grades in English class. This couldn't be further from the truth. Many times, being good at academic writing actually makes you worse at writing expressively about yourself. If you use an academic tone and voice, it doesn't seem genuine and personal. It feels like you're selling your intellect rather than sharing your personality. Also, high English grades are quite common, but other reviewers and I have agreed that outstanding essays are fairly rare - less than one in a hundred.

#English Class Isn't Helping

A big part of the problem is that the AP English curriculum essentially teaches students to write bland, uniform, predictable essays that are expository but little else. It ignores or undervalues narrative writing, storytelling, creativity, and originality. So everyone knows how to write a canned 5 paragraph essayTM in an hour, but no one knows how to capture the reader's attention, present a compelling picture, and make points by showing them rather than simply coming out and saying them directly.

My brother is an essay specialist who teaches classes on essay writing and college admissions. I was discussing this with him, and he said one of the biggest problems with most students' writing is that it's too direct. One of the most common criticisms he writes in margins is "I don't believe you." He means that there is no evidence, support, or even emotional appeal that makes the statements or claims seem reasonable and true. You can never say, ["I'm an excellent creative writer"](https://www.reddit.com/r/AskReddit/comments/b9zn21/admissions_officersessay_coaches_of_reddit_what/ek8e0wp/) in an essay without being scornfully tossed aside.

Actually it's even harder to do well at this because you're writing about yourself, so any direct statements you make on your own behalf are likely taken with a grain of salt and used to assess your character as well. Going full [/r/IamVerySmart](#) or repeatedly hitting the AO in the face with

a thesaurus only makes it worse. So instead of saying good things about yourself directly, show those good things in your story. Let the narrative present your character. One of the best ways to stand out from the applicant pool is to have an interesting and compelling essay that breaks the mold and makes the reader like you and believe you.

#How To Tell Your Story And Be Creative

So how do you do this? Many attempts to be creative end up being cringeworthy, so how can you make it work? Think about it this way. In the [opening scene of the movie *The Greatest Showman*](<https://youtu.be/JDjTQNOvyTg>), we are introduced to PT Barnum as a child. The first scene is him gazing through the window of a storefront imagining his high flying circus and theatrical performance. As his dream fades, he is whisked away by his father to a job site where his sense of humor and lighthearted attitude get him in trouble as he flirts with his eventual wife. The entire sequence takes just a few minutes to unfold, but we learn ****so much**** about Barnum - his bold personality, lofty dreams & aspirations, noble motivations, real struggles, persistent creativity, inexorable imagination, and even his wholesome morals. We are drawn to him, captivated by him, and curious to know more. ****This is what you want your essay to do.**** It should introduce you in much the same way - as the protagonist of your life and of your college application. Through an anecdote, vignette, or even a soliloquy, you can show who you are, what motivates you, what dreams possess you, where your passions lie, and your ethics. It's up to you to craft a story that serves as a microcosm of all of this.

Why is this approach so much better? Imagine if *The Greatest Showman* had opted to open with a documentary style instead - the cinematographic equivalent of an AP 5 paragraph essay. The movie opens with generic orchestra music and panning stills of black and white photos of 19th century New York. A narrator begins droning about the humble upbringing of the boy who would become *The Greatest Showman*.

>"PT Barnum was a clever and creative boy with a flair for the dramatic. His sense of humor and lofty dreams were a delight to all who knew him. There was a goodness within him that salvaged the dreariness of his family's poverty."

Five minutes in, the only people left in the theatre have fallen asleep. Note that even though the writing and diction are "good" by AP English class standards and it technically says many of the same things, it just doesn't paint a picture. There's no emotion, no connection, nothing personal. It doesn't feel real. On top of that, the claims of greatness are easily glossed over as subconsciously, in the margin of the viewer's mind, the criticism scrolls: "I don't believe you." Like being your own character witness in court, it simply isn't credible.

****This is what it's like when you use that formulaic, academic style in your essays.**** AOs are not impressed, but it's even worse because they've just finished reading 50 other essays that were just like yours. It would be like watching 50 biographical documentaries in a row. Can you imagine how a film like *The Greatest Showman* would stand out after all that? The AO would lose themselves in it completely - which is exactly your goal.

Throw away everything you learned in AP English, and go be the Greatest Showman.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: How to Approach the Common App Essay - Part 4

Post Body: # Demonstrating Grit

We've come to the end of our series, and I hope that it's been helpful to anyone getting started on writing their Common App essays. Ultimately, there are a number of approaches to writing this essay - this just happens to be the approach that works for us.

This last part is about grit, a buzz word that a lot of people throw around but don't really understand why it's important or how to demonstrate it. When giving feedback on Common App essays, we do try to help students integrate grittiness as another quality to highlight in the story they choose to write about, as I'll explain later in this post.

If you missed the first parts of the series, definitely try to read them before continuing on in this post, as they work better if read in succession. The links for the previous posts are below. Enjoy!

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[Part 1: Understanding the Common App Essay + Demonstrating your best qualities](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/heic2o/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_1/)

[Part 2: What to write about](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hf4awf/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_2/)

[Part 3: What NOT to write about](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hfqung/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_3/)

****Part 4: Demonstrating grit****

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What is grit?

By now, you have most likely encountered Angela Duckworth's TEDTalk from back in 2013, called [Grit: The power of passion and perseverance](https://www.ted.com/talks/angela_lee_duckworth_grit_the_power_of_passion_and_perseverance) (note: If you haven't watched it, we highly recommend it). In her talk,

Duckworth describes how metrics like [IQ and school performance](<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S0191886912001894>) are not good indicators of future success. Rather, she discovered that independently of how academically clever or how financially well off a student is, [grit is the most powerful indicator of how a student will perform](<https://www.forbes.com/sites/lisaquast/2017/03/06/why-grit-is-more-important-than-iq-when-youre-trying-to-become-successful/#a5bded17e45c>). Since then, colleges, who were long bound by the fallibility of test scores and GPAs, have also begun to explore the power of grit and factor it into their decision making process.

So first of all, what is grit? Grit is a non-cognitive personality trait based on an individual's perseverance of effort combined with the passion for a particular long-term goal or end state. We can break this down into two parts: passion and perseverance.

Demonstrating passion

Passion is a word that has always personally irritated me because it is used so noncommittally. I hear people say “I’m passionate about dogs/cooking/working out/you name it” all the time, but if we are digging to the core essence of what passion is all about, you should only have space for one or two true, passionate interests. This is what admissions officers want to see, and it is what you should strive to offer them in your main essay.

Now, a couple of notes: First, it is helpful if your passion serves others in a way. For example, if you are really into entrepreneurship, then you should consider how your innovations will help the world. If you are passionate about ballet, then you should consider how artistic expression is good for the world in general. Second, it is helpful if your passion serves a larger goal that is somehow attainable through the path you are choosing. If you are passionate about cooking but applying for a mathematics major, then take care to connect the mathematical aspects of cooking to the theme of your essay. If you are passionate about working with kids but you are applying for a psychology major, then demonstrate how the two go hand in hand.

Demonstrating perseverance

The key here is [longevity](<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/11/01/education/edlife/what-college-admissions-wants.html>); passion should not be viewed as a fleeting or newfound interest. The only way to demonstrate grit is to show that you have been chipping away at some larger goal for an extended period of time. In doing so, you will have demonstrated perseverance, or “stick-to-it-ness”. Perseverance is an incredibly valuable quality in a candidate because it gives admissions officers the peace of mind that you will see your attendance through to graduation and go on to build a meaningful career in something that you care about. If you can show that you will provide four years of solid attendance, good grades, participation, and tuition, then you are a dream candidate.

As you can see, those who chose an Admissions Angle early in their high school careers are at a distinct advantage when it comes to demonstrating perseverance, longevity, and grit. But any interest that has held your attention for at least two years should be good enough to mention.

Showing that you are gritty

As you have probably figured out, the secret to demonstrating grit is showing that you have been passionate about something for a while and that you have worked hard to explore and grow this passion. However, this does not need to be the main essence of your essay. It is okay if you only bring it up tangentially.

For example: If your essay is about how you spent a summer building a canoe with your Grandfather, this in and of itself demonstrates the grit to see a large project to completion. But you can apply this experience further by showing that the lessons you learned (like measure twice, cut once) were helpful when you went on to found the Blockchain Club at your school. Just by mentioning your Admissions Angle (in this case, blockchain), you will reinforce your interests in the mind of the admissions officer. Then, you can drop similar references in your supplemental essays and, of course, your resume.

Concluding thoughts

Through what to talk about, what not to talk about, and demonstrating grit, we have offered you a lot of criteria for what we believe forms the perfect essay. However, you may be struggling to keep track at this point, or you might feel that the window is too narrow to achieve.

Remember that the Common App Essay is meant to require a great deal of thought. It is meant to require a great deal of effort. The process of writing the Common App Essay should take a long time, if you are following a [good essay timeline](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2020/04/16/the-college-essay-timeline/>).

Our number one advice for deciding what to write about in the Common App Essay is to talk to people who know you well. Ask your mom or dad! Talk to your teachers, coaches, mentors, or... dare I say... siblings! They have unique insight on you that you don't have on yourself. In the meantime, collect essay samples, [engage in college research](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2020/05/14/researching-colleges-from-home/>), and enjoy your senior year.

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****Note: The full Common App Essay guide can be found****

[****here****](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2020/06/16/what-should-i-write-about-in-the-common-app-essay/>) ****on our blog, along with a number of other great articles on the admissions process.****

***** End
of Post

Post Title: If you're wondering what an acceptance letter looks like, and you hope to see one someday, PLEASE take some time to proofread your essays! Tips inside.

Post Body: ****Never, never, never**** submit your essay without proofreading it. Proofread both for content and grammatical errors. There are no excuses for grammatical errors in an admissions essay. One or two can be ignored, but too many of them makes it look like you either don't care or don't know better. Here are some ways you can ensure that your application is the best it can be.

Feel free to reach out via PM or at www.bettercollegeapps.com if you have questions.

****1. Read your essays.**** Then give yourself a break and do something else for a while to clear your mind, or maybe even wait until the next day. Go back and read them again – the break will help freshen your mind to what you've written. It's a common tip, but it works well to read your essays backwards too. This way you won't get blinded by the familiarity of them and you will catch things that you would have missed. One other tip for self-review is to actually print out your essays. Studies have shown that printed words are viewed and processed differently than those on screen, and nearly everyone has printed something they've written only to discover an error afterward. Remember to check and double check your spelling, grammar, spacing, punctuation, verb tense, active voice, use of quotes and commas, etc.

****2. Have someone else review your essays.**** They will catch things you won't and offer an outside perspective. They can let you know if it reads like a thesaurus exploded on your desk or if it actually sounds sincere. They can tell you if parts need more detail or explanation and if anything just doesn't sound good. Bonus tip: go to Google, [/r/CollegeEssayReview](http://r/CollegeEssayReview), or (gulp) College Confidential and pull 4-5 other essays and have them read those first. Then they'll be in the same mindset AOs are in when they get to you.

****3. Read your entire application including your essays from start to finish**** (maybe even out loud), then craft a two minute summary of it highlighting the most important things and clearly communicating the theme or arc of the app. Why? Because this is what AOs have to do to present your app to the admissions committee. If preparing this summary is really hard for you to do, guess how the AO will feel? After you're done, go back and tweak your application to make this summary more coherent and stronger.

****4. Make sure all of your essays are about you including your "Why [School]" essay or any non-traditional prompts****. No AO wants to read ANOTHER list of great things about their school - they want to know what about you makes you a good fit for the school. They also don't want to read another rehash of the ECs, awards, etc that they just read; they want to read about you. What are you interested in, how do you think, how have you grown and developed, what skills

have you learned and why, what ideas are important to you, and what are your intellectual pursuits and curiosities?

****5.** Take a step back and think long term for some added perspective.****** You're already spending a ton of time and energy deciding on schools and poring over your application. You think about it way too much or you wouldn't be reading this. But you should also give some thought to what you want to study in college and what you want to do after. Really do some research and spend some real time thinking about it. (Seriously, set a timer and spend even half an hour just thinking about this). Do a mock job search or mock grad school application. Picture your life ten years from now and what you want it to be. THEN, go back and incorporate some of that vision into your application. It will add powerful cohesiveness to your theme and guide you in revising your essays.

****6.** Go back and read your essays again.****** Paste them into Google translate and have it read them out loud to you or ask a friend to do it. Sometimes hearing it changes your perception. Put it into [Grammarly](<https://www.grammarly.com/>) or [The Writer's Diet](<http://writersdiet.com/test.php>) and see what changes they recommend. Note that these are automated tools and only come up with suggestions, so take them with a grain of salt. Grammarly is like spell check on steroids - it recommends improvements to grammar, syntax, and phrasing.

The Writer's Diet analyzes your writing to see if it is bloated or overly verbose. It also highlights by word type so you can see if you have too many adverbs or other unnecessary filler. When you're reviewing your final draft, change the font and size to something really unique. Studies have shown that people process text differently when it is in a different style, size, font, or presentation. This is especially true when it is done in an unfamiliar way. Ditch the Times New Roman or Calibri and put your essay in size 18 font. Just don't forget to change it back when you submit.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: It All Started With Essay Topics – Here's How To Find Yours

Post Body: ****Set Aside The Conventional Wisdom****

Many students struggle with identifying a good topic for their essay. Conventional wisdom says to start by brainstorming a list of potential topics, and chances are, you have already started a mental list of ideas. You might think you only have a few choices for topics, based on your activities or experiences, based on what someone may have ~~negged~~ told you, or based on the rough drafts you've attempted. I advise, however, that you put down your list of topics and back away from it. Forget that exists for a moment. Seriously - thinking about this initial list tethers you to certain ideas that might not actually be your best options.

Now you can begin brainstorming with a clean slate.

****Showcase Yourself****

Start with thinking about what you want to show in your entire application, not just one essay. ****Every single component in your app has one purpose – to tell more about YOU.**** Filling out the rest of the application by rote and focusing solely on the essay is short-sighted and will leave so much potential untapped in your application. Don't think of your application like it's presenting you on paper or painting a picture of you. It's more like multiple pictures of you, taken from different angles. Use the various sections of your application to showcase different facets of who you are, specifically your core values, personal strengths, motivations, aspirations, foundational beliefs, and passions. (Note - these things are what people mean when they say your essay should be about YOU.)

An admissions officer's goal is to understand you fully, in the context of your background and the rest of the applicant pool. They will begin this with assessing your academic abilities and potential. Then they will evaluate how you will fit into the student body they're trying to curate. All of this can be somewhat broad and diverse and touch on several institutional goals. But they will dig deep to find out what each applicant is like, what your core values and motivations are, what kind of student you will be, how you will contribute to the vibrant and intellectual campus community they're building, etc.

Your goal with essay brainstorming is to ascertain how to powerfully tell your story in a manner that will fit these criteria. The entirety of your application (again, not just one essay) aims to showcase your abilities, qualifications, and uncommon attributes as a person in a positive way. Before you begin outlining or writing your application, you must determine what is unique about you that will stand out to an admissions panel. All students are truly unique. Not **one** other student has the same combination of life experiences, personality, passions, or goals as you do. Your job in your application is to frame your unique personal attributes in a positive and compelling way. How will you fit on campus? What personal qualities, strengths, core values, talents, or different perspectives do you bring to the table? What stories, deeper motivations/beliefs, or formative experiences can you use to illustrate all of this?

It is always helpful to start with some soul-searching or self-examination. You might not immediately know what you want to share about yourself. It's not a simple task to decide how to summarize your whole life and being in a powerful and eloquent way on your application. Introspection prior to starting your application takes additional time and effort rather than jumping straight into your first draft. But it is also a valuable method to start writing a winning application that stands out from the stack.

*****Introspection Questions****

It's often easiest to start thinking in terms of superlatives -- what are the most meaningful things about you? Here is a list of questions to help you brainstorm broadly before you narrow down your focus for writing:

- What are your interests?

- What sparks your curiosity?
- About what topics do you enjoy reading?
- With whom do you enjoy spending time? Who has impacted your life the most?
- Reflect upon "superlatives" in your life. What moments were most memorable, formative, enlightening, enjoyable, or valuable? What physical possessions, experiences, dreams, or lessons could make your superlatives list?
- Stop and think about what things, people, or circumstances in your life are really unique, fascinating, or outlandish. Are there any that really have a lot of "cultural flavor" (whatever your culture is)?

I have a free introspection worksheet with over 100 questions like this designed to help you find ideas worth exploring in your essays. [You can download it directly here](<https://bettercollegeapps.com/product/better-college-apps-introspection-worksheet/>) or find it on the A2C Discord. (Note - For the last several weeks I've been emailing this to y'all individually by hand, and I finally set up a way to give it away without sending a dozen or more emails every day - I just couldn't continue that through the busy season this fall.)

*****Connecting Introspection To Your Essay****

Once you have finished your soul searching, sit down and make three lists:

- A list of stories, examples, anecdotes, relationships, etc that you think might make for good essay material. This can include anything from the introspection worksheet, ideas you already have, or whatever else you want to add.
- A list of things you want to say about yourself in your essay/application. This could be related to your application theme/narrative or whatever else you feel is important. Focus on core values, motivations, personal strengths, foundational beliefs, personality traits, passions, aspirations, etc. Again, the introspection worksheet will ask about some of these. You can also do a Google search for each of those words with "list of" and you'll see tons of ideas and examples, e.g. search "list of core values".
- A list of potential essay topics or outlines. Aim to have two to three ideas for different approaches you might want to take. It can help to envision how items from lists 1 and 2 will fit into each outline. Once you start a rough draft, you will aim to express the things from list 2 and use the things from list 1 to show and demonstrate them.

If you have questions, feel free to comment below. If you're lost, let's get you found.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: What I've learned from reading tons of your essays part 2

Post Body: Here's part 2. Before I start, a lot of you have been sending me your essays and a lot of them fall into one of the patterns I noted in the first thread (or some combination of the patterns). I'm going to try to address how you can troubleshoot them on your own in this thread at the end. If you haven't, please read some guides by /u/ScholarGrade, or read some of the comments on the first thread. I feel as though most of the issues you all are having are already addressed by the guides ScholarGrade has posted.

As I must preface once again, I am ****not**** an expert on writing personal statements. Please take whatever I say with a grain of salt! Whatever kind of advice I express are things that I would have done differently if I were to write an essay. There is plenty of advice from actual experts on this sub, so please look at their guides before you make any fast conclusions!

****7) The merely ok essay****

Everytime I see a chance and the student rates their own essay, they always rate it 8/10. As I'm sure most of you have noticed, most essays are, in fact, not 8/10. Most of the essays I've read that weren't super bad (as in too much narrative or whatever) were just average--5/10 at best. These essays usually have some common insights with a common topic with basic writing. For instance, I read an essay that was about learning how to be confident. There is certainly nothing wrong with this kind of topic, as it's mainly how you execute your topic that will make it bad, average, or good. However, this essay I read was very basic: it described how at first they just didn't like to talk, suddenly started to talk to people, and are now comfortable in their own skin. The writing itself was pretty bland, and there was nothing memorable about the prose, diction, or tone. The insights they made were, while significant to them, commonplace to me because I've read 4 other essays prior that talked about the same exact thing. As a result, it didn't really move the needle for me. Nothing stood out.

In my opinion, there are a couple of ways to fix this. One way would be to lead your reader somewhere unfamiliar/unexpected.

For the confidence topic, I would have liked to see more of how the student applied their confidence in situations that are perhaps not commonly talked about. Maybe instead of writing about how you were confident talking to people or in front of a crowd, you can dive into how your confidence pushes you to do unorthodox things, like exploring new routes in hikes or something. Obviously, my example sucks because I don't have that kind of experience of confidence leading to something uncommon, but I hope it illustrates my point nonetheless. By taking your reader someone unfamiliar/unexpected, I feel as though it's more memorable. You won't be that kid that was like four other students who had built confidence and could now talk to people; you are now that confident kid that not only talks to people, but uses that confidence in other aspects of their life that aren't simply confined to speaking. Of course, make it flow. I also

want to note that thinking of unexpected avenues is hard. Don't expect to just have the idea in your head in a minute.

Another way to make your essay better than average is to leverage the emotions behind something. There was some post from a former AO on this sub (I can't remember who, but if any of yall can remember, please link it below!) who talked about making the reader feel something. I completely agree with this. When I can feel something after I read an essay--like empathy, anxiety, laughter--the essay feels more real and genuine. I can actually get more of a sense of who the person is while also being able to remember their essay--or at least how I felt after I read their essay. There are tons of ways to do this--from prose to diction to your narrative. I want to caution, though: this kind of writing should be genuine. It's very easy for this, in my opinion, type of writing to come off as forced. If you're writing a narrative, really think about the events that happened. Did you feel anything? What did you feel? Don't mistake this to mean that I'm telling you to be flowery or descriptive. **Make sure whatever emotional tug you have in your essay helps to advance who you are/plot/insights. Emotion just for the sake of emotion can ruin the flow and come off as forced!**

The third way I would probably make an average essay better would be by changing the prose/diction/phrases/tone. I've seen SO many essays that are just... bland. The writing is as if my professor wrote it for an academic journal. I just get super bored, super tired of reading, and sometimes the paragraphs are so long that I get lost and give up reading because I don't know where the hell I left off. So how you do fix this? Well, I think it's a bit complicated, because it relates back to 'your voice' in an essay. If your voice isn't the type to be creative and daring in their diction/prose/tone, then don't do this--it'll come off as an insincere. However, if you do have a rich personal voice, don't be afraid to use it! For example, instead of saying something like, 'I'm a wild person,' you can say 'I'm a human exclamation mark!'

Again, perhaps not the best example, but I hope it illustrates my point. When you are purposeful with your diction or tone or whatever, it tends to jump out on paper. This is also another way to convey passion. I've seen a lot of sentences where they go something like, "I grew infinitely more passionate about CS after xyz..." But if you replaced that sentence with something a bit more daring and bold and creative, it feels more genuine and sincere. Again, DO NOT DO THIS IF IT ISN'T YOU. If you're the type of person who just cannot write creatively, then don't. I also want to caution that there's a fine line between flowery and creative. Flowery, to me, is just a bunch of fluff with no real meaning behind it other than to just showcase you know how to describe something in a more-than-needed way. Creative is the process of using her head and being purposeful with what you say such that it can convey the meaning you want it to.

There are other ways to make an 'ok' essay better, but this is what I would do. Don't take this to mean you need to integrate all these strategies. Figure out what is natural to YOU.

8) The Computer Science essay

Most of this sub is trying to get into CS. Ok, I get that. But a ton of you have written the same thing: you built a website, you loved the beauty and intricacy of your code, CS is your biggest problem that you love to solve, you competed in some competition and learned a lot about CS and how much more you have to learn, and then some rehash of some ECs you do. These are all great sentiments, but, to me, are overplayed. This ties back to the common topic/average essay I was talking about, but in the context of CS. It just doesn't move the needle for me. Most students are learning how to code on their own, and that's great. But when 50 of you write about building a website and how much you love code because of it, it's really hard to differentiate any of you.

The main thing that I want to ask is this: what else about code do you love besides the coding itself? Is there a deeper meaning as to why you code? Maybe you're looking into the socioeconomic implications that tech has, and you're seeking a way to ensure that these kinds of implications don't ruin society. Maybe you love to code because it gives you the chance to be creative and original, and you write about how it is creative for you and why it's important. Maybe you code because you're passionate about saving endangered species and you want to identify them with AI to prevent them from being hunted or whatever. All that I'm saying is that you should find something beyond just building a website because it's starting to become trite.

****Questions I've received from some of you and how I would troubleshoot them:****

1) Do I convey enough about myself in my essay?

There's no real easy way to answer this without reading your essay. There was some fantastic advice I read from /u/peteyMIT where he suggested that you should be learning something new about yourself in your essay. This is something I always advocate with a student I'm currently working with. You should ask yourself the same questions: am I learning something new about myself? Am I learning anything about myself at all, either explicitly stated or implied? If you're finding that essay doesn't reveal anything about your values, traits, ideas, thoughts, motivations, personality (one essay doesn't need to have all these things because, again, it may fall flat), here's what I recommend: start with "I" statements. When you start with "I" right off the bat, there's no way you can't make it about yourself. I also recommend just talking outloud, either to yourself or someone else. Talk about yourself. Get used to it. A lot of students really struggle with talking about themselves, but there's no other way around this. If you can't talk about yourself, either in your essay or in person, how am I going to figure out anything about you when I read your application? Record yourself talking, then listen to the recording. Notice anything that sticks out that might be worth diving into? Talk more about it! Figure out who you are, what you love, what you value, how you think, where you're going in life... these are things that are good starting points to figure out what you want to convey in an essay.

I also find that asking yourself the questions like, "what's the point? What is the purpose of this sentence as it relates to my story/me?" after every line is helpful. If you find that you can't really answer those questions after going line by line, then maybe it's time to go back to the drawing board and think about what you want to convey again.

2) Is my topic of [disabilities, abuse, sexual assault, mental health, etc] a sob story?

Personally, I think it's less about the topic you write about and more so about how you write it that makes it a sob story. I'll give you an example: I have a friend who is disabled. He's paralyzed from the hip down. We once had a very serious conversation about how he views life, and what he told me was very moving. He said this (not exactly verbatim, but close enough!):

"I have two choices: I can see the world as a scam and curse at everyone because I'm bitter. That's actually the easiest thing to do. I hate how I can't play basketball anymore. I hate how it takes extra time for me to get ready in the morning just because I can't walk. But fuck that. My height might have been cut in half, but my life is still full. So fuck all the weeping, the sorrow, the pity, the 'I feel bad'--cut all of that out. If I want to go out and have fun with my boys, I'm going to do it. I may not be able to play basketball anymore, but that doesn't stop my love for the sport. I still hate the Lakers, nothing has changed. Hell, I can still shoot the ball, and that's more than enough. Is it harder? Yeah. But I like that. I like the challenge. Throw me in hell and I'll find my way back to heaven. I'm disabled, yeah, but I'm a warrior, too."

Now compare that back to your 'sob story.' Notice the difference? My friend spent less time talking about his disabilities and how sad he is, and more so about how he wants to challenge the world. He's not afraid. He's ready, he's willing, he wants to live, and the disability is not stopping him. There's a completely different connotation you get from this. If he wrote his essay about this topic, I can guarantee you that 10% of it would probably be about his disability, and 90% of it would be about his dreams, his aspirations, how he sees the world, how he thinks differently because of his disability, how he's ready to fight despite his accident. So my advice is to really think about your sob story and focus on how you have changed. Read your 'sob story' essay and try to pick up if you get a negative connotation. If you do, scratch it and write about what you've learned, how you've grown, where you're going.

3) Is writing about my EC in my essay bad?

I would say yes if you're rehashing whatever you wrote in your extracurricular section. If you wrote in your EC section how you fundraised 5k, don't repeat it in your essay. When you plug it like that, it just makes you seem desperate. If you're expanding upon your EC (answering the heavy question of WHY YOU do what you do), then I think that's fair game.

I'm open to answering more questions in this thread (if there are any)! Again, I'm not an expert, just a college student procrastinating on projects and labs I should be doing! Hope this helps.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: A sage insight about the college essay from my girlfriend's uncle

Post Body: I was at a small get-together last weekend with my girlfriend's family. I was making the rounds, chatting up the aunts and uncles and cousins and grandmother, when I found myself pulled into a conversation with my girlfriend's uncle.

My girlfriend's uncle is an interesting guy. He's a self-taught mycologist. He's pretty big time in the pacific northwest where, if you don't know, mushrooms are a big deal.

We were discussing foraging for truffles. Truffles are a notoriously rare subterranean mushroom that grow in Europe and some other parts of the world. Two types grow in Washington State. One grows in warmer weather, in the spring and summer. When the temperature shifts around November, almost overnight, like a light-switch, the variety of truffles also shifts to the cold-weather-loving variety. Mushrooms are amazing.

When I asked him how many mushrooms he could spot after a career of spotting mushrooms, his answer surprised me. "Oh," he said. "Not **too** many. But I know a lot about the ones I can recognize."

Of course, his "not too many" is roughly 50x the number I can identify.

But he continued on with this lovely metaphor: For him, he said, mushrooms are like "all the people in the wide world." Hundreds, thousands pass by, but only a few grab your attention. We don't attempt to give equal attention to each passerby, no, we focus in on those few with whom we form an immediate attachment.

We follow them down the rabbit hole. We learn about their lives, their dreams, their flaws. We spend hours, years, decades learning about their lives with an almost obsessive and singular focus. Because human connection, and, in his case, intellectual infatuation, is not a numbers' game. We don't go an inch deep and a mile wide. We work in silos that extend as deep as we are able to make them, in the limited time we have on the earth.

His metaphor hit me partly because of its immediate applicability to the college application process. There is a concept I like that I came across on Twitter. ***Humans don't have short attention spans, they have short consideration spans***. We will spend hours binging a show, a whole year reading a complex and glacial novel, decades with our friends or partners... if only we get "hooked" up front. We have a near-infinite tolerance and attention span for the things we care about.

Instilling that level of care in an AO is the true magic that you're trying to work through your college essays. If you think your goal in the college essay is to IMPRESS someone, you're wrong.

You are trying to make them, for lack of better words, ***fall in love with you***. Your goal is to become one of the 50 mushrooms that my girlfriend's uncle has spent his LIFE studying.

This is somewhat of a food-for-thought post, and I feel guilty setting up such a broad "goal" without giving any advice about how to get there. The only thing I can say is that I've been reading John Dewis' "Hack the College Essay" and so far, I'm very impressed. I would recommend taking a look at that. The man has a thing or two to say.

But I'll leave it with this. You have a story to tell, but, right now, you probably don't know what it is - because you are anxious and uncertain about the "best" way to woo AOs. In Dewis' words (to which I add my own assent) the story you need to tell is the "one that only you can tell." This advice may seem thin, cliché, or empty at first blush. But it is worth ruminating on and taking seriously. What's the story that only you can tell?



\-Alex

***** End
of Post

Post Title: How you should (and shouldn't) be using the additional information section

Post Body: The additional information section is both the most underused and misused section of the application. What's it for? Who should use it? How does it fit into the larger scope of your essays and extracurricular section?

It's a hard section to use correctly because it's basically a blank slate. I encourage you to think of it that way—there really is no prescribed way that the section should be used, although there are bad ways to use it.

First things first, the additional information section isn't part of your "formal application." So by that principle, you shouldn't upload a long-ass essay. Anything you put in this section should be concise and descriptive. This is NOT a place to unspool a narrative that resembles your personal or supplemental essays.

You can think of the additional information section as a place to add information that provides context on the rest of your application.

Good ways to use the section:

* **Explain a wrinkle in your extracurricular section**. You've been debating for 6 years but stopped in senior year. Why? Well, because you got pneumonia for 3 months. Explain that in your additional information session. AOs won't penalize you for not continuing with an EC if there is some mediating circumstance that prevents you from doing so.

* **Contextualize a major achievement**. If you're in the top .01% of ballet dancers internationally, or you created an app that has 2 million downloads, the additional information section can be a good place to give more details about what went into that. Use the section to contextualize your achievements.

* **Explain a non-traditional extracurricular** . So you're a princess in the Apple Blossom Festival. OK. What does that mean? You can use the additional information section to elaborate and help an AO understand an important but non-traditional resume item. This is also where you can talk about something like taking care of family members—go over your responsibilities and walk an AO through a less “formal” EC.

* **Disclose other events or family contexts that you may not want to write about in a main essay** . Maybe you struggled with a chronic illness throughout high school. Maybe you attended four high schools because one of your parents is in the military. Maybe there was an unsafe situation at home that made it consistently difficult to focus on homework. If there's something that you think is relevant to understanding your application, but *you don't want to spend an essay talking about it*, the additional information section is your friend. The additional information can free you from the burden of “having to” talk about a difficult issue in your main essays, while still addressing a factor that has a bearing on your life.

And as I said, be short and to the point. Tell an AO what they need to know and little else. Here are a few bad ways to use an additional information section.

Less good ways to use it

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* **Dropping a paper abstract** . The additional information section is not the place to just unload a lit review or abstract on an unsuspecting AO. A better practice: learn to talk about your research achievements in layman's terms and use the section to provide that context.

* **Writing another supplemental essay** . Some students will say, “Well, I really liked this supplemental I wrote for Columbia. Should I add it to the supplemental info section?” **No!** While the section is open to a lot of interpretation, you will lose points by just pasting in another supplemental. Respect the conventions of the section.

* **Making bad excuses for grades or scores** . Illness or other educational disruptions can be good candidates for additional information section (although there is also the “educational disruption” section which can be used for this purpose as well). But bad excuses for a low grade or score—the teacher didn't like me, I forgot to pack a snack and couldn't focus—should be avoided. You don't want to come off as someone who can't take responsibility for yourself. And if you're trying to explain away a single B on an otherwise great transcript, you might look a bit extra.

Follow these basic guidelines and you should come away with a great additional information section.

Remember, though—not everyone needs to write one. They are only really useful if you have a significant piece of information that you can't otherwise capture in your application.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Don't be a hammer OR an inert blob of goo: How to craft a balanced narrative across your essays (with UC example)

Post Body: Last year I worked with a student who had the best resume I've ever seen. No joke.

Then I saw the first draft of his essays, and I shuddered. They were ****all**** about his research experiences.

His common app, 3 of his UC PIQs, and almost all of his supplementals focused on his research experiences.

Even though they were individually well-written, taken together, the essays sucked.

Why?

The student was so focused on the strength of his research resume that he suppressed the other diverse stories he could have told about his life and experiences.

This happens all the time. Students correctly identify their strengths then overemphasize the hell out of them.

I'm going to tell you how to avoid this while maintaining a focus on your key strengths.

****I'm going to tell you how to build a balanced narrative.****

Don't be a hammer OR an inert blob of goo

Most of you probably see yourself as one of two things: a hammer, or an inert blob of goo.

What I mean is this. You either see yourself as really good at ****one thing****... or good at nothing at all.

But neither of these views will help you.

When you decide that you're ****one**** thing (a leader, an activist, a researcher, a developer, an artist) your ability to depict yourself as having diverse skills and interests plummets.

When you decide you aren't any of these things, your narrative will become diffuse and unfocused.

Here's the thing. Schools want to see diversity. Not just across their class, but within each applicant they recruit.

****Schools want students who don't really exist****: Students who are "spiky" (i.e., really good at something) but also well-balanced. They want the STEM Lord who's also a first-chair cellist.

They want a well-rounded 35 year-old who's 17.

They won't admit this, but it's true.

"I'm passionate about problem-solving"... And you're not getting into any schools

So how do you strike that right balance between specificity and diversity?

Let's pretend you're a student who has a solid but fairly one-note resume.

****Example Resume****

- * Rising senior, 3.87 GPA, 1500 SAT
- * Active member / leader: Robotics and CS clubs
- * Internship 1: AI company - neural network experience
- * Internship 2: Independent research at the intersection of AI and healthcare technology
- * Qualities and other ECs: Research and knowledge-oriented, dedicated student, semi-serious pickleball player, French Horn 3rd chair in a community orchestra.

Our sample student is turning to the UC essays and wondering how to write 'em.

They want to major in, say, engineering. They want to make the strongest possible case for their academic future at the UCs. Reasonable.

Their first instinct (and perhaps their parents' too eh?) might be to focus on internships, club participation, and general academic achievements in ****as many of the essays as possible****.

They're taking the hammer approach.

Specifically, their plan is to spend:

- * One essay talking about their problem-solving skills in the context of their most recent internship
- * One about their ****unyielding passion**** for neural networks
- * One about the educational opportunity provided by their other internship
- * One about how CS runs in their family and they want to spend their life working in the field, too

These topics, they reason, make the best case for their academic future. Maybe?

But these topics make a ****TERRIBLE**** case for their future as a member of the UC community.

No school in the world wants a student who can only see themselves as their research resume.

Similarly, no school wants a student who ONLY sees themselves as an activist or a leader.

Schools want students whose essays have a clearly definable "leading edge" (research, activism, leadership), but who also have strong secondary interests and characteristics.

****The key is to showcase these secondary qualities in a way that reflects back on core strengths.****

Reworking the essays to balance the narrative: UC example

Ok, that's a bit abstract.

To bring that concept down to earth, take a look at the UC's review criteria for applicants. I'll quote from their website:

>We look for... Special talents, achievements and awards in a particular field, such as visual and performing arts, communication or athletic endeavors; special skills, such as demonstrated written and oral proficiency in other languages; special interests, such as intensive study and exploration of other cultures; experiences that demonstrate unusual promise for leadership, such as significant community service or significant participation in student government; or other significant experiences or achievements that demonstrate the student's promise for contributing to the intellectual vitality of a campus.

Motherlode. Here are the qualities the UC looks for, summarized:

- * High levels of ****achievement**** in a field.
- * ****Special skills**** that differentiate the applicant from others.
- * Intellectual or skill-based ****passions**** that ****you've explored in depth**** (language, independent study).
- * ****Leadership**** experiences or ****serious commitments**** to causes.
- * "Other experiences" that show your potential contribution to ****intellectual vitality****.

OK, so we know what the UC wants to see.

Now our goal is clear: tie the essays back to the student's core focus while aligning the student with a diverse array of UC criteria.

In this case, the core strength for our example student is their academic focus.

[Here's how these essays might be rebalanced to convey a more balanced narrative.](<https://imgur.com/a/wq5jZoA>)

1. The first essay might cover the student's ****creative process****, providing an example drawn from orchestra or pickle-ball AND an extracurricular aligned with major interest.

2. The second goes deep into the student's academic passion. No holds barred, here. This is the ONE ESSAY where we directly speak to academics.
3. The third illustrates the student's connection to community. Again, this essay should ****primarily**** focus on the student's ability to connect with others. ****But** the context in which this connection occurs can be related to major interest—e.g., a CS or Robotics club.******
4. The fourth essay will always depend on the student's resume. Maybe focus on another major EC or family. A topic that matters to you.

This approach to essays will do a few things.

Essay #2 will anchor the academic narrative.

Essays #1 and #3 will show your secondary values: creative process, connections with others and community. But because these essays draw on examples from your core ECs and academics, they will re-emphasize your core strength.

Essay #4 is often hard. Usually a student's first attempt will be redundant with one of the other prompts. You may have to go back to the drawing board a few times before you crack it.

—

I know this stuff is a bit hard to think through.

The bottom line: ****Don't**** overplay your core strength by focusing exclusively on it in your essays. ****Do**** reinforce your strengths through essays that ****also**** touch on secondary values.

Thanks for reading!

\-Alex 🙌

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Making Your Peace with the Supplemental Essays: It's Easier... and More Complicated.... than You Might Think

Post Body: As if writing the personal essay for college apps wasn't enough, many colleges also like to see supplemental essays! They're not trying to torture you though, it's more a way for them to get to know you even better, so be sure to write these supplements -- and take your time and do your research for each one. Even though these essays can be short, they are really important! This is your opportunity to explore all that awesomeness that you do and want to be or to explain the context of your life, so they can have a greater understanding of your application.

****What is optional and what does that mean for college admissions?**** Sometimes, colleges will say an essay is optional, but I encourage you to write every essay unless it doesn't apply to you at all.

****What's the point of all these supplemental essays?**** The point is to paint a picture of you on their college campus. They want to see who you are and what you've done and how you are going to bring that to their specific campus. Each of these essays involves digging in and learning more about yourself and what's important to you and then how that you who you are fits in with what they offer on their campus. Each of these essays requires research about what they offer and elements of you.

Often, these essays are more important than the Personal Essay. Colleges ask these questions for a reason -- and it's usually to make sure they learn more about you and the HUMAN you are (not a test-taking, grade-making, EC doing machine) *and* how you will bring that human (you) to THEIR specific campus. They also want you to show them some love and show them you've done the work -- the research -- to know why you want to be there.

****Here's something you might not know...colleges sometimes like to hide their supplements.**** These essays can be sneaky little devils and they aren't always found in the writing section. Sometimes they call them questions --- with 250-word answers:) Be sure to check the different sections of the Common App for where they might be hiding, like in Activities, Family, and Academics. As you're organizing your essays, make sure you go through the entire common app, step by step to find the hidden essays -- it's like a treasure hunt!

****THE WHY COLLEGE ESSAY****

The most important thing to remember about a "Why College" essay is that it's really a "Why You on our College Campus Essay."

- * This essay is just as much about you as the college.
- * Why do they need you on their campus?
- * What will you bring?

So, in essence, this should be an essay ****that ONLY YOU** could write about **ONLY THIS SCHOOL.**** If any sentence could apply to any other school or applicant, scratch it. Here's an idea from College Essay Guy: take a sheet of paper and divide it down the middle. On one side list all the awesome stuff about you. On the other side list all the amazing stuff about the college. Where do you see overlaps? That's the substance of your essay. Make sure you include SPECIFICS in your essay. Do your research, and let them know you've done your research:

- * If you've visited (or virtually visited in pandemic times), say so. And talk about what you saw and liked and why it was specifically appealing to you.
- * Read the student newspaper online. Find events and articles that appeal to you.

- * Follow the admissions department on social media, and learn what interests you about their campus. Mention something they've profiled recently and why it's specifically interesting to you.
- * This year, I encourage you to follow the changes and updates they've been making in response to Covid 19 and other human rights issues. How has any of that resonated with you? Let them know that you are keeping up with what they are doing to open up or if they're going test-optional or how they're supporting their students.
- * Read the website, especially the admissions website, carefully. Most college websites tell you exactly what they're looking for. **Are you that person?** If so, demonstrate to them why. If not, well, maybe this school isn't a great fit for you.
- * Read the college's mission statement. Does their mission mesh with your personal mission?
- * Check out classes that look interesting to you. Look at course lists on the website. Do you find classes that you can see yourself attending? Tell them why this would be a great class for you. What will you get out of it? What can you contribute?
- * Find professors that appeal to you. Maybe even reach out to them and learn about their programs.
- * Again, devour their website. Check out clubs and activities on campus. What can you bring to the campus and how do you see yourself being involved?

[Here's a longer post about the Why College Essay with some tables that can help you plan your Why College Essay](<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1KNTQjDiPhxdXwTeEaV9UTriKEFcKCNrM/view?usp=sharing>). Also, Tulane has a great [How-To for the Why College Essay on their admissions blog](<http://tuadmissionjeff.blogspot.com/2013/09/the-optional-statment.html>). Read it.

u/4suka shared what they learned at a JHU workshop and I think it's great info to share with y'all here: "I went to a supplemental essay workshop with JHU and ... they (AOs at the workshop) essentially exemplified that we didn't even have to mention specific programs about the school so much as use the supplement as an opportunity to write another mini-personal statement that connects our values and motivations to Hopkins'. "You don't have to mention any classes or anything, we already know what we have, you're just wasting words unless that specific class you mention is essential to your description/expression of values," basically." [link to JHU workshops](<https://apply.jhu.edu/campus-and-community/workshops/>)

Here's some great advice on Instagram from Todd Denning, Assistant Director of Undergraduate Admissions at Tufts: "The Why Tufts supplemental essay question, may seem pretty straightforward, but be sure to put plenty of thought into it. A "good" answer to this question will, of course, depend on you and what draws you to Tufts. A quick piece of advice: avoid the "features" trap. Yes, it's ok and perfectly normal to be drawn to the amenities of a college or university, but we (The Admissions Committee) want to better understand why you think Tufts is a good fit for you. Rather than focusing on the features (residence halls, bucolic campus, professors), point to some of the "feels" (an eye-opening conversation you had with a current student, the university's Liberal Arts identity, the deep civic and political engagement on campus, and so on.) A university is more than just a collection of buildings, clubs, and classes, so get creative and be thoughtful with our Why Tufts!" Also here's a link to an Instagram post

with more great advice from Tufts Admissions:
https://www.instagram.com/p/CXL4QhwLO66/?utm_medium=copy_link

****THE LEADERSHIP ESSAY****

I want you to think about leadership a little differently. I don't know if you know or follow Mark Manson, but he posted this recently on social media and I was struck by it: "Leadership is doing the shit nobody else wanted to do in a way nobody else thought possible."

So, you see, leadership is about way more than being Captain High School or President Every Club. Think about all the different kinds of leadership there are. You don't have to be a specific leader at your school like a president or captain or prefect.

- * Are you a leader in your own life? Do you make decisions for yourself?
- * Are you a leader in your family? Older sibling? Care for grandparents? Oldest cousin who everyone goes to for advice?
- * Are you a leader among your friend groups? Do you make plans? Are you the "parent" of the group? Do you control the social calendar?
- * Are you a leader in the classroom? Do you like to be the coordinator and organizer for group projects? Do you lead class discussions? Do teachers rely on you to be an active participant?
- * Are you a leader in your school? Do you hold leadership roles? Or do you organize without needing some kind of title? Do you help underclassmen? Do you encourage others?
- * Are you a leader in your community? Do you help in your religious community? Do you volunteer as a tutor? Do you organize drives for causes?
- * And finally, do you have a job? A job demonstrates leadership and willingness to learn and work with others and to contribute to your own financial stability or that of your family.

Leadership is more than a title, it's about what you do. And how will you demonstrate that leadership specifically on their campus? Do your research.

****THE EXTRACURRICULAR ESSAY****

- * Choose your activity: Pick the one with the most hours, blood, sweat, and tears, and that's the most important to you (could be school club, sport, summer activity, job, family responsibilities, personal hobby or interest)
- * Discuss your history with the activity, any challenges or obstacles you've come across, failures you've learned from it, and successes. Be sure to describe in detail what you've learned and experienced.
- * Go into the why -- why is this activity important to you.
- * Then the how -- how will you use what you've learned and experienced with this activity and bring it to their campus -- be specific. Are there clubs or activities on their campus you can be part of?

****THE WHY MAJOR ESSAY****

First, I suggest you apply with a major -- even if you're not certain. Many students change their minds. Admissions offices know that, but they like to know that you have some sense of direction. It's important that you give them a clear idea of WHY you've chosen this major. So, once again, details are important. I see this is more of a **why me in this major at this school** essay than just a why major essay. Your job is to create a picture of you on their campus based on what you've already done and what you hope to do. Mention and Describe WHY these were meaningful to you and how they relate to the major:

- * Courses you've taken in high school (or on Edx, Coursera, Khan Academy, etc)
- * Activities you've participated in that have related
- * Independent or personal research or hobbies that relate

Research and discuss the following within your potential major:

- * Classes you are excited by on their campus (look at course offerings)
- * Potential professors who you'd like to take classes with
- * Potential research projects you'd like to be involved in
- * Clubs and activities the college offers that are related to your major

Discuss how you see your major playing into your future --- even if you're not completely sure what you want that future to be.

****THE COMMUNITY/IDENTITY/BACKGROUND ESSAY****

Many colleges want to know more about your community, your background, or your identity, and how you play a part in it -- and what they really want to know is how you will play a part in the community on their campus and in their community and what you might bring to their campus with your special perspective.

- * Decide which community you want to describe. Communities can be super small or large: country, state, city, religion, ethnicity, neighborhood, school, club, activity, online, family, siblings, friends, social groups, and more.
- * If you're stuck I encourage you to think like an ant and look at your world from the tiniest being around -- what communities do you see? Where do you fit into that setting? Or look at the world from a giant lens and see where you fit. You don't have to be a certain ethnicity or religion or be a team player or a club member to be part of a community. Even if you're kind of a loner, there is some community you're part of somewhere.
- * Once you've decided, discuss and explain:
 - * How the community has molded you
 - * Challenges and obstacles you've faced because of it (if any)
 - * Lessons learned from the community
 - * How you have impacted your community
 - * How you plan to continue being part of this community on their campus

- * Give details -- do your research about what they offer on your campus that might allow you to continue to be involved

- * If you're discussing a community that might be hard to continue involvement (your family) on their campus, talk about how you will use what you've learned from your involvement in your community on their campus.

****THE ADDITIONAL INFO ESSAY****

The Additional Info Essay is there for you for just that -- adding info to your application that they won't otherwise be able to learn about. Basically, this space is available for you to provide whatever information you feel the admissions team needs to know in order to understand the context of your application. This is an important space and it can be used for lots of different aspects of your application. You could:

- * ****Expand on an EC:**** when you're not given the opportunity to do so in the application and you have an activity that is particularly meaningful and time-consuming to you -- and your application wouldn't be complete without the admissions officers understanding more about this activity, you can add it here. You can bullet point here or write it like a Why EC essay.

- * ****Why College:**** If you have a particularly compelling reason why this is the right college for you, and you aren't given the opportunity to present it in the application, you might want to let them know here. See the Why College Section.

- * ****Life Isn't Always Fair -- Share your Story****

- * Sometimes you need to be able to explain the circumstances in your life -- and colleges want to know about any hardships you've had.

- * They want to understand the context of your application, so don't worry about thinking you're asking the colleges to feel sorry for you. I hear kids say that all the time.

- * This is your real life. Let them know. They can't know about your challenges and obstacles unless you tell them.

- * Be proud of yourself for making it through your challenges and moving on to pursue college -- that's an accomplishment on its own!

- * I feel like the Additional Info section is the place to talk about them; that way you can use your Personal Essay to get into details about other aspects of who you are beyond whatever challenges life has presented you.

- * ****Some Aspects of Your Life Might Require More Context:**** adversity and hardship, sexual orientation, gender issues, family income and background, family obligations, mental health issues, deaths, divorce, drug-related incidents, illness, and even legal problems. If any of these have affected your school performance, you need to make sure to explain these events or issues.

- * For more information and my thoughts and u/McNeilAdmissions' thoughts about writing about Trauma in Your Applications, [be sure to check out this post.

](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/pc03za/13_reasons_why_its_ok_to_write_about_trauma_in/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3)

****More Phoenix, Fewer Ashes**** (I wish I could take credit for that metaphor -- I think it's also from a story [u/Ninotchka](https://www.reddit.com/u/Ninotchka/) shared on a2c)

1. Address your issue or circumstance BRIEFLY and be straightforward. Don't dwell on it.
2. Next, focus on what you did to take care of yourself and how you handled the situation. Describe how you've moved forward and what you learned from the experience.
3. Then, write about how you will apply those lessons to your future college career and how you plan to help others with your self-knowledge as you continue to help yourself as you learn more and grow.
4. Show them that, while you can't control what happened in the past, you've taken steps to gain control over your life and you're prepared to be the college student you can be.
5. Remember to keep the focus on the positives and what you learned from your experiences.
6. Make sure your essay is at least 90% phoenix, the rest ashes.

****DISCIPLINARY ISSUES ESSAY**** (See More Phoenix, Fewer Ashes Above)

- * First, briefly tell the story. Step up and take responsibility for whatever your issue is. Do NOT blame anyone else.
- * Spend most of the essay talking about what you've learned, what positive impact the lesson had on you, and how you've grown from the experience. Be specific about steps you've taken to learn more.
- * End by explaining how the experience will make you a better college student.
- * Demonstrate that you are taking ownership and taking steps to change your life. You won't hide from this event, and you've worked hard to move past it.

****THE COVID-19 QUESTION****

[From over 300 College Admissions

Deans:](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5b7c56e255b02c683659fe43/t/5ef9bf0b67d0746239a5b429/1593425675919/FINAL+Statement_+TTT+Deans+20200629.pdf?utm_medium=amp;utm_source=amp;utm_campaign=%22what+we+care+about+in+this+time+of+crisis%3a+a+collective+statement+from+college+admission+deans%22) ... "we encourage students to communicate any factors specific to their circumstances that impeded their academic performance. Those factors might include:

- * lack of access to the internet
- * no quiet place to study
- * or the various family responsibilities described above.

We encourage students to describe concretely how any of these circumstances have negatively affected their academic performance or ability to engage in activities that matter to them. It is helpful to know, for example, how much time students spent per week taking on a family responsibility, such as taking care of a sick relative. " My summary of the "Collective Statement from over 300 College Deans" is [here](https://www.instagram.com/p/CCGi7lpBP2-/).

[Question on Common

App:](<https://www.commonapp.org/blog/COVID-19-question-common-app>) Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.

****♻️ REDUCE, REUSE, RECYCLE****

Many colleges will ask similar questions. It's ok to rework an essay to make it work for one school and then another.

Do make sure you do specific research for that college to include like:

School Traditions

School Values, Culture, and Mission

Classes that interest you

Profs that fit what what you're looking for

Research Opportunities that fit in with what you want to learn more about

Clubs and Activities that help you explore more about who you are and what interests you

Where you learned your research (website, tour, virtual visit, info session, social media, school paper, etc)

Don't:

Write a one size fits all essay

Use the WRONG name of the college!

****SUGGESTION!****

Organize your supplemental essays. I suggest organizing your supplemental essay by colleges and common supplemental essays. I have one I'll share with you if you email me at admissionsmoma2c@gmail.com. Then, I suggest making google doc folders for each college and copy and paste the topic and word count at the top of a google sheet as you're organizing. In addition to the spreadsheet, write the Why

College, Why EC, Why Major, and so on at the top so when you're searching for that Why EC essay you've already written, you can easily find it.

****ONE LAST TIP**** \-- When you're submitting your apps, sometimes you have to submit the supplemental essay after you've submitted everything else, so be sure to go back and make sure all your supplements have been submitted. This is especially true in my experience with Rice -- but I've also heard of it with other schools.

Tldr: Even though these Supplemental Essays can often be short, they are super important and must show that you've taken your time, given thought, highlighted yourself, and done your research on the college. Your job is to make them see you as an active member of their campus. Every word counts.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: The document in every application most students never see

Post Body: Students often come to me with questions about the seemingly unique situations at their high schools – AP limits, scheduling conflicts, quirks of their weighted GPA... We've seen it all. And so have most AOs! But weird variances are why almost every high school provides all your colleges with a crucial document: a school profile.

If you've ever thought, "my school does X, will admissions know this?" there's a good chance your school profile will cover it. The school profile helps us understand the coursework, rigor, ECs, and environment available to you as a student.

What is a school profile?

The school profile is a required part of your college application that your school will (should) automatically send when they send your transcript.

While they vary in contents and thoroughness, the school profile contains important information about your school—including classes offered, how they weight GPA, rank information, demographic data, and distinctive opportunities at your school. In short, the school profile allows AOs to assess how you have been challenging yourself within the context of your own school.

****How do AOs use the school profile?****

Schools vary in what they choose to include in the profile. At the very least, a profile gives basic information about the school and its offerings – private or public, size, demographic information, courses offered, and percent of graduates going to college vs work. This context is most helpful when an AO reviews an application from a school they are unfamiliar with or have some distinctive feature.

For example, check out this [fantastic school profile](https://bca-admissions.bergen.org/pdfs/BCA_School_Profile.pdf) from Bergen County Academies, a top public magnet-type school in NJ with seven “academies” (like majors) within it. BCA is a weird school and AOs would rely on this profile to decipher their transcripts.

But, the most valuable thing school profiles can do is help AOs *estimate class rank* when schools don’t report it. At many schools, over 2/3 of applications reviewed come from schools that do not report rank.

Check out the GPA distribution on [this one](<https://www.tesd.net/site/handlers/filedownload.ashx?moduleinstanceid=3380&dataid=11854&FileName=Profile.pdf>) from a public high school in PA. Here’s what I see immediately when I look at this profile:

- * 35% of students have above a 4.70 GPA!
- * The next 30% fall nicely between 4.20 and 4.69
- * Fully 87% of this school has a GPA of 3.7 or above...

Grade inflation much? This is why Ben [wrote this piece](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/vdorm9/when_weighted_gpas_do_and_dont_matterfrom_a/) on the importance of weighted GPA and how AOs use it.

Others might have no GPA distribution at all or leave a smaller nugget of information schools can use to estimate rank in class. Here’s one from a [private women’s school](https://foxcroft.myschoolapp.com/ftpimages/30/download/download_7323096.pdf) in VA that includes the highest (97) and lowest (76) GPA in the class at the bottom of the “Grade Point Average” section.

So, if an AO sees a 97 weighted GPA, they know that the student is the highest academic achiever in the school.

****Takeaway****

The main takeaway is to rest easy knowing that AOs have the context on your school that they need to review your application equitably. There’s no need to *do* anything with this information.

If interested, you might try finding your school’s profile (many post them online) to see what AOs will know about your school before reading your application.

***** End of Post

Post Title: A simple piece of writing jiu-jitsu to make your descriptions pop

Post Body: Hi! After I wrote [this post](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/nuq94w/how_to_launch_dopemeaningful_ec_projects_by/) I got responses from a lot of people who complemented my writing (thank you!) and [asked how they could improve theirs](<https://imgur.com/a/tkVySsqk>).

So over the coming weeks and months I'm going to be writing about writing, sharing tips you can use to improve yours. All of these tips will be focused on stuff that you can use in your essays.

****The first one I want to tell you about is called "free indirect style."****

Using free indirect style to make your descriptions pop

Free indirect style describes a method of writing that can add literary style to straight-forward narration.

Here's a simple example of free indirect style:

>"The accident unfolded in the sickened evening light."

The key to the magic is one word: "sickened."

Remove the word and watch the sentence turn back into a pumpkin: a simple declarative sentence about an accident occurring at a certain time of day.

****Example 1****: <https://imgur.com/a/pH9w4fn>

But by adding the word "sickened," we enact a piece of writing ju-jitsu. The scene jumps off the page and gains an emotional aura. We know it was a bad accident without the author even describing it.

But let me ask you something. Whose word is "sickened"?

Does it "belong" to the character, who is experiencing the scene, or to the writer, who is writing it? The answer is that it belongs to both the character and the writer, or to neither of them.

Why it works

When a reader encounters this sentence, something complex happens in their mind.

They see the writing through the eyes and language of the character, and understand them to be viewing a terrible accident. (Much more artful than saying, "The terrible accident unfolded in the evening light.")

But the reader ALSO feels the presence of the writer, who located the word "sickened" where no free-thinking character would naturally include it.

It's very clearly an artistic choice, and that draws attention to the writer. But not in a bad way, because...

🔥🔥 **The word reveals the writer's voice in the narrative WITHOUT breaking the spell of the narration itself**. 🔥🔥

A single word causes the reader to become aware of the space that separates the character and the writer. But at the same time, it closes the distance between them. In the mind of the reader the two figures are now one and the same.

Pumpkin —> carriage. And it all happened in the span of a single word.

Two more examples: <https://imgur.com/a/AaOMU4W>

Try it out yourself. Make up some basic sentences and see if you can enliven them by adding an artful adjective.

Bonus, if ya want: comment them below and I'll give you my thoughts for how to make your sentences better.

-Alex

***** End
of Post

Post Title: How To End An Essay Gracefully

Post Body: Ending essays is hard, and most students struggle to end their essay elegantly. They often seem to end:

1. Abruptly as if the word count snuck up on them and tackled them from behind just as they were drawing a breath to continue.
2. By simply rehashing something that was already stated – a casualty of the common yet misguided advice to make your point thrice over in your introduction, body, and conclusion. As one teacher once told me, "Tell them what you're going to tell them. Tell them. Then tell them what you told them." This is fine for a five paragraph essay or an outline for a speech, or for an assignment you're turning in to a teacher who just told you that. But in an admissions essay, it's a disaster of redundancy.
3. With a trite aphorism or sweeping generality. Examples include phrases such as "striving to achieve our full potential," "making the world a better place," etc. These are commonplace and

lame, but worse, they say nothing about the student. Instead, they make the AO instantly aware that the author is trying to make an impression with such a statement and it causes skepticism about the sincerity of everything they just read. As an example, imagine you attended a workshop about something you were interested in, but at the end the presenter went into a non-sequitur sales pitch for his tangentially related product. This would instantly cast doubt on his credibility because it doesn't fit with what you thought the point of the workshop was (to inform vs to persuade, influence, or sell). Or, imagine you go to a car dealership to buy a car fully expecting a forceful sales pitch. If half way through the salesman starts talking about all of his personal philanthropic activities and how he runs the dealership as a way to give back to the community you would instantly question his motives. Clearly he's actually there to sell cars and earn profits, so you would realize that he's actually attempting to manipulate you. AOs will feel a little of this if you try to end your essay with a canned, too-wholesome conclusion.

#So how do you end an essay in a compelling and purposeful way?#

Obviously you want to give the sense that the essay actually ended intentionally rather than being stifled by the word count. You also want to leave a final good impression. If you crafted a truly outstanding essay, the AO will get a little bit lost in it. They will momentarily forget that they're sitting in a windowless room evaluating a depressingly deep stack of application essays and just enjoy hearing what you have to share about yourself and getting to know you. You need to close gracefully, sincerely, and purposefully so they continue to feel positively about you and reward you with a top score.

Here are a few ideas. I'd love to hear any others you have in the comments.

- I'm fond of the "call back" commonly used by comedians. You reference something from earlier in your essay to say one more thing about yourself. Sometimes this is something that you used to start the essay off. Other times it's something that was a major theme of the essay or a big part of the story you told. It gives natural closure, reminds the reader of the points you made earlier, and serves as a symbol or memento that the AO can carry with them to make your application stand out in their memory (like the totems in the movie Inception).

- Another option is to depart from the story and inject something more about you. Examples of this in literature include the socialist meeting Jurgis stumbles upon at the end of Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle* and John Galt's speech at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*. John Steinbeck's interchapters are another less direct and more metaphorical way of doing this. You obviously don't have the space to elaborate here, so one or two sentences is probably enough. You will want to work in a smooth transition though. One example of a good way to do this is to end with a quote about you spoken by one of the characters in your story.

- One further possibility is to mirror how great motivational speakers and clergy make use of stories in their speaking. Often they use a similar approach to what I advocate for essays - start a story somewhat in the middle with a cold open and elaborate and fill in details as they go. Then when they reach the end of the story they relate it to their main point or one of the main

themes they want to drive home. You can do the same thing, just make the main point something about you and make sure it relates to the story you're telling.

- Lastly, go look at how some great stories, movies, plays, and books end. Whether it's a comedy or a tragedy, you'll notice that there is usually relatively little by way of denouement. The Return of The King film notwithstanding, often even long stories give little detail and are much more direct and abrupt when they reach the ending. They start summarizing what happened and "zooming out". Again 1-2 sentences is sufficient here but you can do the same thing - just keep the focus trained on you. Don't broaden to the world around you or some philosophical concept. Instead say something about one of your "whys". For example, why the story you chose to tell is so important to you, why you have the theme/arc that you do in your application, why you did/thought what you did in your story, the why behind your choices, passions, motivations, thoughts, goals, achievements, overcomings, etc. You could also say something about how you've changed/grown or what you've learned (usually about yourself or something really close to you, not some generality or something academic). Show depth of thought, introspection, maturity, and humility. When you do this right, the AO finishes the essay wishing it had continued longer. They want to know more about you and are intrigued by the personality you presented.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Hi Seniors! You DO have an amazing essay inside you. Here are the steps you can take to drag it out of yourself (The Personal Essay: AdmissionsMom's Step-by-Step Guide Fall 2021)

Post Body: This is an updated post from my post last year about the Personal Essay. I don't post often about the Personal Essay because there are so many others here sharing their valuable resources, and I usually prefer to just respond one-on-one to kids asking about the essay. But here's the deal: after reading thousands of essays over the last couple of years, I ***know*** you have it in you to write a strong, heartfelt, personal, personal essay. So, I'm sharing with you the exact steps I use with my own students to get them to dig down and find their amazing essay inside. It's there. I promise.

A little background: I was a writing teacher for thirty years before I became a college admissions consultant, and for the last fifteen of those I taught freshman writing at Houston Community College. Much of that time was spent covering and teaching my personal favorite, the Personal Essay. For the last 5.5 years, I've been a private college admissions consultant, and when I'm not answering questions here or with my students, I'm reading posts on college admissions counselor pages, following tons of admissions offices and deans on Twitter, and going to conferences (and now nearly daily webinars).

Here's what I know: Your ***idea*** about some kind of story you tell just isn't that important. Often, the best essays I read come from the most mundane ideas. So many of you are focused on finding the magical idea that you're letting the point of the essay escape you. There is no

magic formula. There is no perfect idea. Because you have the focus of the essay right there. With you. It's inside you because that's what it is: *inside* you. I mean, we the readers, want to get to know the narrator version of your life, not the pretty scenery version where we only see what the character is doing. We need to know what's happening inside your head, and most importantly, we need your values. We need your beliefs.

****So, really, what's the frickin point of the personal essay?**** Here's how I see it and what I've learned over many years and lots of time investigating and sleuthing on multiple college admissions websites, years of college admissions conference attending, and lots of Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook following. Despite what you think and what you've been told, I've come to believe (strongly!) that the point of the personal essay is not to STAND OUT, but to STICK WITH. You want the reader to fight for you in committee, and they will want to fight for you in committee *****if you build a connection with them*****. Here's a quote straight from u/DeanJfromUVA on Twitter: "I see so many students worrying about finding a unique college application essay that will 'set them apart' right now. Application essay topics don't have to be unique! I don't mind if students write about something super popular, whether it's an activity, academic interest, book, song... I just want them to give a little insight into who they are."

****How do you build that connection?**** You build a connection with your reader by building bridges instead of walls. Walls can be an extended metaphor that has gone too far, an essay that feels like it's trying too hard, stilted formal language, thesaurus words (please don't sound like you've swallowed a thesaurus -- choking isn't a good look), paragraphs that aren't about inside you at all, but that are about another person, your ECs, or too much description. When I feel like someone is writing an essay that has been specifically written with the intent of impressing me, that builds a wall. ****Bridges let me in. Bridges are human connections.**** Bridges show vulnerability and problem-solving. Bridges aren't afraid to show failure and learning from that failure. Think about the bridges and walls you have with your friends. What connects you with your friends with whom you have deeper relationships? What puts up a wall with your more shallow and surface friends?

****How do you build the bridges?**** Let's get to it! These are the exact steps I use with my students. It works. Time tested. Student tested.

****STEP ONE: AVOID ACCEPTED ESSAYS LIKE HOT LAVA****

If you fill your brain with "essays that work," you get stuck inside your head about what a personal essay should look like. You can become limited in your idea of what a college essay is. Honestly, when I'm reading essays, the essays that I feel need the most work are from kids who have tried to emulate what they think an essay should be, so they get focused on the essay itself rather than sharing who they are and what's important to them. And, moreover, you really don't know if someone's essay helped their app or they got into a school in spite of their essays.

Example: My daughter is an amazing writer, won tons of national and state awards for writing in high school. I never worried about or gave her college essays a second thought -- not that it

would have mattered if I did because she wouldn't let me near her applications anyway, but that's outside the point of this story. She was accepted to every school she applied to with the exception of Princeton, and she attended Harvard. I think we all just assumed her personal essay helped her with admissions because she wasn't the strongest student in her school when it came to doing homework or daily assignments. But when she used the FERPA rule to review her application later during her sophomore year, she discovered that she'd been admitted **despite** the fact that they hated her essay. They called it "over-blown" "full of itself" and "way too self-important." That's just one example, but from many of the "essays that worked" that I've seen online, I've found a similar vein. So, you -- or the writer of that essay have no idea if that essay actually helped or hurt them in admissions -- even if they were admitted.

I go into more detail about this in the essay chapter in my book with the help of [u/BlueLightSpcl](https://www.reddit.com/u/BlueLightSpcl/) (one of our amazing former mods) and his wise words. I've linked that chapter below in resources. Also, you can find words from [u/Admissions_Daughter](https://www.reddit.com/u/Admissions_Daughter/) there. You might be able to find her advice archived here on Reddit somewhere too. She's not active anymore bc she's now in law school, but she has some awesome posts based on her years of college essay coaching -- starting after she graduated and read her FERPA!

The only exceptions I'd consider to this step are reading essays on college essay guy's website or from college admissions websites (like Tufts, for example) where they profile what they liked! And even then, I still don't fully advise it because I want you focused on your own thoughts and feelings and values, and I don't want you to be stymied by what you think your essay should look like. If you'd like to read some essays from colleges and also read what other folks in admissions say about reading "essays that worked," [here's a link.](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1ps2Gw06Kkaew-TvtTBDvM0O8hcb7Kkgr/view?usp=sharing)

Last summer, I loved this comment about reading "Essays that Work" from [u/Vergilx217](https://www.reddit.com/u/Vergilx217/) so much that I wanted to add it here to make sure y'all all got to see it: "When you have no reference, that accepted essay becomes a reference. You will sound insincere. Furthermore, you create a mental guideline on how a "good" essay is and it severely stunts how much you can express yourself, and that makes your essay that much even more impersonal. It would be like forcing Django Reinhardt to learn the piano instead of the guitar, because you've seen so many famous pianists and not so many guitarists then."

****STEP TWO: WRITE FOR FUN****

Put aside the pressure of the essays for a day or two and just write and then keep writing. Jot down a daily journal. Jot down your thoughts about the pandemic. Jot down your gratitudes. Don't worry about grammar or trying to write in any certain way about any certain topic. Just get comfortable putting words on a piece of paper -- or screen. Hell, write to us here on A2C every

day for a week so you can get comfortable with your voice. You can do this while writing your personal essay.

****STEP THREE: WWW.THISIBELIEVE.ORG****

Go to [www.thisibelieve.org](<http://www.thisibelieve.org/>) and read essays. There are thousands of real deal personal essays there. Read at least three of them and absorb them. You can also listen to them, which can be fun because you can take the essays with you on a walk!

Why am I ok with "this I believe" essays and not "essays that worked"? Great question. It's because "this I believe essays" aren't written with the intent to try to impress someone, but they are written (the good ones anyway) to express innermost values. Also, there are literally thousands of them, so you can play for hours listening and digging in and learning about what a personal essay sounds like that goes in deep and really personal. [Here's a link to some of my favorites.

](https://drive.google.com/file/d/18LP5tMHxbH_Os4GqyRqaackbG7AQKDD_/view?usp=sharing)

****STEP FOUR: I LOVE... I VALUE... I BELIEVE... ONE MINUTE EXERCISE****

Set a one-minute timer on your phone and list out loud things you love, then list things you value, then list things you believe. Do it with a friend or do it on your own. It doesn't matter. It's a good warm-up. You can do this on different days or all one day. You can tell me some in the comments below if you like! (Idea piggy-backed from College Essay Guy)

****STEP FIVE: GO WITHIN****

Here's the deal about the personal essay. It has to be just that — super, incredibly, deeply personal. The essay needs to be about Inner You — ****the you they can't get to know anywhere else in your application****. So, you have to peel off your onion layers, find your inner Shrek, dig in super deep, and get to know yourself as you've never done before. What is the essence of you-ness you want the readers to know about you? It's not easy. Ask yourself (and write down these answers) some really personal questions like:

What do I believe?

What do I think?

What do I value?

What keeps me up at night?

What do I get excited about?

What comforts me?

What worries me?

What's important to me?

Who are my superheroes?

What's my superpower?

What would my superpower be if I could have any superpower?

What's my secret sauce?

What reminds me of home?

Just play with these. And learn a lot. Become the expert on you because you are really the only person who can be the expert on you. [Here](<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1VYDfFisudGKbAlpQGdWzEsSR2QkEpga/view?usp=sharing>) are some more questions to ask yourself as you're going through this process. After you've answered them, ****look for themes that tell you about yourself.**** Then, you'll be ready to teach the lesson about who you are and what you believe and value to the application readers. The topic is you. Any vehicle (idea or story) that gets across the message of what's important to you can work. ****Start with the message you want to share about who you are. Then find ways to demonstrate that.****

This doesn't have to be — and, (in my opinion) — shouldn't be, a complete narrative. I think the essays need to be more reflection and analysis than story. Those are the essays that stick with me after reading a few thousand of them.

I'm not saying don't use a story. Use one or two if that's what feels right for you. Just remember the story is only the vehicle for getting the message of who you are across the page. I like to see more commentary and less narrative, so for me the Show, not Tell isn't really that effective. I prefer show **and** tell — like kindergarten. I don't want a rundown of your activities — if something is discussed elsewhere in your application, to me, you don't want to waste the valuable space of the personal essay. In essence, you can think of it like this: More expressing, Less Impressing.

****STEP SIX: ANALYZE THE PERSONAL ESSAY PROMPTS****

This is a step I've recently added, but I think it's super important. While I don't feel that you have to pick one of the prompts, because the topic is YOU no matter what, I do think it's important to take some time to internalize what they are asking of you. You can find the prompts [here](<https://www.commonapp.org/apply/essay-prompts>). I encourage you to take time to read

them all and focus on these words: background, identity, meaningful, lessons, challenge, obstacles, setback, failure, learn, experience, reflect, questioned, challenged, belief, idea, thinking, problem, solved, challenge, personal importance, significance to you, solution, personal growth, understanding of yourself, engaging.

Maybe highlight them in pretty colors and absorb them as you are in this thinking phase. All of these questions are asking you to dig deep and share what you've learned from your experiences. They want to see a person who's ready to learn from mistakes and obstacles and who knows they can handle bumps in the road because they have.

****STEP SEVEN: TAKE A WALK OR LONG SHOWER****

Give those thoughts some time. Let these thoughts simmer. Take long walks and showers. Sit in silence. Give your brain a break from applications and all the stuff we spend so much time filling them with. Turn off ALLLLLLL the screens. You've asked some tough questions; now you have to give your brain some time to just let the thoughts soak. Live with these thoughts and questions for a few days and just hang out with them. Maybe jot down a note or two as you think of them, but it's important to spend some time doing nothing at all to let your brain deal with your thoughts and questions. For many of you, this is the first time in your lives you've grappled with some of these big questions about life.

****STEP EIGHT: FUN WITH WRITING AND QUESTIONS****

This is fun: Pick three or four of the questions above and play around with them on the www.themostdangerouswritingapp.com. I like the superhero one, the what do I believe, and special sauce, but you pick the ones you like most. Give yourself three or five minutes only to write as much as you can. The cool thing about the most dangerous writing app is that if you stop, you lose what you write, so be careful. I've had many many students end up using what they wrote in those few minutes as the catalyst or largest part of their essay. Copy and paste those paragraphs to a google doc so you can use them.

****STEP NINE: WRITE A SHITTY DRAFT****

Basically, this: "Bad writing precedes good writing. This is an infallible rule, so don't waste time trying to avoid bad writing. That just slows down the process. Anything committed to paper can be changed. The idea is to start, and then go from there." ~ Janet Hulstrand.

So, yeah. Get going on that shitty draft -- especially if you're experiencing overanalysis paralysis, just feel stuck, or feel like you suck at writing. I borrowed this idea from one of our subreddit parents who'd borrowed it from Anne Lamott. Start with writing the shittiest most terrible thing you can do. Just write down all your thoughts and words. Throw away grammar, and trying to make sense of it all. Push yourself to write some total crap. Just keep going until it's the worst most horrible pile of words on a page you've seen. Here's what she says "make it

trite, make it stupid, make it arrogant, make it profane." Get all that crappy stuff out of your head and write it down. Then put it away. Just leave it for a day or two and then I love this: She suggests doing a dramatic reading of it. How fun is that?

[Read what Anne Lamotte says about Shitty First Drafts here.

](https://drive.google.com/file/d/15Yg9Twq7JZteW6Bfua0E7CSoZkkQe_cl/view?usp=sharing)

****STEP TEN: WRITE YOUR ESSAY****

Take what you've written on [tmdwa](<http://www.themostdangerouswritingapp.com/>) and in your shitty first draft and use that to get yourself going. Write your essay. Focus on who you are — not what you do. Like I said earlier, your job is to build a connection with your reader. You build a connection by allowing someone in and being vulnerable. So take what you learned about yourself and share that knowledge.

Essay readers in admissions offices will read your essays quickly, so with limited time to get the essence of who you are across a sheet of paper (or computer screen), clarity and focus on INNER you are essential from the get-go. You have to remember that they will give your essay about 5 minutes. Maybe 10. You don't have a lot of time to be too nuanced. Lack of clarity, too many details about anything other than you, and language that is more complicated than necessary all build barriers (walls) between you and the reader, something you really don't want. Remember, you want bridges.

While it's certainly not the only way to write a personal essay, and I don't suggest that you have to do it this way, the easiest way to move forward might be to use a "This I Believe" type format like those essays you read in [www.thisibelieve.org](<http://www.thisibelieve.org/>). So if you're looking for an easy way to move forward, focus on one belief that you thought of and then write about it.

If you can include the words I believe, I think, I value, I wonder, I know, and they fit well in your essay then you know that it's personal. (Helpful Hints: 1. Remember to use your voice. This essay should "sound" like you and be more conversational. It's not an English 5 paragraph essay. More like talking to an older cousin, you really like and respect. 2. I also like to suggest throwing in an "I mean" and a "you know" -- if those can flow in your essay, then you know it's conversational and relaxed.)

Suggestion: If staring at a blank screen stresses you out, record your thoughts by talking into your recorder on your phone. That's a great idea for those of you who like to write while you walk (like me). Then just write it all down and give it some structure if you ramble!

****STEP ELEVEN: THE THUMB TEST****

If someone covered up your name with a thumb or they found your essay on the floor in the middle of your high school hallway with no name on it, would your mom or your best friend know

it was yours? If not, keep working. That essay needs to sound like you with your voice, your tone, and your experiences.

****STEP TWELVE: EDIT****

Edit the shit out of your essay. Make sure you read it on your computer screen, read it on paper, and read it out loud, and have at least one other person you trust look it over. Here's one[of my Medium

posts](<https://medium.com/@admissionsmom/admissionsmoms-quick-and-dirty-tips-for-editing-college-essays-49dbcf555504?sk=744bcf34e8f0cc44714558a751477d45>) that goes over how to edit essays with lots more detail -- you should read it when it's edit time. Editing is far more than working on grammar, although grammar is important. Editing can be about totally restructuring the essay -- and that can be good. When I'm reviewing essays, I look for bumps. Places where when I'm reading I just don't feel the flow. It's usually from too much flowery language or long-drawn-out metaphors or funky word choices, so read out loud and look for those bumps! Just make sure you are in charge of all edits. If you're still finding your essay is toooooo loooong, [try this Cutting to the Bone Exercise!](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Lem-QHQOicyA_RgJq5i5XAuPwXkwtBd5/view?usp=sharing)

And, now pay attention here -- If you get someone else to review your essay, don't let them just randomly make edits and revisions. Make sure they suggest edits -- and YOU agree with them and ok them.

****STEP THIRTEEN: BREATHE****

Pat yourself on the back, sit back and smile. (and then go back and edit it again!!)

****LOOK, IT'S HARD****

You CAN do this. It's hard, but so important for your future, your college admissions, for sure, ***but it's also important*** just for future you to take the time to learn to write clearly and dig in and figure out what's important about the essence of who you are.

** A NOTE** You're going to hear lots of different advice about all sorts of things when it comes to college admissions, and especially about the essay. My advice to you is to take it all in and absorb what does work and doesn't work for you. I don't think there's one right or wrong way to end up with a killer essay that gets to the point of you.

****MORE RESOURCES:****

* Check out [www.collegeessayguy.com](<http://www.collegeessayguy.com/>) for lots more info on the personal essay.

* Be SURE to check out the A2C WIKI!

* Def Read what [u/ScholarGrade](https://www.reddit.com/u/ScholarGrade/) and u/McNeilAdmissions have to say in their many wonderful posts:

* Here are some of my faves: [How to end an essay gracefully](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/8upen2/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf), [Why you shouldn't read essays that worked](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/o0hhvw/why_you_shouldnt_read_essays_that_worked_a_case/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf), [Don't put your admissions readers to sleep](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/o0jtz8/dont_put_your_admissions_readers_to_sleep_5_tips/?utm_source=share&utm_medium=ios_app&utm_name=iossmf)

* [Great points by u/misslunamae in their response to a post about the essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/n3pdni/can_anyone_really_get_into_elite_schools_just/gwr9gv7?utm_source=share&utm_medium=web2x&context=3)

* [Katherine Center's Read for Joy (but it's really about writing too)](https://katherinecenter.com/read-for-joy-2/)

* [Bird by Bird by Anne Lamott -- Advice on writing](https://ideas.ted.com/14-writing-tips-from-beloved-teacher-anne-lamott/)

* [Stephen King's Top 13 Writing Tips](https://writingcooperative.com/stephen-kings-top-13-writing-tips-69dbbcbb4cc2)

* [Why You Should Probably Delete the First Paragraph](https://medium.com/creators-hub/why-you-should-probably-delete-your-first-paragraph-16628d7efd4a)

* Here's a [great blog post filled with great blog posts about the essay from Rick Clark, Director of Admissions at Georgia Tech](http://pwp.gatech.edu/admission-blog/2020/07/02/college-essay-greatest-hits/).

* [More Advice from Rick Clark](https://grownandflown.com/director-admission-college-essays/)

* [The Neuroscience of Your Brain on Fiction (NYT)](https://www.nytimes.com/2012/03/18/opinion/sunday/the-neuroscience-of-your-brain-on-fiction.html)

* [George Saunders -- On Story (YouTube)](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-1xNNrABw8)

* Here's a link to the [essay chapter](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1oiBORqe3GZMktBbX55T6lWjnz4idn7o4/view?usp=sharing) of my book, *Hey AdmissionsMom: Real Talk from Reddit.* In it, you'll find lots of advice from me and others from Reddit from 2016-2018.

tl;dr: The personal essay is about INNER YOU. Find your Inner Shrek. Build bridges, not walls. You do have an amazing essay inside you. I promise.

💖 And finally, for those of you who made it all the way to the end of this post, I'm inviting you to a **FREE One-Hour Personal Essay Work Session for A2C Family --** ~~this Sunday, September 19 at NOON Central time~~.~~ This class is done, but if there's enough interest, I might be able to do another one, so let me know in the comments if you'd like me to host

another Personal Essay Work Session soon. Here's what it is: I will walk you through all the steps I present here in the same way I do with my private students. This won't include essay review, so it's more for those of you who either aren't completely happy or comfortable with your current essay or those of you who are ready to get started.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Don't put your admissions readers to sleep: 5 tips for writing brilliant short sentences that give your writing punch

Post Body: Reading audiences all share one characteristic: their capacity for focus is limited. This is as true for admissions officers as well as for anyone.

Good writers learn to write around the attention span of their audience.

Attention spans aren't measured in minutes, by the way. They're measured in seconds.

So good writers keep things moving. They balance longer, more complex, elaborative thoughts against shorter, snappier ones that crystalize a point.

In other words, good writers use **tempo control**.

One of the easiest ways to control the tempo in your college essays is by alternating the lengths of your sentences.

[Here's a simple example about **paste**.](<https://imgur.com/a/sev4lbn>)

This is the original sentence before it was varied up, no edits or effort to control the tempo:

>**Original**: You should eat more paste. It's an abundant source of cheap food. You don't need to prepare it much. And did I mention it's also nutritious?

Do you notice that as you read, a monotonous rhythm emerges? Each of the sentences is about the same length, with the same cadence.

They roll off your tongue one by one and none of them stands out.

But watch what happens when we convey the same information but vary the structure of the sentences a little bit.

>**Varied**: Eat more paste. It's abundant, nutritious, delicious, and requires little preparation. Oh yeah--and it's cheap!

Boom. We combined sentences into a single longer one. By combining sentences and sandwiching the long between two shorter ones, we gave the passage a little more life. (We also cut words!)

These changes add up over the course of a 650-word essay. They are often, in my experience, the difference between an impenetrable essay and a readable one.

How to vary sentences in a personal essay (example)

[Here's another example of varying sentences, this time from a supplemental statement](<https://imgur.com/a/KV0Te0g>) I was handed one time (I asked permission to share and switched up the theme):

> **Original**: In a household with programmer parents, programming is a topic that has always been near at hand. But the focus has been on individual challenges, on how to learn new languages and improve my problem-solving. As I've grown, I've begun to see programming as a discipline that extends beyond the individual and that offers a lens for thinking about global issues.

Aside from the generic nature of the subject (ooh, another essay about the relationship between programming and problem solving? Yipee!), the writing itself is flat.

It's flat because the paragraph consists of three longer sentences with somewhat similar structures.

Take a look:

* **Sentence 1**: 17 words, two clauses.

* **Sentence 2**: 18 words, two clauses.

* **Sentence 3**: 26 words, two clauses.

It's not that any one of these sentences is too long or particularly poorly written. But strung together in a row, they cause the reader to weep tears of boredom.

Now look at the same paragraph, same themes, but with varied sentences:

> **Varied**: Computer science runs in the family. My parents are programmers. So is my sister, so am I. I used to see programming as an individual challenge: a process of acquiring new languages and honing my ability to solve problems. But it's more than that. Programming is a lens for thinking beyond the individual, a tool for tackling global issues.

Instead of three sentences, we now have six.

We still have a long, complex sentence in there. But it's smuggled in between shorter sentences.

Each of these shorter sentences acts as a rest stop for the reader, a chance to regain some stamina before continuing on.

So how can you use this in your essays? Here are five tips that will help you improve as you tackle your personal essays

#1: Combine multiple related sentences into a longer one. Then sandwich the longer ones between shorter ones.

We went over this briefly in the paste example.

Go through one of your drafts (if you have one). Try to find a spot where you have successive medium or long sentences with a similar topic.

An example of this was above: "...[Paste\] is an abundant source of cheap food. You don't need to prepare it much. And did I mention it's also nutritious?"

Each of these three sentences is doing something similar: pitching you the benefits of paste.

By combining them into one sentence, we cut length and efficiently organize related ideas under the rubric of a single sentence.

But now it's a long sentence. So the next move is to stick it between two short or medium-length ones. These give the reader a break before and after the main idea.

Tempo control.

#2: Understand the function of longer and shorter sentences.

Long sentences slip and slide around in the excrement of soaring, descriptive detail.

Short sentences bring the reader back to terra firma.

Long sentences traverse long spans of time, summarizing events, developments, or processes that took place over weeks, months, or even years.

Short sentences grunt out the "so what."

Neither form should be used excessively. The unsung hero of this post is the medium-length sentence, which can convey a lot without drawing excessively on the reader's attention span.

#3: Capture your readers attention with shorter sentences before unloading a doozy

The best time to unload a long sentence is after you've already built a funky little rhythm with a few short or medium-length ones.

Longer descriptive or expository sentences are the workhorse of your essay. Shorter sentences convince your readers to not fall asleep half-way through.

Ration them strategically at points in your essay where you really want someone to pay attention.

Effective writing is effective communication. On college essays, effective communication takes strategy.

Where are you hitting your most compelling points? Where is the climax in the story? Know these facts about your essay and write accordingly.

#4: Do a safety check - count words in each sentence to make sure there are no dead zones.

If you're concerned about your writing seeming monotonous, do a safety check. Go through your application and start counting the words in each sentence.

If you notice a string of three or four sentences in a row with high word counts, that might be a good place to start editing. Start by seeing if you can combine anything.

But keep in mind: your whole essay **SHOULDN'T** be a calibrated alteration between short and long sentences. Consistent alteration of short/long sentences can be just as bad as bludgeoning your readers with too many long ones.

It's not the end of the world if you have multiple long-ish sentences in a row. There is no hard and fast rule.

But above all, be conscientious of the reader's attention span.

#5: Don't overuse short sentences

Don't go Hemmingway on our asses because you read this post.

Short sentences should be rationed. Use them sparingly as a tool to capture and conserve your readers' attention.

They should be used like a speed limit: to help regulate pace and prevent a ten-sentence pileup on the proverbial interstate of your common app essay.

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Thanks for reading! Hope you find this useful in revising drafts.

👉-Alex

***** End
of Post

Post Title: What I've learned from reading tons of your essays (as a college senior)

Post Body: EDIT: I'm going to do a part 2 later tonight. There were more patterns I noticed but didn't have the time to fit in this post.

EDIT 2: I've been getting a ton of PM's and messages to read essays. While I wish I could help all of you, I simply can't leave thorough feedback for all of you. I can give my initial reaction, but that's it. If you can, please ask questions and I will make a new post about it on how you might resolve your problems with your essays. It's going to be a very general thread, but I hope it still helps. I really want to emphasize that you should post your question in the thread here, because I am slowly getting lost in my own dm's.

EDIT 3: here's part 2: <https://redd.it/du0axm>

After reading a ton of essays from those of you applying ED (I apologize to those I didn't have the chance to get back to!), there were some patterns that I felt needed to be addressed.

To preface, I'm a college senior, and by no means am I a leading authority on writing essays. I am trying to help in anyway I can, and I felt that this was a good way to do so.

1) Too much narrative

Example: My heart raced as the door shut. It was 2 AM. Jack and I both ran with no other destination in mind other than out. Looking back, all I could see was my shadow trailing behind. Our footsteps became the manifestations of our desperation to get out--each step forward louder than the next. Then... we could finally see something: blue and red flashing lights. We were finally saved.

Imagine that narrative, but have it drag on for another two or three paragraphs, essentially taking up more than half your essay. I've been noticing this kind of writing A LOT in the essays I've been reading, and while the writing itself is fine, the problem is the fact that I learn nothing about you. Look, I get it: you want to paint the story and captivate the reader. But at this point, this seems to be overplayed. I don't really care that it was 2 AM. I don't care that your shadow was trailing behind you (as it should, anyway...). I'm not saying these details shouldn't be included, but please, **please** remember to balance your narratives out with introspection. What do I mean by that? Well, there are a variety of ways to do this. You can start by showing some of your beliefs, values or traits as a result of the event. For example, say you were helping

some students out with their homework. Instead of pAiNtInG the details of the setting or what the students were doing, you could showcase your personality trait of being patient and kind. How? You could say something like, "As each student tried to figure out how to sculpt their own masterpieces, I couldn't hide my smile. I hoped that after buying them 50 pounds of clay to mold, these students would see the same freedom of expression and beauty in sculpting as I did when I was young."

By no means is this a perfect example, but I hope it illustrates what I'm talking about. In those 2 sentences, we learn a couple things about the person: they're generous because they bought a ton of clay for these students when they didn't have to; they love art and see sculpting as the ultimate way to express themselves. You don't need to write all these flowery details about what the students were doing, or how the air in the room felt or whatever. Balance it out with narrative that tells me something about YOU.

****2) Quirky essays without anything substantive to say... ****

I'm sure many of you have read williamthereaders top 5 most common essays. If you haven't, I suggest you read it! Quirky but non-substantive essays are probably my least favorite essays. These are the essays that talk about some obscure thing in their lives and then relate it back to some larger picture about themselves. In most cases, though, students who do this fail to make it substantive. For example, I've read several essays about cookies (I don't know why this is a recurring theme). In these essays, students talk about their love for cookies, but that's as far as it goes. Here's the thing, though: liking cookies isn't really quirky.... everyone likes cookies... Look, I get that you want to seem different, but you do so at the expense of coming off as just weird or boring. It also feels really contrived when I see someone talk so passionately about their favorite cookie and just ramble about how it taste; I learn nothing about you other than the fact that your favorite cookie is an oreo or double fudge.

If you do take the quirky route, please, PLEASE make sure you have something to say about yourself other than your quirk. Yes, quirks are cool and all, and they do help differentiate students, but I can't differentiate you from other students if 75% of you like oreos. Ask yourself what makes YOU different by having this quirk. Do you think differently because of your quirk? Do you see the world differently? And no, liking cookies is not quirky, so please stop writing about your favorite cookie! Everyone likes cookies!!!!!! I would consider you quirky if you *didn't* like cookies... (i'm kidding... partially, you freak!)

****3) The negative essay****

I'm sure everyone has seen one of these. These are the sob story essays. Most of the time, these essays are 90% negative and 10% introspective. Please don't take this to mean that I'm being rude or inconsiderate of your hardships. I'm actually genuinely concerned for many of you who write about these serious topics. I think the issue stems from the fact that many of you see your essays as a therapy session. I get it. It's personal, it's deep, it's vulnerable. But I don't think this is necessarily the time to vent all your anger and sadness. AO's are not your therapists.

Again, I don't mean to sound rude. If you are really struggling with a loss, personal issue, or whatever, please, please reach out to a trusted friend or adult. Yes, it is sometimes beneficial to write down your frustrations on paper, but realize that college essays have a very specific audience, and that there is a time and place for everything.

If you do decide to write about something like this, really think about how you have changed because of it. Do you think differently? Do you see the world differently? Are you more energetic and animated with your friends? Do you cherish life more and how so? Focus on the positives. Focus on who you are today and who you strive to be, not who you were when you were sad or upset.

****4) The essay that jams way too many things into 650 words****

These essays are the ones that jump around and try to include as much as possible about themselves, from the instruments they play to the food they cook to how they dance. Here's the problem, though: when you try to talk about yourself from 30,000 feet above, it will just fall flat. There are so many elements in your essay that some things just don't flow very well together, and everything just feels out of wack. How exactly does your passion for violin relate to your love of cheese and how it brings your family together? It just feels contrived, rushed, and makes you seem really desperate. You might as well tattoo "pls accept hahvard" on your forehead.

Zoom in and focus yourself on a couple of things. Don't try to talk about everything. Think about what was most formative to you, and then think about some values, beliefs, thoughts, traits, etc that you want to portray. You could also go the other way around and figure out what values/beliefs/thoughts/traits etc you want to showcase and think of what story/microcosm of your life most aptly hits those points.

****5) The pretentious essay****

This one is really subjective to the reader. There was one essay I read that was ranting about capitalism and then somehow related it back to autism and kids dancing at the orchestra. The essay tried to impose a greater sense of morality, and it just didn't work. This essay felt completely ****insincere****. As soon as I get the feeling that someone is being insincere, I don't read the rest of their essay. Think about it: if you were on a date, and your date was talking about capitalism and somehow related it back to autism while suggesting they had the superior sense of morality, would you want to continue your relationship with this person? Most of you are 17 writing these essays. I don't really need the most profound subject matter to be discussed. I just want to get to know who you are, but I want to know the best parts of who you are. It becomes extremely difficult to advocate for someone when your first impression of them is a dbag.

There's no easy fix to this other than having someone who knows you well read your essay. Your friends can usually catch if the essay sounds like you. Another option that I suggest, as have many on this sub, is to just take a break and not look at your essay for a week. Come back

to it and see if your opinion changes. Read it outloud. Read it backwards. Imagine if you were on a date and you read them your essay; would they want to have a second date with you?

I hope this helps some of you for your RD schools! Again, I apologize to everyone who I didn't get back to. I'll try to answer questions (if there are any) in this thread.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: My World-Ending Guide to the College Essay

Post Body: ***Psst***, I'm back and writing new admissions content as u/McNeilAdmissions. If you like this post check out [*this fat archive*](https://mcneiladmissions.com/open-admissions/) *of my content. Kind of the home base for my admissions writing. Cheers!*

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Hi everybody! u/misttermcneil here. I'm a [college admissions counselor based in the Bay Area.](https://mcneiladmissions.com/) Coming to you live with a massive post I wrote about the college essay, how to make yours special, and some stuff about language (how to avoid clichés, etc) to consider as you begin your own writing process. This one's a doozy - the most resource-saturated post I've written. Hopefully you enjoy. For reference, THIS GUIDE IS WRITTEN FOR THE VERY BEGINNER, but hopefully has utility for everyone.

In addition to what follows, I'm sharing three other things with you today. The first is the blog post from which a lot of this text comes. The second is another post that contains three stellar college essays. (The format of the essays is impossible to transpose onto reddit, hence the outbound link.) Third, I'm linking out to a **free, 35-page guide** to the college essay that includes everything from topic generation tips to brainstorming exercises to more detailed writing suggestions. Again, the outbound link is due to the format.

For simplicity's sake (although as we know there's nothing simple about this process), here are those links upfront:

1. The original [blog post](https://mcneiladmissions.com/open-admissions/) from which this post is drawn
2. A guide I wrote for my new subreddit, r/CollegeEssays. Go over there and hit the menu button... Or join the sub. You'll get the guide sent to you in a message.

Alright, here we **G O O O O O O O**.

Introduction: So, It's Time to Write a College Essay

Hello, you - whoever you are. It's probable that you're coming to this post as a rising senior, just beginning to eyeball colleges and gnawing at your fingernails. Or, perhaps, you're a senior who,

in a desperate bid to make up for months of procrastination, has turned to this guide looking for guidance in crafting your essay. (Obviously this only applies to those of you currently in the first category but who will find yourself in the second in a matter of months.)

No matter who you are, you're in luck - because contained in this huge thing are as many secrets about the college essay as I could fit in a post. In this post I cover topics from the basic (What is the Common App?) to the microscopic (What topics are on and off the table? How do I avoid clichés?) and everything in between.

So come one, come all, to this big ol' post on the college essay. It is my sincerest hope that you come with questions and leave with answers. (But if for any reason this gigantic guide failed to address your particular question, please send me a note. I'd be happy to answer you personally!)

SO, without further ado...

Part One: The Very Basics - What is a College Essay?

For the uninitiated, the college essay is an essential component of most (but not all) college applications. Generally, college essays fall into one of three categories - (1) the common application general essay, (2) the supplemental essay, and (3) various scholarship essays. (More on these different types in a moment.)

No matter which type you're writing, though, college application essays tend to place you, the writer, in the spotlight. They're designed to help admissions committees gain an insight into what makes you tick. Thus, college essay prompts are often (if not always) of a directly personal nature. They're written in a way so as to challenge the writer to dig deeply and to share personal information about such topics as one's family background, passions, intellectual predilections, or extracurricular occupations. In sum, the college essay is designed to triangulate **who you are** for an admissions committee.

In very short, then, a good college essay is one in which the writer goes **deep**, exposing him- or herself on the page, while a bad essay is one that stays on the surface and never moves beyond (or, rather, beneath) the level of the superficial. If that all sounds abstract, don't worry - we'll go into detail on what this all means soon. For now, though, let's talk about the two primary types of college essay.

I refer, of course, to the common app essay and to the dreaded supplemental essay.

1. What is The Common Application Essay?

To answer this question, you first need to know what the Common Application (App) is. The Common App is a non-profit organization that provides the infrastructure beneath the process of applying to colleges in the United States. Practically speaking, the Common App is a giant

portal that you, the applicant, will use to upload your essays, input your personal information, and select the schools to which you want to submit.

Helpfully, the Common App aggregates most if not all of the information you need in order to make a successful application to a given school. The Common App is the place to go to figure out what prompts you'll need to respond to in order to satisfy the essay submissions requirements for a given school, and they're also in charge of determining which "common app essay" prompts students will be answering in a given year.

Now, let's get back to the question at hand.

The Common App Essay is a general essay that almost every school requires prospective students to submit. While some schools ask for additional supplementary essays (I won't get ahead of myself yet), the Common App Essay is ****required**** by almost every school.

****Completing the Common App Essay is the minimum you will need to be a viable applicant****.

The Common App Essay Is...

- * An essay of no more than 650 and no fewer than 250 words in length
- * Written in response to one of seven prompts, which I'll list below
- * The main piece of writing that a given school will examine when determine whether you're a good fit

As I mentioned above, the essay is designed to help applicants share their personality with admissions panels. Here are the prompts for the current application cycle. These prompts, released in 2017, have remained unchanged since and, collectively, offer a wide variety of footholds for an applicant to tell his or her story. There's somethin' in here for everyone.

Common App Prompts for 2018

1. "Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story."
2. "The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?"
3. "Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?"
4. "Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution."
5. "Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others."

6. "Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?"
7. "Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design."

As you can see, these seven prompts are designed to provide a near-infinite number of possible responses. And if the first six don't do it for you, there's always prompt number 7, which is explicitly designed for anyone else.

So, in sum, the Common App Essay is a universally required essay of between 250 and 650 words that, drawn from seven possible prompts, is the primary way that a university gauges your writing. The Common App Essay is designed to help highlight a student's individuality, and is an opportunity to "go deep" and share oneself with the admissions panel.

Now, on to the supplementary essay.

2. What is a Supplemental College Essay?

Unlike the Common App Essay, which is near-universally required by colleges, supplemental essays are provided on a case-by-case basis by the colleges themselves. Their parameters vary widely. Some are on the shorter side, clocking in at 100 words or fewer, while some rival the length of the Common App Essay at 500 words or more. The supplementary essay is generally intended as an opportunity for students to show why a specific school is the one for them.

While the Common App Essay is designed by the Common App organization, supplemental essays are written by colleges and universities, so their prompts (and the kinds of responses they solicit) align more explicitly with the recruitment goals and priorities of a college. That is, the supplementary essay is a college's tool for screening applicants, sometimes (but not always) by providing challenging or confusing prompts.

For example, the below prompt is real, and really challenging. It's both an opportunity to be creative and is potentially impossible to answer.

> **Supplemental Essay Prompt Example #1: The University of Chicago:**

>

> **Prompt**: "You're on a voyage in the thirteenth century, sailing across the tempestuous seas. What if, suddenly, you fell off the edge of the Earth?"

Some prompts, however, are far less adventurous than this, and ask you something simple such as, "Why x school?" These essays are designed to give students an opportunity to talk about the specific features of a school or program that makes them want to attend. Whereas the Common App Essay is general - universal to all schools to which one applies - the supplementary essays are much more particularized. That being the case, supplementary

essays award creativity and specificity in a way that the Common App Essay generally does not. (Not to say you can't be creative on your Common App.)

Above all else, the supplementary essay is critical for letting your favorite schools know why you'd like to attend them. Even in the most creative approach to the supplementary essay, it's good advice to keep one eye on the prize: that is, of giving a clear reason why you belong at X school - regardless of whether that school is the University of Oregon or Johns Hopkins.

Now that we've clarified the two main types of essay, it's time to move onto a closer consideration of the actual essay topics themselves, and the possible responses we might imagine to some of them.

3. Possible Topics for the College Essay

Ok, so: we now know the difference between the Common App Essay and the supplemental essay. We also know the range of possibilities for the Common App Essay prompts. But what are some possible ways to successfully respond to the those prompts?

Right up front, it's important to understand the breakdown of which prompts students choose to answer the most frequently. Why? Because, by understanding which prompts are more or less frequently chosen, you can get a sense of where you fit in the cavalcade of applications that admissions committees see every year. So, here's a breakdown of the three most common Common App prompts.

The Three Most Common Prompts on the Common App - SOURCE: [COMMON APP](<https://www.northcoastprep.com/blog/college-essay#>)

1. According to the Common App, the most popular prompt in the 2017-2018 cycle was number (5), "Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others." A whopping ****23.6%**** of students chose to answer this prompt.
2. Second-most popular was prompt (7), a topic of personal choice, with ****22.5%**** of students choosing to answer.
3. The third most popular was prompt (1), "Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story." ****21.4%**** of students chose to answer this prompt.

That means that, although there are seven (7) prompts to choose from, the majority of students (~70%) choose from among ****only three****. One could draw several conclusions from this - that these prompts are the most compelling,; or else, that students find the other prompts more challenging, and thus avoid them because they're afraid of failing to answer the prompt in a satisfactory manner. Some students may see this as an opportunity to choose the less commonly answered prompt, and thus to stand out in the eyes of an admissions committee.

Let's examine the question of essay topics more closely, and look at several topics and approaches to the college essay that are compelling. We'll also look at several others that, from our perspective, you should avoid.

4. Good College Essay Topics

The only truly essential starting point for your common app essay is that it be about something important to you. It doesn't need to be about curing cancer, immigrating from Venus to the US or winning three varsity championships in a single morning. It just has to be something significant to you.

Consider this quote from Christopher Burkmar, Princeton University's Associate Dean of Admissions:

>“Consider a mundane topic. Sometimes it's the simple things in life that make the best essays. Some of my favorites have included essays that reflect on the daily subway ride to school, or what the family goldfish observed from the fishbowl perched on the family kitchen table. It doesn't have to be a life-changing event to be interesting and informative.”*

A good college essay can potentially be about anything. Often times, however, the impulse is to write it about everything: to write an essay about one's philosophy about life, say, or about something equally grandiose. In fact, the better essay strategy may be to start small, by examining the little details in life that nevertheless contain deep meaning.

To come up with good topics for your college essay, you'll probably need to do some brainstorming. Keep in mind that the best essays don't spring out of the ground spontaneously, but are the process of a long, typically rigorous process of brainstorming, drafting, and redrafting. But how does one start brainstorming a topic?

5. Brainstorming for the College Essay

A good brainstorming session can be the difference between creating a strong and unique essay or a mediocre and predictable one. Remember, a unique topic **does not** have to be out-of-this-world zany, but simply something that has personal resonance to you.

To hone in on those topics, break up your brainstorming into rounds.

In **round 1**, your goal should be identify the important experiences, people, or periods of time in your life. For specific brainstorming exercises to help you do this, read our blog on brainstorming exercises for the college essay. But for this phase, simply look around and ask yourself, Who or what is most important to me?

In **round 2**, it's time to take your initial list and delve into the sensory and concrete details that surround the characters, times, and experiences that formed your initial list. If you're writing a college essay about your mother, the second phase of your college essay brainstorming should include a list of feelings (love, admiration, respect), settings (her office, the kitchen), etcetera. These will help give you a basic sense of the emotional texture of your essay.

Finally, in **round 3**, it's time to draft. Your objective here is to put the pieces you gathered during rounds 1 & 2 together in a writing process. Start to assemble the pieces of your essay into a narrative that moves beyond the realm of the brainstorm and into the territory of an essay. This can seem a bit abstract or difficult at first. In the next section, we provide an example of a stellar essay, and show you how this process of brainstorming led to its creation.

College Essay Ideas that Worked - Brainstorming in Action

Below, we've included a copy of a college essay that really worked. Read it and try to pick up on the essential themes covered in the essay. Look for what the essay does well, and for where it fails (although, we admit, this essay was pretty great). The section that follows will be dedicated to examining how brainstorming made this essay possible.

Theme: Identity Prompt: "Indicate a person who has had a significant influence on you, and describe that influence."

>*Her dark brow is often furrowed; the freckles on her tanned nose crinkled as they too scrunch in concentration; the long, spidery lashes of her bright eyes are flickering constantly as she focuses. This is the way my mother calculates, the way she thinks, analyzes, and decides. This is the look I have been raised under, the look to which I can attribute every quirk in my being. It is the look that defines my mother, and the look that has created me. This look—those narrowed eyes, the pursed lips, the sharp tongue—has taught me courage, taught me independence, taught me strength, and sacrifice. They have showed me vulnerability—a flaw in the façade—and isolation. Those features, the way the muscles contract and flex, have instilled in me everything that my mother is and have taught me everything I can be.*

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>*My mother's eyebrows taught me independence and determination, a mark left over from her adolescence. Although omitted from my knowledge of her until midway through my seventeenth year, my mother grew up surrounded by temptation and destruction. Alcohol, marijuana, heroin. Tested and abused by her mother, father, sister, and brothers. Jail and violence. Damage and disrepair. My mother was forced to be her own person before she was eighteen; she was forced to be her family's person, their protector. No matter how she's suppressed the haunting memories, the twinge in her brow remains the souvenir. It tells me, she tells me, that I don't need to rely on anyone but myself. She teaches me the importance of taking care of others, but never forgetting to take care of yourself. She taught me courage. It's not easy to take the first step without a supporting hand. But it is possible.*

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>*I learned strength from her mouth: her tight lips and the slight smirk. It was the mouth that held in the tears, held back the bitter words, and held up her chin. It was the mouth that kissed me as a child and smiled at my curiosity, despite the divorce, despite the cheating, and the lies. She raised me on her own. She was strong and stubborn. To this day, I don't understand how she managed to care for infant, maintain a career, pay bills, and never miss Sunday night's dinner. But the strength that she possessed, that she still possesses despite the heartbreak, the abandonment, and the responsibility. Strength in the face of challenge, strength when there's nothing to support you—is invaluable.*

>

>*Independence is convenient, and strength endures, but sacrifice is the most powerful of all. And that's what I see every time I look into my mother's eyes. The moment she laid eyes on me, the moment she knew she was going to do it alone, she gave me her life. I was the first priority, always. She ensured my safety, she ensured my happiness, my growth, my knowledge, everything. I can never repay her, nor begin to thank for every opportunity she gave me. But I'll never forget it because I can see it every time she looks at me. The pride or the love or perhaps the occasional eye-rolling.*

>

>*What can have I learned from my mother? How to be myself and how to be better than I am. And I'm always learning, always discovering something new about my mother. And all I have to do is look at her. It's written there in her features. All I have to do is look.*

College Essay Analysis: All I have to do is look

This is a great essay for a number of reasons. The writing is *par excellence*,* and the topic is clearly important and personal. This college essay provides a perfect example of what we mean when we say that an essay doesn't need to be about the time you went to Venus, but can (and should) be about something more ordinary and yet more meaningful. Here, that topic is the writer's mother.

But how did brainstorming lead to this essay? Take a look.

* In Round 1, we can see the initial ideas coming together: Her mother's gaze, her mother's impact on her developing and strengths, and her deep respect for a distinguished individual. These elements form the fundamental *idea**, if not the actual contents, of the essay.

* In Round 2, these ideas are deepened through a process of association-building. Specific features attached to sensory details are brought in to deepen the characters in the essay. Finally, a supplementary group of experiences, all mediated through the relationship to the central character, the mother, are introduced.

* In Round 3 of the brainstorming process, the author introduces concrete details to bring the character and the essay to life. The tone also begins to take shape.

While much of the brilliance of the example essay comes in the particular writing ability of the author, the fundamental components have everything to do with a structured and replicable process of brainstorming.

All this goes to show that you CAN brainstorm your way into a remarkable college essay. It's just a matter of being deliberate, taking your time, and working carefully to establish the details, characters, and tone that ultimately breathe life into the essay.

6. College Essay Topics to Avoid

Although almost any topic can potentially be the basis of a great college essay, there are some we recommend against, for two primary reasons.

1. The essay topic is dangerous because it runs the risk of offending a reader
2. The topic is overplayed, clichéd, or boring for other reasons.

In this section, we list eight types of essay that, for one reason or the other, we advise you to avoid in the process of drafting your college essay.

The first variety, the most heinous, is what we've termed "Red Flag Topics." These are essay topics we advise against at all costs, as they have a high chance of either boring or simply alienating admissions committees. Stories that fit into the "Red Flag Topic" section are often so played out that you run the risk of being written off immediately. Here are the three types of essays that we advise against.

Red Flag College Essay Topics

1. **Community Service Trips**: Applicants tend to draft elaborate essays about short-lived service experiences. These essays may seem condescending or superficial. And besides, who hasn't taken a service trip? We're sure you can think of something else that speaks more eloquently to who you are.
2. **The Admissions Process**: You won't win points with admissions by writing about the drudgery of application itself. Your essay is an opportunity to reflect. Believe it or not, you might actually enjoy the process.
3. **Unnecessary Quirkiness**: Don't have the reader hold your essay up to a mirror or read in a spiral. Focus on content, not gimmicks.
4. **Sports**: The advice from admissions officers is simple: don't write about sports. They're tired of it. Alternative topics will show additional dimensions of who you are. Leave sports discussion to your short-answer responses or to your list of extracurriculars.

There, that was easy, wasn't it? Tempting as those topics may be, do your best to ignore them. Remember, the best essays are written about a seemingly innocuous yet transcendent feature of your life - something that occasions true, deep reflection. That's why service trips aren't a good topic for the college essay: at most, they take place over a week or two, and they rarely get at an experience truly essential to *you* and your character development.

Yellow Flag Essay Topics

Before we proceed to the next section, let's go over a few yellow-flag topics. These are ones that you might want to consider avoiding, but which are not categorically bad.

These include, in no particular order...

- * Childhood Anecdotes
- * Political Essays or Topics
- * Travel Stories
- * The "Influential Grandparent" Essay

While these topics are not necessarily off-limits, one should be aware that many admissions officers advise writers to steer away. This for a variety of reasons: some topics, like essays about grandparents, travel, or childhood anecdote, are frequently occurring and tend to sound very similar across hundreds and thousands of samples. Others, like essays about political beliefs, run the risk of alienating the writer from the reader. Of course, that doesn't mean these essay topics can't be executed successfully. One should simply be judicious in choosing whether and how to approach these topics

7. College Essay Clichés

In addition to selecting the best prompt for your essay, it's important to rid your writing of these classic college essay clichés. These pesky phrases, openings, and tendencies are repeated over and over by unknowing students from across the country. These clichés are some of the biggest turn-offs on a college essay, according to college admissions experts. If you identify a cliché in your essay, it just takes some effort and creative thinking to re-design your ideas.

Clichéd Essay Openings

1. ****THE DICTIONARY OPENING****: "Webster's Dictionary defines 'determination' as..."
2. ****THE FAMOUS PERSON QUOTE****: "Our greatest glory is not in never falling, but in rising every time we fall." ~Confucius
3. ****THE VAGUE GOAL****: "I've always known, from the time I was old enough to play Operation, that I wanted to be a doctor."
4. ****GOING META****: "Was your childhood home destroyed by a landspout tornado? Yeah, neither was mine. I know that intro might have given the impression that this college essay will be about withstanding disasters, but the truth is that it isn't about that at all."
5. ****JUST PLAIN UNCREATIVE****: "Ever since I was young.." "I still remember the day that..."

Other College Essay Clichés

1. ****BROAD CONCLUSIONS****: "So, in the end, it's clear that we should settle our differences with our opponents and listen with open hearts."

2. **“REVELATION” MOMENTS:** “I realized in that moment that just as the shabbiest objects can become the most exquisite paintings, true insight can come from the most unexpected of places.”

Avoid all these clichés and you should be off to a good start. Of course, this list isn't exhaustive; to look for your own clichés, just read your essay with an eye for banalities, common phrases, and ideas that seem superficial or common-hand. A good rule of thumb is that "If you've heard it before, take a second look."

(For more advice about how to avoid cliché in [your college essays, take a look here](<https://mcneiladmissions.com/college-admissions-blog/six-clichs-to-avoid-on-the-college-essay>).)

Conclusion

As you begin to write your college essay, whether you're starting off brainstorming or you already have a draft in the works, remember: a good college essay is vulnerable and comes from the heart. That advice can be a dime-a-dozen - what does it really mean to write an essay that "comes from the heart" and is "vulnerable"?

In this post, I hope that I've provided some answers to that question. To me, the best college essays are those which begin from a place close to the applicant's daily life, and which illuminate something special yet simple.

Remember, you don't need to come across as a superstar, a profound mind, or a saint in order to impress an admissions committee. All you need to do is be honest - both with them and with yourself - in the portrait you construct of your life. Sometimes, clichés are clichés for a reason: because they're true. The cliché "everyone has a story to tell" just happens to be one of these.

/end post

I hope this extremely long (yet inevitably inexhaustive) guide was useful. A lot of this information is drawn from the free guide I linked above. If you have any questions for me about this stuff, feel free to let me know!

In the near future I'm planning posts on school selection, how to gauge fit, and other topics related to the college essay.

In the meantime, though, happy writing! :D

***** End of Post

Post Title: Essay advice from a Stanford 2024 admit

Post Body: **Edit: I'm aware getting into Stanford doesn't warrant my advice but I'm just trying to help out. Here's a link for a full guide to the Stanford essays I found super helpful -**
<http://www.pavedwithverbs.com/blog/stanfordessays2017#comments>

Edit2: I don't know what's up with the down-votes on this sub, if you don't like it just skip it, someone out there might find these useful.

Hi! I'm a Stanford 2024 admit from India.

When you're just words on a page, you want to wake your admissions officer up. If you're lucky enough, your application has a compelling story (or if we're being real here, a compelling hook). If you're not lucky enough, you need everything else to work out for you. These are tips I picked up along the way. Some are psychological, some are quick fixes, and some are just my learnings. Hope they help you out :)

Needless to say, take all of these with a grain of salt.

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1. **Nudges**

I once came across a story about an Apple employee who would purposefully incline the store's MacBook screens till it was just off. Whenever a customer would walk in to look at the device - a few of them would physically lift the screen back up to its place. That one interaction increased the attachment they had with the device - *genius*.

Now you're writing essays, most of which are being viewed computer screen (maybe even paper). How do you psychologically get your reader to become more invested in your writing? Nudge them.

This is an excerpt from my intellectual curiosity essay to Stanford:

""Running my hands over the laptop's keyboard, my fingers seamlessly moved over two subtle bumps. It was 2 am in the night and out of exhaustion, I placed my head sideways on the desk. Right on the keys 'F and J', were two lifted lines, deformities hiding in 'plane' sight.""

Chances are, the existence of these bumps wasn't known to my AO (as I confirmed when I read her handwritten letter to me). The moment she looked down she could find them for herself, and that one discovery went a long way to help cement my words in her memory.

Another example of the same principle from my essay to Yale about my journey with Indian Sign Language:

"Given a unique sign for my name - *touch your thumb with your pointer and interlock your two loops, curling your outer three fingers to make an S* - by my Deaf peers"

In my opinion, this one is a little much, but the idea here is to bring your AO to physically react and try it out for themselves. If they can invest even the slightest bit of cognitive effort into your work, beyond words on a screen, the chances of it becoming memorable will genuinely increase.

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****2. Your Common Application Essay shouldn't be about your spike.****

This one's quick - but also just a personal opinion. Your Counsellor LOR references your spike. Your additional LOR references your spike. Everyone's talking about your spike. Use the Common Application essay to provide an experience your college wouldn't know about from each other category. Make it about you, your personality, and what makes you unique. Could you do this through your spike? Yes. Do you need to do it through your spike? Not necessarily.

​

****3. Short Answers. Short Answers. Short Answers.****

My father used to tell me a quote by Blaise Pascal (I didn't know he said it but Quora pointed me to him so I'm assuming it's one of his sayings)

"I'm sorry I wrote you such a long letter; I didn't have time to write a short one."

When you're forced to cram answers in 100 characters / 50 words / annoyingly short prompts you have the greatest chance to shine. Take advantage of it.

Here's an example:

****Stanford prompt: What would you do with an extra hour in the day.****

The goal here is *****not to be quirky*****, neither is it to come off as an *****over-productive machine***** that would capitalize on the hour till the very last second.

Answer:

"Years ago, my father would tuck my younger brother and me into bed with virtuous stories he would weave through the night. With his entrepreneurial venture, our tradition has faded away.*

In this 25th hour, I would become the storyteller, awakening my brother's imagination, and recreating our ritual of togetherness."

A little tacky? Yes. Maybe a little more self-awareness about how 'ritual of togetherness' sounded like a children's storybook would've gone a long way. But the point is, in those 50 words I tried to convey 3 of the 6 themes I chose for my entire application:

The bloodline of storytelling. An entrepreneurial background that inspired mine. Family and its importance to me.

(The other 3 were the irrationality of human beings, communication, and disability and inclusion in case you wanted to know)

Okay that was a long tip, here's a short one for a break.

4. **~Show, don't tell.~** **Show and Tell.**

Given the stats, letters of recommendations, your activities and honors, your essays will be read briefly, and then highlighted in places where the AOs sometimes comment on what you're trying to convey. I understand what reviewers mean when they say "Show, don't tell." But often it **might be more helpful** to go beyond the entire scene you have articulated and draw a soft conclusion. *Show and Tell*. It's just one of those small things that has the potential to ease their process, or maybe affirm their conclusions.

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5. Kill your babies. I mean it. Kill them.

Essay writing is a *personal* process. But you're going to have to eventually share those ideas with trusted sources (I mean beyond your wildly supportive or unsupportive parents - counsellors, reviewers, and students) When they all unanimously make recommendations, in most cases, something's up.

Since the 11th grade, I wanted to write an essay about dim sum and my obsession with it. An Indian loving dim sum?? Unique? Why not. A food essay? Who doesn't love food!!! Bonus points - my AO is now reading my words and thinking about her love for food too!!!

The worst part? I began writing this essay and fell in love with my introduction. **Just the introduction.**

"Ayurvedic scriptures dictate that a passion for certain pursuits can be genetically transferred. Personally, though, I strongly believe they missed out on the heritability of food.

*In a corner shop on the streets of Tanjong Pagar, a soon-to-be Indian mother in Singapore vociferously brought chopsticks close to her mouth. Years into the relationship, the naive soon-to-be father asked, "Have you had enough?" Something snapped - possibly the

chopsticks. From a soon-to-be born perspective, I believe the intensity of emotions surging through my mother infused in me an innate love for the dim sum that was hurled at the undeserving target."*

Here's the deal. After a while, my essay turned into one of those - metaphorical, matching features of a dim sum to myself like its a dating app, here's my quirky obsession I'm not like other applicants pieces.

It took me a while. I usually take advice but I was convinced this was a golden ticket and refused to switch up my Common App essay until I was backed into a corner.

Tl;dr I killed my baby, but I'm thankful for it.

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If you made it to the end, why thank you I appreciate it. I have way too many #tipsandtricks but these are a great place to start. I admit, I don't use this platform often and I'm a Youtuber at heart. Soon enough, I'll be posting videos about my stats, extra-curriculars, spike, etc. etc.

I don't have any college advice videos up yet, but I will have them up soon. If you want to check out my College Decisions Reaction Video - you've probably seen a lot of these but give it 30 seconds, if you're not into it, feel free to click off -
[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8J7xCml_ro](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=r8J7xCml_ro)

Thanks for hearing me out :)

***** End
of Post

Post Title: If you don't have a first draft yet, don't read this.

Post Body: I've seen many people ask for a list of common essay mistakes so they know what not to do. Here's a fairly comprehensive list I've compiled based on my experience, discussions with others in admissions, and books I've read. You would think that many of these would be self-evident or obvious, but experience indicates otherwise. If you have questions, feel free to reach out via PM or my website at www.bettercollegeapps.com.

#WARNING!

If you don't have a solid list of potential topics or a rough outline of your essay, ****STOP READING NOW****. Seriously. Don't start with lists of rules or errors because they will feel limiting or excessive, and will likely stifle creativity and actually focus your attention and energy on what you shouldn't be doing rather than devoting it to creating new ideas or topics. Ok, do you have a rough draft or an outline or at least some topics? Really? Good. Read on, and remember that these are just guidelines, so if you really want to break one of these rules, you

can. Just recognize that it's risky to do so and you will need to write a really great essay to make the risk pay off. If you're interested in a professional essay review, feel free to PM me for more details - this is the best way to make sure your essay passes muster.

****1. Don't choose a common topic.**** It's possible to write a good essay on a common topic but **so much more difficult** because of the sheer volume that comes in. These include the standard sports injury/championship, mission trip, divorce, moving to a new city, death of a grandparent, and slightly meta "getting into this college would be the culmination of my dreams" essays. To a lesser degree, this also includes "soup du jour" essay topics like cryptocurrency, social media, or whatever else is trending. Yes, it is theoretically possible to have a good essay on any of these common topics. But every AO rolls their eyes and dies a little inside every time they have to read another one.

****2. Make sure you write about something that is actually important to you**.** Full meta essays about college applications/grades/tests feel like they are clever and creative, but they aren't that distinctive or original. And there's no way the college application process is that big of a part of who you are because you've only been doing it for ~7 months tops. People who write about this are trying to project intelligence and depth, but it does the opposite. Other people write about things they think AOs want them to write about. What they actually want you to write about is YOU.

****3. Use caution when writing about super polarizing or sensitive issues**.** Be careful not to come across as too dogmatic, political, religious, cult-like, overly dramatic, aggressive, racist, sexist, or argumentative. Often you come across as somewhat crass or blunt simply because you don't have the space to explain your complex views fully enough and the topic is so delicate. Other times your opinions clash with the deeply held views of whoever is reading your essays. Again, it's possible to write good essays on delicate topics, but it's risky - just like killing a fly in your grandmother's house with a baseball bat.

****4. Don't curse too much,**** try too hard to incite pity or catharsis, be overly pessimistic / self-deprecating, talk about your forays into illegal/unethical activities, or do anything else dark, depressing, or weird. You want to stand out as unique, but not like this. You can curse a little and brush up against dark or challenging material, but you want your essay to portray a positive view of you.

****5. Avoid using too many big words.**** Do not, repeat, DO NOT touch that thesaurus. You want this essay to be your voice. You're smart and you want the AO to know that, but they will already see your SAT verbal score and your transcript, so you don't need to hit them in the face with a thesaurus. Using too many big words sounds unnatural and makes it sound like you're trying to be impressive rather than expressive. Instead of coming away with "wow this guy is really passionate and a creative writer" they might just find you insincere, boring, and uninspiring. Big words in excess drain emotion and jar the reader out of the story and remind them that they're sitting in a windowless room evaluating essays. They are WAY overused in these essays too, and often evoke a "here we go again" sigh. You can sound full of yourself and arrogant as well

as out of touch. Remember that you want to be likeable, personable, and charismatic. These will be more impressive to an AO than people who try too hard to impress with intellect and vocabulary.

****6. Take time to edit & review your essays****. I've seen essays list the wrong school. I've seen a student literally misspell her own first name in the essay. I've seen essays that scream that English is not your first language so loudly they are hard to get through. You don't want any of those. Review your essays, revise them, and get someone else to help give you feedback too.

****7. Don't make your essays low effort or last minute rush jobs.**** Too many bright students are used to churning out an essay in a couple hours and getting an A almost by default. Or they're used to putting things off until the last minute but succeeding anyway because they're very bright. Or maybe they're shotgunning too many schools and are already sick of it. Or maybe they don't actually want to go to that particular school so they don't really try. Whatever the reason, this is a recipe for disaster on college application essays because they are supposed to be much more than the typical writing you produce. They should be thoughtful, introspective, expressive, creative, inspiring, interesting, and revealing. You won't get that kind of compelling writing in a single draft or with a lazy approach. Usually, when an essay was thrown together with little effort or very quickly, it shows. That always communicates that you either don't care enough to give it the time and effort it deserves, or that you aren't capable of better. Either way it's a fast one-way ticket to the waitlist.

****8. Don't try to write about your entire life from a 30,000 foot view.**** You simply don't have space to say everything about yourself, so don't try. Pick a few attributes and try to tell one story that showcases those. If you bite off more than you can chew, you probably won't end up saying anything really compelling about yourself. The more you zoom out, the more every student looks the same. It's only when you talk to them, get to know them, spend time with them, learn about them, and engage them that you start to see how different, vibrant, interesting, talented, and incredible they are. So give the AO an opportunity to get close to you in the essay. Go small. Zoom in on one story, not your whole life. Don't use an introduction, just jump right in and let the story fill in the details as you go.

****9. Don't use pithy aphorisms, clichés, or generalities**** even ~~if you made them up~~ they're original to you. Don't try to include wholesome sounding life lessons or broad sweeping statements about the world or humanity. None of these: "I learned more from them than they did from me." "By striving to achieve greatness we can become more than we ever thought possible." "Only by helping others can a person truly realize their potential in the world." "I am far stronger than I knew and I'm excited to face the next set of challenges." Those are all the worst and are an instant eye-roll and "not this again" sigh.

****10. Don't fail to complete a portion of the application****. On multiple occasions I have been reviewing an app and the next section loads and it's empty or the essay is only partially complete. I refresh the page and still get just half an essay. I reach out to the admins to make

sure there's not a clerical or systems error. Then I ask them to check the student record and if possible follow up with the student to make sure they completed the section. Sometimes we get a response with the missing section and sometimes we don't. It's hard for this to turn out well. Many schools would not be this gracious and would simply move on to the next app. If you're paying the app fee, get your money's worth by actually filling out the whole thing and completing your essays.

****11. Don't be so academic or stick too close to the prompt.**** Some prompts are more dangerous for falling into this mistake, but so often students are conditioned to answer questions directly and fully like they would for school. The prompt is primarily there to get you to talk about yourself not to assess your ability to answer a question completely and fully. So if it asks why you want to go to X school, don't write 500 words praising the school for being so awesome. They already know how awesome they are. What they want to know about is YOU and how YOU fit the school. Make sure your response addresses the prompt and that it's clearly written for that school, but don't treat it like an exam question. Think of it more like someone asked you that question on a date to find out more about you. Let the response be more reflective of you than it is of the prompt.

****12. Don't steal an essay that isn't yours**.** Sometimes this works and you take credit for a well-written and proven essay. But there is also the risk that you could get caught and there is no statute of limitations on this. If they discover it 25 years after you graduate, they can still cancel your degree. It's just not worth the risk. Not only is it riskier than most students realize, it's also not as effective. What was a powerful and compelling picture of one student might not work or fit for you. Holistic review means that everything is considered together in evaluating applications. When things don't fit, it raises a variety of concerns and the total picture of the applicant just isn't as strong.

****13. Avoid overused words, especially SAT words - plethora, myriad, ameliorate, etc.**** These don't make you sound smart. They make you sound fake and basic. Use words that you would use to talk about yourself to a friend or on a date or in a job interview.

****14. Don't use a template from a book, or model your essay after someone else's.**** One of the admissions officers that contributed to The New Rules of College Admissions tells the story of how one year she and her colleagues read many essays that all talked about a genie granting wishes and how the wishes embodied the student and his/her ambitions for college and life. They scratched their heads over the striking similarities until one of them found a book published that year that had a successful essay example that was the genie essay. This didn't end well for those students.

****15. Don't go over the word limit**.** AO's have to read a ton of essays and if yours is demonstrably longer, it's going to be annoying at best and detrimental to your rating at worst. Many application review systems will automatically truncate responses at the word limit, so the end may not even show up.

****16.** At the same time, don't write an essay that is less than about 60% of the word limit**. Unless you have a really clever, amazing, and heretofore unseen idea that requires this, you should aim for 80-100% of the word limit. If you're less than 60%, it just looks lazy, uninspired, aloof, and disengaged.

****17.** Avoid giving off bad vibes**. This includes excessive bragging, self-absorption, entitlement, snootiness, arrogance, bravado, presenting an abrasive personality, or anything else that indicates you will struggle to fit in to a vibrant community and flourishing student body. Most of the major problems colleges deal with are related to a very small minority of their students. So it saves a lot of big headaches to screen these people out in the admissions process. Make sure your essay says "plays well with others" and not "social pariah bound for arrest or expulsion." You want to come across as interesting, likeable, fun, clever, creative, and upbeat. Let your SAT and grades showcase how smart you are.

****18.** Avoid pitymongering**, humblebragging, being a victim, depressed rants, passive aggressive or reverse psychology attempts (e.g. "I just know I'm going to be rejected"), self-deprecation that goes too far, or generally an overly negative attitude. This should be a showcase of your strengths, the very best you on your very best day. Avoid putting others down, diving deep into personal conflicts (one essay I read was about a student's best friend abandoning her and how she cut her out of her life), showing inability to work with others and airs of superiority, paranoid defensiveness, or general toxicity.

****19.** Don't go overboard with fluff or exaggeration**. AOs are pretty familiar with common accomplishments and what typical high achieving students look like, so don't try too hard to stretch things. They're also pretty familiar with BS because so many students try to pass it off as legitimate in their applications.

****20.** Don't use the essay to explain the reason you don't have a 4.0**. Don't make excuses, blame others or society for your shortcomings/struggles, gripe about injustices in your life, etc. The essay is a space for you to showcase your personality, skills, abilities, accomplishments, talents, strengths, and potential. Don't waste it on justifying your faults.

****21.** Make sure every essay you write says something meaningful about YOU**. So many well-written essays end up being less impactful because they fail to say anything about the student. If you tell a story, make sure it shows something compelling and insightful about you. No matter what the prompt is, the essay should be something only you could write because of how much it shares about you.

****22.** Don't simply rehash all the other stuff in your application**. Essays take a lot of time to review, and AOs do not appreciate redundancy. If you do write about something already listed in your application, make sure it adds more information and shows more of your personality, character, ability, etc.

****23. Don't discuss or complain about your mental illnesses or other limitations**.** If you want to address extenuating circumstances, you can do so in the additional information section or have one of your recommenders explain it on your behalf. Note that even here you want the focus to be on how you've overcome challenges, grown through them, and what you've learned in the process. The essay shouldn't be wasted just trying to get you back to par with "normal" applicants, instead it should show how you are unique, awesome, and desirable as you are.

****24. Don't try too hard.**** This includes overdone attempts to impress, to be unique, to write well, to sound smart, to be funny, to make light of something serious, to be creative etc. It's a little hard to define exactly what constitutes trying too hard, but AOs know it when they see it. When you aren't yourself and it's not your voice, it's always going to be a worse essay. "Go home and write a page tonight and let that page come out of you. Then it will be true." - Langston Hughes. I'm taking that quote out of context, but if you go read the full poem, Theme For English B, you'll see exactly what I mean.

****25. Don't recycle an essay that was clearly written for something else**.** This includes submitting an essay that was done for a class in school, making bad and obvious copy/paste errors, or shoehorning a different application essay in. All of these result in an essay that just doesn't feel right. It isn't necessary to be married to the prompt as noted above. But it is necessary to make the essay polished and specifically oriented to that prompt or college.

****26. Don't get cute with fonts, presentation, etc**.** This means no secret codes, wingdings, mirror writing, weird poetry, Elvish, Klingon, Morse code, all caps, or arranging the words to form a pattern or picture. I have seen or heard of all of these and they never go well. Write the essay in English unless it's an international or multilingual school in which case you should write in the language you would be using there. Don't try to impress AOs with how well you know French. AO's don't have time or patience for that – they'll just skip over it and move on. Don't write illegibly or incoherently either. Use proper grammar, syntax, and diction – but remember to use your own voice. Do not cite sources or do anything too academic. This is an essay about you, not a documented research paper. But it still needs to be easy to read. An AO with hundreds of essays to read will appreciate it.

****27. Don't regurgitate the prompt in your introduction.**** This is boring, commonplace (thanks freshman English teachers...), and wasteful of your precious word count. Keep your essay unique and interesting. Don't be bland, predictable, or too straightforward. Don't answer the prompt like you would on a test in school. Instead, tell a story about your life or write in a way that showcases your personality and the things that make you unique.

****28. Don't put down or belittle the college**.** Some students do this because it's not their first choice, they legitimately feel like insulting the institution, they want to intimate that the college is somehow "beneath them", or someone is making them apply. Whatever the reason, it will only make you look petty, negative, and self-absorbed. If you give off the sentiment that you don't want to attend that college, the AO will probably oblige you with a rejection letter.

****29.** Don't tell a story or write an essay that doesn't have a point**. Some essays seem aimless and just ramble until the word limit is fulfilled. I think many students are used to doing this in school to BS their way through an essay assignment of a given length. Others don't know what they want to say in the first place and end up rambling a lot and saying nothing. Remember that the focus of the essay (regardless of the prompt) is to reveal yourself to the AO. Get them to like you, be curious about you, and leave with a positive impression of you.

****30.** Never start with a definition**, especially for a word most people already know or a big obscure word that doesn't have any personal meaning or connection to you. An alarmingly high number of applicants do this and it starts you off with a sigh from your AO. It's overdone, pedantic, and worthless. It says nothing about you. It does not make anyone actually want to keep reading. You should also avoid starting out with a quote, especially one that is inspirational, philosophical or by a famous person like Lincoln, Franklin, Jobs, MLK, Einstein, or Gandhi. Students think that borrowing from or attaching themselves to a famous author, philosopher, statesman, or businessman will give them cache, rapport, or credibility. It would be somewhat weak even if it wasn't overdone. The essay is supposed to showcase you – not the famous person, and quotes cut into your word count. Most great essays don't start with a quote, especially a lame one.

****More posts in this series:****

- [Help with Essay

Topics](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cgwexx/help_with_essay_topics/)

- [Part 1: How To Start An Essay, "Show Don't Tell," And Showcase Yourself In A Compelling Way](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/baotoj/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_1_how_to_start/)

- [Part 2: Throw Away Everything You Learned In English Class](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bdyf1d/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_2_throw_away/)

- [Part 3: Conquering the "Why \[School\]" Essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bgvslr/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_3_conquering/)

- [Part 4: What Makes An Essay Outstanding?](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bkg10a/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_4_what_makes/)

- [What to do when you're over the word count](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9dp4u7/what_to_do_when_youre_over_the_word_count/)

- [What to do when your essay is too short](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aefjas/what_to_do_when_your_essay_is_too_short/)

- [How To End An Essay Gracefully](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/8upen2/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/)

- [Proofreading Tips](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a9vfov/if_youre_wondering_what_an_acceptance_letter/)

- [The Top 30 Essay Mistakes To Avoid](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9zg9sc/if_you_dont_have_a_first_draft_yet_dont_read_this/)

- [A Short Guide to Short Essays](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dfawfe/a_short_guide_to_short_essays/)

- [Giving Away the Secret Sauce - How to Make Your Essay Outstanding](https://www.reddit.com/r/CollegeEssayReview/comments/ddyj9l/giving_away_the_secret_sauce_how_to_make_your/)

- [Before You Submit, PLEASE Review Your Application](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/egkpja/before_you_submit_please_review_your_application/)

***** End of Post

Post Title: The ScholarGrade Essay Series Part 1: How To Start An Essay, "Show Don't Tell," And Showcase Yourself In A Compelling Way

Post Body: There have been an increasing number of juniors visiting this sub asking for advice about writing essays. Below is some advice that has some valuable tips for making your essay stand out as excellent. I will be posting a new installment every week or two with more insights and advice - these are all excerpts or digests of my step-by-step essay guide. This is also a great place to ask questions because I will answer every single question in the comments. You can find out more about me at www.bettercollegeapps.com.

#Part 1 - It's About You

You'll see the advice everywhere that all essay prompts are really about the same thing - ****you****. The goal of each essay then is to showcase who you are, what matters to you, and

how you think. I guarantee if you're on this sub enough, you'll hear the advice to "show, don't tell" when writing about yourself. But what does this mean really, and how do you do it well? How do you even get started on an essay that does this?

#Introspection

Before you even begin outlining or writing your essay, you must determine what is unique about you that will stand out to an admissions panel. All students are truly unique. No one other student has the same combination of life experiences, personality, passions, or goals as you do; your job in your essay is to frame your unique personal attributes in a positive and compelling way. Most students don't immediately know what to share about themselves, so starting with some soul-searching and self-examination is very helpful.

Introspection Questions

It's often easiest to start thinking in terms of superlatives -- what are the most meaningful things about you? Here is a list of questions to help you brainstorm broadly before you narrow down your focus for writing:

- What are your interests?
- What sparks your curiosity?
- About what topics do you enjoy reading?
- With whom do you enjoy spending time? Who has impacted your life the most?
- Reflect upon "superlatives" in your life. What moments were most memorable, formative, enlightening, enjoyable, or valuable? What physical possessions, experiences, dreams, or lessons could make your superlatives list?
- Stop and think about what things, people, or circumstances in your life are really unique, fascinating, or outlandish. Are there any that really have a lot of "cultural flavor" (whatever your culture is)?

I have a free introspection worksheet with over 100 questions like this designed to help you find ideas worth exploring in your essays. [You can download it directly here](<https://bettercollegeapps.com/product/better-college-apps-introspection-worksheet/>).

#Find Your Story And Arc

Think of a small anecdote or story from your life that you could share that serves as a microcosm of who you are and what is important to you. It will massively help you narrow this down and find a gem of a story if you first start by thinking about your application arc or theme.

This is the one-phrase summary of your entire application. It could be "brilliant entrepreneur who started her own successful business" or "talented athlete who wants to study economics and finance as they pertain to sports", or even "avid baker whose hobby sparked an interest in chemistry". It doesn't have to be related to your intended major, but it can help your arc be stronger and clearer if it is.

Once you have an arc determined and a story to share, think about what you want that story to say about you. This is where it can help to think of this as something you would share on a date - what impression does it make about you to the reader? Once you know this, start showing, not telling this attribute of yourself through your story. For example, instead of saying that you're compassionate toward others, you show an example of a time you were compassionate, then elaborate on why, and what it means to you.

****Essay Brainstorming Techniques****

If you are having trouble finding a story, or simply have writer's block once you have picked your topic, here are some ideas to get your juices flowing:

- Stream of consciousness writing -- Start writing whatever is in your head, and don't stop for 30 minutes. You probably won't use what you just wrote for your essay, but it will help you find a starting point.
- Journaling -- Answer the prompt as if you were writing in a journal. This will get you in the habit of writing about yourself and establish comfort with the concept. It will also take you to a new level of introspection and self-awareness.
- Twitter style -- Write several rapid-fire responses to the prompt in 280 characters or less. Choose an idea from these responses to expound upon in your essay.

#Get Started

If you're struggling with how to start your essay or how to introduce yourself well, go look at how characters unfold in great movies and books. Usually they are introduced without much background or context. The situations, dialog, and other clues fill in the details as the story progresses. For example, Rick in Casablanca is shrouded in mystery for most of the movie. Nearly every one of his scenes shows something new about his past, his ethics, his motivations. The viewer is hanging on every detail, driven by curiosity and the character's charm and charisma. This same phenomenon holds with a lot of classic characters in works by authors from Dickens, Dumas, and Shakespeare to Alfred Hitchcock and JK Rowling. Heck the tv show Lost was basically built entirely on this literary device.

****But wait ScholarGrade, those books are like 700 pages long. Lost is 6 seasons. I only get a few hundred words, how can I make this work?*****

Go look at some short stories like *The Most Dangerous Game*, *The Bluest Eye*, or *Mateo Falcone*. Really any great short story does this too. In all honesty, even the best and most successful LinkedIn and Tinder profiles use it to some degree. Here's how you can make this work for your essays:

1. ****Go small.**** Don't give a sweeping aerial view of your whole life or even your whole personality. Zoom in on specific events, vignettes, or conversations that were significant, pivotal, or foundational for you.
2. ****Use a cold open without much setup****. Introductory sentences are a hallmark of the AP English 5 Paragraph EssayTM. They are also unnecessary, commonplace, and lame. **Do not ever** spit back part of the prompt in your first sentence. Don't explain the story you're about to tell or even establish the setting. Just jump right in. The context and other details will be filled in later as you go, and the reader will be hanging on each one because he/she needs them.
3. ****Sneak the "showcasing details" into the story rather than writing them directly****. This is what "show, don't tell" really means anyway. With a low word count you'll have to be fairly judicious with how you do this though. If you're creative with problem solving, show that with the problem you solved in your story, don't just say "I'm a creative problem solver."
4. ****At some point, depart from your story to give some commentary****. This doesn't have to be much, but something that drives home the points you're trying to make. If it's a really short essay, like a 200 word supplement, you're probably done with it after you finish this. Note that if you tell a really great story, you don't need this at all. (Fun side note: Upton Sinclair probably had the worst case ever of this backfiring on him. In *The Jungle*, he tried to jump out of the story at the end with his main point, "So we should all be Communists," but what he got instead was "We must reform the meat packing industry." This backfiring probably won't happen to you, but it helps illustrate how this device is supposed to work. Another good example that worked is John Galt's speech in the trial at the end of *Atlas Shrugged*.). Take the attribute or character trait about yourself that you're showcasing in your story and go one step further by explaining **why** you did, said, or thought those things. Unpack what it means to you, how you've grown or changed in that area, or what/how you hope to build on those attributes further.

More posts in this series:

- [Help with Essay Topics](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cgwexx/help_with_essay_topics/)
- [Part 1: How To Start An Essay, "Show Don't Tell," And Showcase Yourself In A Compelling Way](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/baotoj/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_1_how_to_start/)

- [Part 2: Throw Away Everything You Learned In English Class](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bdyf1d/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_2_throw_away/)
- [Part 3: Conquering the "Why \[School\]" Essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bgvslr/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_3_conquering/)
- [Part 4: What Makes An Essay Outstanding?](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bkg10a/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_4_what_makes/)
- [What to do when you're over the word count](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9dp4u7/what_to_do_when_youre_over_the_word_count/)
- [What to do when your essay is too short](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aefjas/what_to_do_when_your_esay_is_too_short/)
- [How To End An Essay Gracefully](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/8upen2/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/)
- [Proofreading Tips](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a9vfov/if_youre_wondering_what_an_acceptance_letter/)
- [The Top 30 Essay Mistakes To Avoid](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9zg9sc/if_you_dont_have_a_first_draft_yet_dont_read_this/)
- [A Short Guide to Short Essays](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dfawfe/a_short_guide_to_short_essays/)
- [Giving Away the Secret Sauce - How to Make Your Essay Outstanding](https://www.reddit.com/r/CollegeEssayReview/comments/ddyj9l/giving_away_the_secret_sauce_how_to_make_your/)
- [Before You Submit, PLEASE Review Your Application](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/egkpja/before_you_submit_please_review_your_application/)

All of these posts are extracts of my full guides (150+ pages). [To get a Reddit discount, use code reddit2021 to purchase the full guides package for just \$20.](<https://bettercollegeapps.com/product/better-college-apps-guides-package/>)

***** End of Post

Post Title: 13 Reasons Why It's OK to Write About Trauma in your College Applications -- And How to Do So (a joint post by u/AdmissionsMom and u/McNeilAdmissions)

Post Body: *Hi everyone. This post is written by* u/AdmissionsMom *and* u/McNeilAdmissions, *TOGETHER. It's a subject we both care about. We (your dynamic mod-college-consultant duo) took up pens together to write what we believe is the first collaborative advice post in the sub's history. Yay! Enjoy and thanks for reading.*

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Content warning: discussion of traumatic subjects: suicide, sexual abuse, trauma, self-harm

There is always a debate about what topics should be avoided at all cost on college essays. The short-list always boils down to a familiar crew of traumatic or "difficult" subjects. These include, but are not limited to, essays discussing severe depression, self-harm, eating disorders, experiences with sexual violence, family abuse, and experiences with the loss of a close relative or loved one.

First and foremost, you do NOT have to write about anything that makes you uncomfortable or that you don't want to share. This isn't the Overcoming Obstacles Olympics. Don't feel pressure to tell any story that you don't want to share. It is your story and if you don't want to write about it, don't. Period.

BUT, in our view, ruling out all essays that deal with trauma is wrong for two big reasons.

The first is that there is no actual, empirical evidence that essays that deal with trauma are less successful than those that don't. The view that essays dealing with trauma correlate with lower admissions rates is based on the opinion of a few counselors and anecdotal evidence from students who applied, weren't admitted, then tried to find a justification and decided it was their essays.

Both of us reflected on this. Here's what we had to say.

* **AdmissionsMom**: I work with lots of students who have suffered from anxiety, depression, eating disorders, and addiction. They nearly always have to address their issues because of school disruption, and I have to say that their acceptances have remained right in range with the rest of my students.

* **McNeilAdmissions**: I counted, and I can provide more than 17 accounts about students of mine who have written about trauma and been admitted to T10 schools. I also asked a

colleague of mine who is known as the “queen of Stanford admissions” and she said there was no trend among her students.

****The other big reason is that traumas, while complex, can be sources of deep meaning, and therefore are potentially the exact sort of thing you want to consider**.** Traumatic experiences are often life-shaping, for better or for worse. So are the ways that we respond to and adapt in the face of trauma. The struggle to adapt and move forward after a traumatic experience may be one of the most important and meaningful things you’ve ever done. So a blanket prohibition on traumatic topics is equivalent, for many, to a blanket prohibition on writing an essay that feels personally meaningful and rewarding.

Categorically ruling out trauma stories also conflicts directly with ****the core lesson**** that most college consultants and counselors (including ours truly) are trying to advocate. That is, write a story that matters to you. This is a piece of corny but non-bullshit advice. As it turns out, it’s a rare moment (in a process that can be somewhat cynical) where meaning and strategy overlap. AOs want to read good essays. Good essays are good when they’re written about things that matter. You can attempt to hack together a good essay on a topic you don’t care about, but good luck.

So there are a few big intersecting threads about why you MIGHT want to write about your experience with trauma. First, there is no empirical evidence to recommend against it. Second, traumatic experiences are huge sources of personal meaning and significance, and it would be sad if you couldn’t use your writing as a tool for processing your experience. Third, meaningful essays = good essays = stronger applications.

So for anyone out there who wants to talk about their experience but who is struggling with how to do it, here are some things we want to say:

1. You ARE allowed to talk about trauma in college apps.
2. Your story is valid even if you haven’t turned your experience into a non-profit focused on preventing sexual assault, combating abuse, or eating disorders or done anything whatsoever to address the larger systemic issue. ****Your**** story and experience -- ****your**** personal growth and lessons learned -- are intrinsically valuable.

Now, here are some things to keep in mind if you decide to write an essay about a challenging or traumatic subject.

13 Reasons Why It’s OK to Write About Trauma in your College Applications -- And How to Do So

1. ****Colleges are not looking for perfect people**.** They are looking for real humans. Real Humans are flawed and have had flawed experiences. Some of our most compelling stories are the ones that open with showing our lives and experiences in less than favorable light. Throw in

your lessons learned or what you have done to repair yourself and grow, and you have the makings of a compelling overcoming -- or even redemption -- story.

2. ****Write with pride****: This is your real life. Sometimes you need to be able to explain the circumstances in your life — and colleges want to know about any hardships you've had. They want to understand the context of your application, so don't worry about thinking you're asking the colleges to feel sorry for you (we hear kids say that all the time). We recognize you for your immense strength and courage, and we encourage you to speak your truth if you want to share your story. Colleges can't know about your challenges and obstacles unless you tell them. Be proud of yourself for making it through your challenges and moving on to pursue college — that's an accomplishment on its own!

3. ****Consider the position of the admissions officer****: "We've all had painful experiences. Many of these experiences are difficult to talk about, let alone write about. However, sometimes, if there is time, distance, and healing between you and the experience, you can not only revisit the experience but also articulate it as an example of how even the most painful of experiences can be reclaimed, transformed, and accepted for what they are, the building blocks of our unique identities. If you can do this, go for it. When done well, these types of narratives are the most impactful. *****Do remember you are seeking admission into a community for which the admissions officer is the gatekeeper. They need to know that, if admitted, not only will you be okay but your fellow students will be okay as well*****." from Chad-Henry Galler-Sojourner ([www.bearingwitnessadmissions.com])(<http://www.bearingwitnessadmissions.com/>))

4. ****Remember what's really important****: Sometimes the processing of your trauma can be more important than the college acceptances -- and that's ok. If a college doesn't accept you because you mention mental health issues, sexual assault, or traumatic life experiences, in my opinion they don't deserve to have anyone on their campus, much less survivors. Take your hard-earned lived experiences elsewhere. The stigma of being assaulted, abused, or having mental health issues, is a blight on our society. That said, be aware of any potential legal issues as admissions readers are mandated reporters in some states.

5. ****Consider using the Additional Info Section****: If you do decide you want to share your story -- or you need to because of needing to explain grades, missed school, or another aspect of your application or transcript, don't feel compelled to write about your trauma, disability, mental health, or addiction in the main personal essay. Instead, we encourage you to use the Additional Info Essay if you want to share (or if you need to share to explain the context of your application). Your main common app essay should be about something that is important to you and should reveal some aspect of who you are. To us (and many applicants), your trauma, disability, mental issues, or addiction doesn't define you. It isn't who you are and it isn't a part you want to lead with. Putting some other aspect of who you are first in your main essay and putting trauma, addiction, mental health issues, or disability in the Add'l Info Essay is a way to reinforce that those negative experiences in your life don't define you, and that your recovery or your learning to accommodate for it has relegated that aspect of their experience to a secondary part of who you are.

6. ****You CAN use your Common App essay if you want:**** IF you feel like recovery from the trauma or learning to handle your circumstances **does** define you, then there is no reason you can't put that aspect of who you are forward in the main personal essay. If the growth that stemmed from the crisis is central to your narrative, then it can be a recovery, or an

“overcoming” story. It's a positive look at your strengths and how you achieved them. If you want to place your recovery story front and center in the primary essay, that's an appropriate choice.

7. ****Write from a place of healing****: Some colleges fear liabilities. So, wherever you decide to put your essay in your application, make sure you are presenting your situation in a way that centers how you have dealt with it and moved forward. That doesn't mean it's over and everything is all better for you, but you need to write from a place of healing; in essence, “write from scars, not wounds.” (we can't take credit for that metaphor, but we love it)

8. ****Make sure your first draft is a free draft.**** With any topic, it can be hard to stare at a blank page and not feel pressure to write perfectly. This can be doubly true when addressing a tough topic. For your first draft, approach it as a free write. No pressure. No perfection. Just thoughts and feelings. Even if you don't end up using your essay as a personal statement or in the additional info section, it can be useful to sit and write it out.

9. ****Protect yourself when you're writing****: If you do decide to write about your trauma, be sure to follow a few simple rules to protect yourself and your feelings and emotions:

1. Establish an anchor. Anything that makes you feel safe while you're writing and exploring your thoughts and experiences. Have that nearby. It can be a candle, an image, a pet, a stuffed animal.

2. Check in with how you are feeling.

3. Pay attention to your body and what it's telling you.

4. Take breaks

5. Go for walk

6. Talk to someone who makes you feel safe

7. Remember this kind of essay is NOT a reflection of you. It is only **part** of your story. (Ashley Lipscomb & Ethan Sawyer, “Addressing Trauma in the College Essay,” NACAC 2021)

10. ****Ask questions that guide your writing toward growth****: Great college essays reflect growth and thoughtfulness. It can be helpful in any essay, but especially in one that deals with challenging subjects, to keep a few questions in mind to guide your writing. Here are a few that could get some gears turning. ****Four questions you can ask****. (1) Who supported you in the aftermath of the experience? What did you appreciate about their support and what did you learn about how you would support others? (2) Did your self-perception change after the experience? How has your self-perception evolved or grown since? (3) How did you cultivate the strength to move through your experience? (4) What about how you dealt with the experience makes you most proud?

11. ****Remember that all writing is a two-way street and should serve you and the reader****: All writing leaves an emotional impression or residue with the reader. This is especially true with personal essays. Good writers are able to look at their writing and understand how it can serve themselves (that sweet, sweet catharsis) while still meeting the reader half-way. This can be particularly challenging on the college essay, where your goal is to be both personally honest and to help an AO see why you would be a wonderful addition to their school's student community. When you're writing, be cognizant of your reader - tell your story

12. ****Shield your writing itself from excessive negativity****: When writing about difficult experiences, it can be easy for the writing itself (your phrasing, your diction) to become saturated with a tone of hardship and sorrow. This kind of writing can be hard to read and can

get in the way of the underlying story about growth, maturity, or self-awareness. Push yourself to weed out any excessive “negativity” in your writing - look for more neutral ways of stating the facts of your situation. If you’re comfortable, ask a trusted reader to read your essay and point out the places where language seems too negative. Think of ways to rephrase or rewrite.

13. ****Think of your application -- and therefore your essay -- kind of like a job application**.** Sure, it’s more personal than a job occupation, but it’s not necessary to share every detail. Focus on the relevant information that validates the power of your journey and overcoming your challenges. Focus on the overcoming.

A framework for writing well about trauma and difficulty: “More Phoenix, Fewer Ashes”

Here’s a framework that we think you could apply to any essay topic about a traumatic experience or challenge. This is not a one-size-fits-all framework, but it should help you avoid the biggest pitfalls in writing about challenging topics.

The framework is called “More Phoenix, Fewer Ashes.” The metaphor actually comes from one of our parents who used to be active on A2C back when her kid was applying to college; she took it down in her notes at a Wellesley info session. In short, however, the idea is to pare down the “ashes” (the really hard details about the situation, past or present) to focus on who you’ve become as a result.

1. Address your issue or circumstance BRIEFLY and be straightforward. Don’t dwell on it.
2. Next, focus on what you did to take care of yourself and how you handled the situation. Describe how you’ve moved forward and what you learned from the experience.
3. Then, write about how you will apply those lessons to your future college career and how you plan to help others with your self-knowledge as you continue to help yourself as you learn more and grow.
4. Show them that, while you can’t control what happened in the past, you’ve taken steps to gain control over your life and you’re prepared to be the college student you can be.
5. Remember to keep the focus on the positives and what you learned from your experiences.
6. Make sure your essay is at least 80% phoenix, 20% ashes. Or another way to put this is, tell the gain, not the pain.
7. The ending, overall impression should leave a positive feeling.

Use that checklist / framework to read back through your essay. In particular, do a spot check with the 80/20 phoenix/ashes rule. Make sure to focus on growth!

Good luck and happy writing.

u/AdmissionsMom and u/McNeilAdmissions

Edit: We wanted to add a post by u/ScholarGrade that provide some other views.

* SG's

[post](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/n413dc/trauma_in_essays_why_it_can_work_and_when_it/) weighing the possible pros and cons of writing about trauma, and when it doesn't work.

***** End
of Post

Post Title: How To Fix Your Bad Essay

Post Body: #Why Essays Are Hard And Most Are Not Great

Essays are art, not science or math. So, like all art, most initial attempts by unpracticed people are not great. If you asked me to draw a picture of a chick or even an iceberg, it would be downright awful. I just don't have any experience or any semblance of skill for doing that. (If you happen to be an artist, this example should make even more sense to you, but if not, imagine someone asked you to draw left handed). Most students feel the same way when they are suddenly asked to write expressively about themselves for the first time. Your English class probably failed you miserably when it comes to writing about who you are and what's important to you. Your training in academic writing is working against you and undermining your voice and personality.

So many students end up writing about the same tropes and get way too obsessed with being impressive rather than expressive. Don't try to spin a sob story - they aren't going to admit you out of pity. Don't try to blow them away with how smart you are - they already see your grades and test scores. Don't try too hard to be unique - you'll just look weird. Be yourself.

I've written about this before, but most essays just aren't very good. This has been my experience both as a reviewer and as a consultant. It's been corroborated by WilliamTheReader (reviewer at a T5) and BlueLightSpcl (former AO at UT Austin). We have all estimated that truly outstanding essays (which I'll call 9s and 10s on the hypothetical 10 point scale) are something like one to five out of every hundred. My rule of thumb is to take the self-rating out of ten and subtract 4 to get the actual rating. Most students put themselves in the 7-8 category and they're probably closer to the 3-4 level.

Your essays don't have to belong in a museum to get you in. But admissions has become so competitive that your essays do have to have something compelling that adds to your application or your chances are quite slim at top colleges. Yes, most other students' essays suck out loud. But most other students are also going to be rejected by T20 colleges with single digit admit rates.

It's easy to tell someone their art or writing isn't working. Identifying what, specifically, is wrong is harder. Explaining how to fix it is the hardest. So let's talk about some strategies.

#So How Do I Fix It?

First, here's a list of posts I've shared before that have some proven strategies and insights. These address many of the essay problems that people have been talking about.

- [Help with Essay Topics](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cgwexx/help_with_essay_topics/) and [How To Get My Free Introspection Worksheet](https://www.reddit.com/user/ScholarGrade/comments/i6dijd/get_my_introspection_worksheet_for_free_and_save/)
- [Part 1: How To Start An Essay, "Show Don't Tell," And Showcase Yourself In A Compelling Way](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/baotoj/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_1_how_to_start/)
- [Part 2: Throw Away Everything You Learned In English Class](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bdyf1d/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_2_throw_away/)
- [Part 3: Conquering the "Why \[School\]" Essay](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bgvslr/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_3_conquering/)
- [Part 4: What Makes An Essay Outstanding?](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/bkg10a/the_scholargrade_essay_series_part_4_what_makes/)
- [What to do when you're over the word count](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9dp4u7/what_to_do_when_youre_over_the_word_count/)
- [What to do when your essay is too short](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/aefjas/what_to_do_when_your_essay_is_too_short/)
- [How To End An Essay Gracefully](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/8upen2/how_to_end_an_essay_gracefully/)
- [Proofreading Tips](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/a9vfov/if_youre_wondering_what_an_acceptance_letter/)
- [List Of Automated Essay Editing Tools](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/cnwczp/a_comprehensive_list_of_essay_editing_tools/)

- [The Top 30 Essay Mistakes To Avoid](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/9zg9sc/if_you_dont_have_a_first_draft_yet_dont_read_this/)

- [A Short Guide to Short Essays](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/dfawfe/a_short_guide_to_short_essays/)

- [Giving Away the Secret Sauce - How to Make Your Essay Outstanding](https://www.reddit.com/r/CollegeEssayReview/comments/ddyj9l/giving_away_the_secret_sauce_how_to_make_your/)

- [Before You Submit, PLEASE Review Your Application](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/egkpja/before_you_submit_please_review_your_application/)

Ok, now that you know the basics, let's talk about how to self-assess and how to fix what's wrong.

#Problem 1: Your Topic Sucks

1. Did you write about a common topic like sports, missions trips, your favorite food, video games, or your move to a new city?
2. Did you write about a "nearly impossible to execute well" topic like death, divorce, depression, drugs, sex, or a meta topic related to college admissions itself?

#How To Fix It

1. Success here is simple – just have one of the best essays ever written on one of these topics. OR, just zoom in and be more personal. Don't make the essay about a missions trip, make it about one relationship you developed on the trip and show how that relationship illustrates who you are. Don't write about the sport you played, the championship you won/lost, or the injury you sustained and how that taught you the value of teamwork and perseverance. Make it more meaningful by writing about a common topic in an uncommon way. I've read a hundred essays about soccer and teamwork that aren't expressive, exciting, or insightful. I've read just one about soccer and imperialism that was fresh, oddly personal, and compelling. /u/CollegeWithMattie's famous half ideas are one way to tease this out. Another is to go back to your list of personal qualities you want to showcase, identify a core value that does not easily relate to your common topic, then find a way to make it fit. If none of these work, it's time to scrap this topic and go back to the drawing board.

2. For most of these “off limits” topics, there’s no saving it. Just abandon ship. I’ve read many essays in this space and I have yet to find one that I truly thought was a student’s best option.

#Problem 2: Lack Of Personal Expression

1. Read each paragraph of your essay and ask yourself what it says or indicates about YOU. If there’s nothing in there about you, then that paragraph is probably too long and may not even belong.

2. Stop at the end of the essay and jot down a list of what the reader might learn about you through your writing. If that list has less than 3 things on it or if you really have to squint to find anything, that’s a problem.

#How To Fix It

1. Trim the sections of your essay that don’t say much about you. Add more in the sections where you’re really diving into your core values, personal strengths, motivations, etc.

2. Make a list of what you want the reviewer to know about you. Go back to the Help With Essay Topics link for more ideas on how to generate this list. Then brainstorm some examples, anecdotes, relationships, conversations, etc that will showcase these things.

#Problem 3: Lack Of Support And Subtlety

1. Look through your essay and try to find instances where you pontificated or made unsupported claims about yourself. You can’t just say “I’m a creative problem solver” any more than a random redditor can just say “I know a lot about admissions essays.” No one will believe you unless you show that or support it with an example, anecdote, etc. Look for statements you’ve made that are more “telling” than “showing”. Sometimes these can indicate that you aren’t being convincing.

2. When you think about the lists you made for Problem 1, look for the ones that are stated directly, use clichés, seem generic and broad, or feel too neat. “I discovered that collaboration is the key to unlocking positive impact in the world.” is going to be met with a resounding *GeneWilder.jpg* from your reviewer.

#How To Fix It

1. Add examples. Tell your story. Show how you developed whatever traits or qualities you’re trying to claim you have, or a time that you demonstrated them. Don’t say things and ask them to believe it. Instead show them something that makes them believe without questioning.

2. Replace clichés with your own distinctive phrasing. Replace generalities with specific details. Change any references to an indeterminate “you” or “we” to “me” and “I”, then rephrase the sentence so it makes sense. So don’t say “It can be hard to tell when you should just give up” or “We are often blind to the problems closest to us.” Instead say “I can never tell when I

should just give up” or “I’ve often been blind to the problems closest to me.” Then if that doesn’t quite fit or doesn’t reflect the truth, modify it so it does.

#Problem 4: Your Introduction And Your Conclusion Are Both Wasteful And Worthless

1. Does your introduction draw the reader in? Does it have pace and get to the good stuff quickly? Does it make a good first impression? Is it relevant and directly related to the rest of the essay? Or does it start out with a lame quote, boring “documentary” style, dictionary definition, or unrelated red herring?
2. Does your conclusion end gracefully? Does it leave the reviewer with a positive impression? Does it include new insights, deeper analysis, personal reflection, etc? Or is it just a rehash of everything you already said? Does it contain a plethora of platitudes, abstractions, and aphorisms? Or is it highly personal and specific?

#How To Fix It

1. Some of the most common essay advice I give is to just scrap the entire introduction. The reason for this is that the good stuff so often starts right after. If this is you, go ahead and scrap your introduction. If you have a reference or something in there that is needed later, find a way to work it into your new and improved intro.
2. Check out the guide I linked to ending essays gracefully. Stop and consider your personal strengths, core values, foundational beliefs, motivations, aspirations, passions, and all the other things that are an important part of who you are. Since you’ve already shown these things through the stories and examples in your essay, you have earned the right to be more direct in your conclusion. You can talk about what you learned, how you grew, what is important to you, etc as long as you are specific, personal, and avoid clichés.

Questions? Concerns? Insults? Leave a comment below, and ****let’s fix it.****

***** End
of Post

Post Title: How to Approach the Common App Essay - Part 1

Post Body: When preparing to apply to college, one of the first tasks is figuring out what to write about in the Common App Essay. The Common App Essay is, some say, among the most important documents that you will ever write. It is the face of your application, and in its brief 650 word limit, you are expected to share your best, most personal self. No pressure, right?

In this guide, you will learn strategies for determining what to write about in the Common App Essay. This series will be broken into four parts and cover five topics:

****Part 1: Understanding the Common App Essay** \+ **Demonstrating your best qualities****

[Part 2: What to write about](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hf4awf/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_2/)

[Part 3: What NOT to write about](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hfqung/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_3/)

[Part 4: Demonstrating grit](https://www.reddit.com/r/ApplyingToCollege/comments/hgbcai/how_to_approach_the_common_app_essay_part_4/)

I will be posting one part each day until Friday to space it out a little bit. At the end of this series, the hope is for you to feel empowered to brainstorm your own story that makes the admissions officers say, “Yes! I know this student!”

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Understanding the Common App Essay

What is the Common App Essay?

The Common App Essay is a 650-word (or fewer) personal statement that comes with the [Common App](<https://www.commonapp.org/>), the streamlined online application that most colleges in America accept. Your main essay is not specific to any particular college, but every college will see it, so it’s got to be good.

When the admissions officer reads your main essay, they will want you to answer the question, “Who are you?” This is pretty hard to show someone in 650-words, so applicants will need to have a discerning eye. To help narrow it down, the Common App offers you a choice of seven prompts to guide you in the right direction:

Common App Essay prompts

Here are the seven essay prompts for 2020-2021, courtesy of the [Common App](<https://www.commonapp.org/blog/2020-2021-common-app-essay-prompts>).

1. *Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.*
2. *The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?*

3. *Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?*
4. *Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.*
5. *Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.*
6. *Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?*
7. *Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.*

Which Common App prompt is the best?

To the admissions officer, it truly doesn't matter which prompt you choose to answer. Their only goal is to understand you better, and it is likely they won't even look to see which prompt you chose to answer before they start reading. The best strategy that you can employ when choosing a prompt is to think of the story that you want to tell, then see which prompt best fits the story.

As far as popularity goes, here is the run-down for the [2018-2019 application season]([- * 24.1% of students used: "Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design."
- * 23.7% of students used: "Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others."
- * 21.1% of students used: "The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?"
- * 31.1% of students used the remaining four prompts.](https://www.college.transitions.com/blog/2019-2020-common-app-essay-prompts/#:~:text=Which%20prompts%20are%20most%20popular,%2C%20attracting%2023.7%25%20of%20seniors.): : </p>
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So if you want to be unique, you could try to go for one of the lesser-used prompts. But given that nearly a quarter of all students eschewed the offered prompts entirely, it's difficult to say whether that could make a difference.

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Demonstrating your best qualities

As mentioned already, the Common App Essay strives to answer, in 650-words or fewer, who are you? This is tough since you might not even know the answer to that question yourself. So when thinking of a story that you want to tell in your essay, it can help to tackle a smaller question first: what do I want to demonstrate to the admissions officers about myself?

To be clear, you are not going to start your essay by saying, “I am an (insert adjective) person.” Rather, you are going to use your story to demonstrate a good quality about yourself that **shows** the admissions officer who you are rather than **tells** them. This might seem like a cliché writing tip but trust us. It’s what they want.

What is a defining characteristic?

A defining characteristic is something notable about you, something that makes you special. To start, check out the list of 100 characteristics below and try to think of two or three words that you think describe you well:

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Accommodating	Easy-going	Industrious	Persistent
Adventurous	Efficient	Intuitive	Poetic
Altruistic	Encouraging	Joyful	Practical
Ambitious	Entrepreneurial	Just	Progressive
Analytical	Experienced	Kind-hearted	Realistic
Artistic	Far-sighted	Leader	Reliable
Authentic	Flexible	Loving	Resilient
Balanced	Forthright	Loyal	Resourceful
Candid	Funny	Mature	Self-reliant
Careful	Generous	Moral	Sincere
Caring	Gentle	Motivating	Systematic
Communicative	Good	Natural	Thoughtful
Compassionate	Graceful	Nurturing	Trustful
Competent	Happy	Objective	Understanding
Cooperative	Helpful	Optimistic	Unselfish
Courageous	Holistic	Original	Versatile
Creative	Honest	Outgoing	Vibrant
Cultural	Idealistic	Passionate	Well-wishing
Decisive	Imaginative	Patient	Wholesome
Diplomatic	Independent	Perceptive	Youthful

As you can see, this list is far from complete, and many of the words would require substantial explanation, or even additional characteristics, to make sense. For example, if you want the admissions officer to know that you are easy-going, you are going to have to make the case that

this is a good thing. Similarly, if you want the admissions officer to know that you're altruistic, you'll need to make the case that you're authentic, as well.

How do we use our defining characteristic?

You will be using your characteristics to inspire a story about a time in which you proved yourself to be the embodiment of your characteristics. In order to start doing this, try making a list like this one:

My characteristic is **resourceful**.

Times when I was **resourceful**: The time I got a flat tire on the way to basketball practice and instead of calling my mom, I Youtubed how to change a tire myself. Or, the time that my little sister was having trouble memorizing the order of the planets, so I wrote a rap song to help her learn.

My characteristic is **flexible**.

Times when I was **flexible**: The time that my chemistry group chose to pursue a different research topic after I'd already done my work, but since I knew the topic was better, I agreed to make the change. Or, the time that my coworker's child was sick and I had to cover her shift, even though I was exhausted.

You use the defining characteristic to provide the kernel of inspiration for the story you will tell. It will also give your story direction and give you a feeling that you can continually circle back to.

A word of caution

While it can be tempting to choose a characteristic that is controversial, counter-intuitive, or shocking, I would advise against this. For example, if you want to demonstrate that you are lazy in order to tell a story about a time everything turned out perfectly in spite of your minimal effort, this gives your admissions officer the impression that you might not do well in college. If you want to demonstrate that you are a great leader but your story makes you sound more like a great dictator, this is similarly bad.

You want to be honest when you're writing your main essay, but not too honest. Remember, you have only 650 words to give the admissions officer a complete look at who you are. You don't get the opportunity to explain or equivocate, so it's best to play it safe and choose 2-3 solid, positive characteristics.

Once you've chosen your characteristics, you are ready for the next part, what to write about. If you haven't thought of your characteristics, or if you already have a story in mind, then try working backward. To give your story a good direction, use a characteristic to drive your

introduction and conclusion. After reading your essay, you want the admissions officer to say, "wow, this sounds like a really (insert your characteristic) student."

Note: If you can't wait, the full Common App Essay guide can be found

[**here**](<https://www.theadmissionsangle.com/2020/06/16/what-should-i-write-about-in-the-common-app-essay/>) **on our blog.**

***** End of Post

Post Title: Hey AdmissionMom: Real Talk from Reddit -- Free Download and Kindle Book GiveAway in honor National Book Lover's Day!

Post Body: **Happy National Book Lover's Day, Admissions Fam.**

As a certified Book Lover (flashlight-under-the-covers book readers unite!), I am excited to celebrate this day by sharing my new book, [Hey AdmissionsMom: Real Talk from Reddit](<http://bit.ly/admissionismombook>) with you. If you click on that book title, it's linked to a pdf copy of the book -- the entire book (all 377 pages of it!), free and completely available to a2c. HAM (as I like to lovingly call it) was inspired by you -- or kids just like you who were here on r/ApplyingToCollege between 2016 and 2018.

My youngest son (Tufts '18) encouraged me to look around Reddit when I was first starting my "official" consulting business then, and even though I had no idea what Reddit was and had never even seen a page, I took a leap. I was looking for ways to give back and to learn. Here, I found this awesome community of about 8000 stressed-out, but super smart, driven students. At first, I lurked for a few months, and then the stories of anxiety and stress really began to stick with me. I realized I could help with some suggestions for managing stress as I'd just been through a fairly stressful time in my life. My stress stemmed from change, too, as I'd recently retired from my job as a community college writing instructor, become an empty nester, and my mom, whom I'd always been close to and had been caring for during a long illness, died. It was a big shift all in a matter of a few months, leading me on a journey to learn more about mindfulness, meditation, and stoicism, which blended well with my lifelong philosophies of "become who you are," "to thine own self be true," "none but ourselves can free our minds," and "know thyself."

So, to shorten my ramblings: As I was writing back and forth with the ApplyingToCollege community in those early days before the A2C population explosion, I realized I wanted the world to hear your voices. I wanted the world to know how you were handling this admissions journey. I wanted your parents to read about -- and I wanted college admissions folks to know about -- the stress and anxiety you feel, how amazing you all are, and how fantastic you are at sharing advice with each other -- often (but not always) really good advice, so I decided to write a book. In it, I tried to cover the entire admissions journey -- not just from my perspective (although god knows that's in there: :)), but from your perspective. Around 70 of your fellow A2C fam agreed to share their words, mostly high school (and now they're in college) students,

and a few of our all-star adults who are still hanging out here and helping. To all of them, I'm so grateful!

Of course, as the voracious book reader and College Admissions Junkie I am, I can't miss the opportunity to share with you some of my fave Admissions Journey Books to add to your library in honor of National Book Lovers Day:

The College Finder by Steven Antonoff

Colleges that Change Lives by Loren Pope

Fiske Guide to Colleges by Edward Fiske

Where You Go Is Not Who You'll Be by Frank Bruni

The Princeton Review Best 380-something Guides

College Essay Essentials by Ethan Sawyer

The Mindful Twenty-Something by Holly Rogers (OK.. this isn't technically a college admissions guide, but I think you'll find it useful. Read it.)

If you could see my bookshelves, you'd see them filled with books about college admissions, dating from the 1960s. I've learned from them all -- the good and the bad -- even the admissions books that come from creating a place of fear for parents and students have taught me valuable lessons.

I'm so excited to share this book with all 112,000ish beautiful yous, and I hope you'll be able to learn a few things from this book, written for you, and essentially -- written by you!

💙😊AdmissionsMom

If you'd like to purchase the book instead, you can buy it here:

<https://www.amazon.com/dp/B07SKLM2FZ>

***** End
of Post

Post Title: Personal Statement Tips

Post Body: Hi folks! Being that this week and the beginning of next is when many of you will receive ED decisions, I understand that a lot of you might be disappointed with your results. First, just take a second to breathe. Take a walk outside, go run, talk to a friend, play some video games--whatever you need to do to reset. It's ok to feel the way you do now.

With that said, I'm hoping this post will help many of you who are now gearing to apply RD! This post is not a one-size-fit-all for students in how to write your essays, but I hope it is at least helpful in how you might think of your own strategies for RD. If you haven't already, feel free to read my previous posts on essays; they contain some pretty common things I've seen across essays and might be helpful in figuring out what you can improve upon in your RD essays.

****1) Reframe your mindset****

Time and time again, I get asked in my DM's, "How do I write a *good* essay?" This kind of approach always sort of bothered me because it sets students up for some unrealistic expectations. Most commonly, I see this question, and when I redirect the question back to the student, they almost always jump to a sob story, tragedy, some flowery narrative, and/or a ton of fluff.

I recommend that instead of asking yourself how you can write a *good* essay, begin to ask yourself what you know about yourself and what you don't know. Start to reframe your mindset in a zone where the goal ****is not**** to write a good essay or whatever. Instead, your goal is to understand who you are, what you love, how you think, what your goals are, what excites you, and why.

This does two things, in my opinion. First, when you reframe your goal to figuring out who you are, you no longer are bound and/or obsessed with what makes a good essay. You are actively trying to figure out who you are. This is important. 18 to 22 is a period of hyper-maturation. When you're 17, you're transitioning into adulthood. Some of you might have already experienced some glimpses of what adulthood entails (like working a job and perhaps helping your parents pay bills or taking care of others). I think it's important to really reflect on your life and understand who you are to help the transition into adulthood. Bonus points if you figure out stuff about yourself that you never knew!

The second thing this does is that in the process of figuring out who you are, you usually end up with better material to write about for your essays. A lot of you are preoccupied with the many EC's/hw/problem sets/tests you have to do, and that's fine. But as a result, I've noticed that many students I've worked with struggle to answer anything about themselves that has substance to it. By taking the time to really figure out yourself, you provide yourself with a ton of ammo needed to write an essay. (Don't forget to write this down somewhere!) I should also note that this process doesn't just happen in an instant. It takes time. Some people are better at exploring who they are than other people. That's ok. What's important is that you actually just take the time to do so.

My advice for learning more about yourself is to go on a hike, or do anything that is relaxing. Play music if you want. I usually prefer something mellow and chill, like some sort of instrumental. Take the time to just breathe, and then ask yourself these questions. If you need a starting point, ask yourself how your day was so far and piggy off of that. Try to ensure you

won't be distracted. The amount of time this actually takes surprises a lot of students, so be patient with yourself. It's a journey worth taking.

Additional tip: when you're doing this, ask yourself, "so what?" after your answer. If you can answer that question, you probably haven't dug deep enough. I'm borrowing this method from College Essay Guy. This really forces you to find the true significance of whatever you're answering. It helps ensure that your answers aren't just empty--that there's meaning behind it.

Here's an outline of the process:

- * Josh got rejected REA from Stanford. He reviews his Common App essay and notices that it really doesn't say anything about him. It's really flowery and mostly a sob story. He goes line-by-line and asks, "so what?" He finds many of the lines he's written in his essay could answer the "so what" questions.

- * Josh pauses and takes the time to reset. He begins to ask himself the larger questions on a hike: who am I? What do I enjoy? Why do I enjoy it? Why do I think about things in a certain way? What experiences have I had that have informed my perspective on the world as I know it? What's important to me? Why are those things important to me?

- * Josh begins to answer some questions. He begins to understand that he's a really creative guy who doesn't like questions where they confine him to one answer because they limit his creativity. He asks himself, "so what?" It's important to him that he expresses his innovation in more ways than one. So what? Josh thinks back as to why he thinks this way. He finds that his biggest inspiration was his mom, who led by example. His mom would always try to build these cool model ships--but she would never look at the instructions because she felt it confined her imagination. She once told him that her goal wasn't to build an exact replica of the ship; her goal was to build something unique, something she could call her own. Josh remembered that he was inspired by these words, and he strived to do the same.

- * Josh goes even deeper. He remembered a bunch of times where he would stay up late with his mom to construct a ship. So what? He would add his own ideas, add cool things to the ship that wasn't even in the kit: legos, play doh, hand drawn figures, old cloth. He remembered all the times his mom would smile and just light up with him as he added these things to their ship. So what?

- * Josh starts to think about all the other times he applies this mode of thinking to everything he loves: friendships, art, science.

- * Finally, Josh zooms in on a specific microcosm of his life to figure out how to convey some of the substantive things he's just learned about himself.

I could continue on and on, but hopefully you get the idea. Notice how much stuff Josh has to work with from here. He's no longer confined to just sob stories and flowery narratives. He has

actual *substance*. Now he just needs to figure out how to write these things in a compelling way.

Final thing: Remember that you're trying to figure out the best qualities about yourself.

****2) Try to tell the story aloud and try to record it****

Now that you have your substance, it's time to really figure out how to write it. My favorite method is just talking things out, either to myself, a recording, or a friend. Try to tell your story in less than 3 minutes. This serves two purposes.

First, it captures *your* voice. Yes, your actual voice, but I'm talking about the voice you use in your essays. In many essays I've read, I'm either not learning anything about you or I'm just really bored reading your essay and it doesn't move the needle for me. This is mostly due to just how it's written. Here's the thing: most of the boring essays I've seen read like you're a 50-year-old man writing about the international adjudication process for nation-states. But when I have a regular convo with you guys, it's completely different.

Here's what I mean:

This is how you write in your essay: However, this is not to mean that I do not like to venture out in the unknown; I, too, enjoy wildlife and all its beautiful intricacies.

This is how you reply to my question in a discord chat: i love the outdoors! there's no place like the park for me. when my friends and i go there, we have a rule where we can't take out our phones, and it's just liberating. we can be with each other, enjoy the cryptically colored leaves that fall down from the high trees, and just be there for each other!

Notice how the first one just feels like you're old? I don't know a single 17-year-old that talks like that. Hell, I don't even know a professor that talks like that. Your voice is important. It's what helps make the essay feel more genuine. Also, can't you feel the passion in the second example? It just feels more real.

Don't misconstrue this to mean that you should write your essay *exactly* like you would talk in real life. If you're swearing every other word and can't make a coherent sentence sometimes, don't write your essay like that. Try to imagine you're talking to admissionsmom or your favorite teacher.

Secondly, it saves you from all this flowery fluff nonsense mumbo jumbo. Here's a small anecdote: whenever I write for my publication at school or for a research paper, I always sit at my computer desk and type things out. But, I often find that I run out of things to say that are relevant to the paper I'm writing. So I just start writing fluff. Em dashes, more adjectives and adverbs that make me sound smart, extremely nuanced analyses of things that probably don't matter as much as my thesis. Sound familiar? It's called bullshit. We all do it.

Your essays are not a time to bullshit with these lame things--the adverbs, extra adjectives, flowery nonsense. When you're just talking and telling your story, it should naturally flow. Why does it naturally flow? Because you took the time to get to know yourself more! Here's an example of what it should look (or I guess sound) like:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nCwwVjPNloY>

Once you have your story, go bring the recording to a friend you trust and knows you well (unless you started with telling your friend in the first place). Have them review it. Ask them if it sounds like you--not literally, but just the overall vibe. Ask them if they have any questions. Ask them what about your story interests them. Ask them what they don't like about the story. Ask them to retell your story in front of you. Ask them what values, traits, ideas, etc they get from the story. Ask them if there's anything about yourself that you're missing. The purpose of these questions is to really get a sense of whether or not your story is compelling/resonates/genuine. If your friend says it just doesn't sound like you, then try again. If your friend says they love it, really pick on what they loved about it. If they didn't like a couple of things/felt it wasn't you, dive into why. Have a discussion about this. Here's the important thing to remember, though: ****the goal is still to understand who you are.****

This goal should supersede your thirst to write a good essay. Take the time to really understand yourself. Also, by asking them to provide other things about yourself that they think is missing from the story, it really adds another dimension to yourself. There's only so much we can really understand about ourselves. But since we're around our friends, they should know bits and pieces about ourselves that we don't. It provides more substance and material to work with later on in the end. This also benefits the friendship overall since you're being vulnerable, so bonus points!

Once everything is said and done, take notes on what your friends said to you! I find it helpful that your friend does the same process and you listen to them just so you understand what it's like on the other side of things. It helps put you in a different perspective of how you might explore other avenues of your personality and whatnot.

****3) Actually writing the damn thing****

Honestly, I like to call stage 2 your rough draft, assuming you recorded it or had your friend repeat it back to you or something. Write whatever you said aloud on paper. This is the roughest draft you have, so don't rush too much. Depending on how fast you talk, you will either have under 650 words or over. That's OK. After you've written it out, don't look at it again for a day or two. Why? Because you need time to really think about the things you've said and think about other things that are more compelling/missing. Also, when you come back to your drafts, you're going to notice things that shouldn't be there in the first place. For instance, in my drafts, I always say 'that' a lot when they aren't necessary.

If you find that you're only at 400 words, don't write anything yet! Remember, when we feel like we don't have enough material in there, we tend to just write more stuff, but more often than not it's bullshit. Don't fall for it!

Instead, take some time to really go through your story again with your friend (preferably another close friend that knows you well). Ask yourself the same questions you posed to your first friend. Do this until you're comfortable with where you are. You don't need exactly 650 words. My general marker is if you're at around 500 words and you think you've said all you could about yourself in a compelling way, then you're good. Most students write 600-650, though.

If you're over 650 words, take some time to really go through the "so what" exercise again. Go through line-by-line and really ask yourself why you put that line in there. If you think there's a true purpose there that adds something about yourself and/or it helps the flow of the essay, keep it. If not, copy and paste the sentence, paste it at the end of your doc, and then delete the line in the essay. Make sure once you delete the line that the flow of the essay is uninterrupted. I recommend copy and pasting the line at the bottom because you might find some utility for it in another essay. Obviously you can do some preliminary work and eliminate your adverbs, unnecessary 'that's' and make contractions.

****Final words****

I hope this was somewhat informative. I apologize if this seems like a gigantic mess of text. I'm a little burnt out from writing research papers all week long, so forgive any grammatical errors and awkward syntax.

I understand not getting into your dream school, and it definitely hurts. Take your time to really feel what you're feeling. My biggest advice for the process of grieving is to just observe yourself hurting. I know it sounds weird, but acknowledging that the hurt is there is the first step to really moving on. For me, I come from a low-income family, so I thought getting in a t5 would be my ticket to bring everyone up. But things don't always turn out the way we want them to, and that's OK. Tackle each day one at a time and cherish the ones you love, the things you have, the ground you stand on. Take heart, as this is one of many difficult challenges you'll face in your young adulthood. Take your time to heal, and get right back up to challenge the world again. It sounds daunting, but remember that this is your own adventure--no school, admissions officer, or committee can take that away from you.

For those of you who do need help with your essays, unfortunately I have a ton on my plate and probably will not be able to get back to you as fast as you would like.

Lastly, if you have any general questions, please post them down below. If you're bummed about not getting in and need advice on how to cheer up, feel free to ask.

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of Post
