



WRITE GREAT COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAYS AND STAY SANE



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Part 1: The Steps of the Writing Process

When a family's high school student must write the college application essay, the pressure is on everyone. Parents worry that their teenagers aren't sitting down soon enough to write a really good essay. They worry their students sound too modest, too revealing, or too silly or simple. Often, students don't believe they have anything interesting to say, let alone to faceless people who will be judging them. They haven't lived long enough to have figured out the significance of their experiences, even if they want to write about them, and having their parents or teachers tell them the significance is the last thing in the world they want to have happen. Students worry about how to present themselves on the page in a way that sounds real and like them, and often feel that when adults help, the wording and ideas just don't sound right. Additionally, they have full academic schedules and numerous extracurricular activities, making it easier to procrastinate than find the time and emotional space to sit down and begin discovering what it is they have to say to college admissions committees.

Here's the good news: Whether the students have three months, three weeks, or three days to complete the essay (and I'd vote for the three months, but some decisions are made late, and inspiration sometimes needs a tight deadline), there is a process that can help them enjoy writing their personal statement, as well as aid them to learn about themselves and grow as individuals — something that really does prepare them for college. And the process defines a clear and useful role for parents' and/or other adult help.

The overall steps to the process are:

1. After students know what schools they will be applying to, they should visit each school website, download any school-specific application essay questions, and find the common application essay questions to choose from. Note that some schools also require a supplemental essay.
2. Play with images, words, memories and writing strategies, and then do a freewrite of whatever comes to mind. This means setting fingers to the keyboard or pen to paper and just writing without thinking, censoring, or deliberating. In freewriting, writers get ideas down and go wherever their thoughts, memories, and images take them.
3. Put that writing away.

4. Let trusted adults listen to you read the freewrites. (If the material or situation is too sensitive for parents' to hear at this time, let parents help figure out who might be a good choice as listener among colleagues, relatives, friends, and teachers. Keep parents informed about approaching these potential critics for their listening skills and about your own schedule in sticking to the steps this book suggests.)
5. From others' and your own response to hearing yourself read in front of an audience even of one, identify where your energy, honesty, and interest lie in the earliest freewrites.
6. Write that story using the process this book puts forward.

The sub-steps include: using the pre-writing strategies of brainstorming and clustering; identifying patterns of thinking; learning to trust images, details and specifics; asking for responses from readers to learn which words stick, what feelings are evoked, and where the reader is curious; and revising, revising, revising.

Part 2: Why Writing an Essay Feels Difficult

Why students think the college application essay is hard to write:

- You have to talk about yourself.
- You have to make a good impression.
- You have to look into your experience to show something important about yourself when you don't necessarily think what is important about you will impress college admissions committees.
- You don't honestly think you know enough about yourself and the world (isn't that why you are going to college?) to write convincingly.
- You haven't had much writing experience that calls for assessing your personal experience to make a point about your abilities and interests.

Why parents have trouble helping their kids with the college application essay writing process:

- They focus on the competitive nature of college admissions and are so quick to judge their kids' writing that they don't nourish the spark of individuality that is in early drafts.
- Focusing on the looming deadlines, they are quick to judge their kids as terribly behind in completing the applications, and kids don't listen to the resulting nagging.
- They think they know the right story to tell and want their kids to tell the one they think is best.
- They think they are better writers than their kids and correct drafts, making them sound too adult and often too general, and alienate their kids, who feel their experience is being falsified.
- They do not know the writing process themselves and, feeling incompetent as writers, they worry, worry, worry about how their kids will ever write the essay. Kids don't respond enthusiastically to worry. Or nagging. Or corruption of their story.

Why it's hard for kids to have their parents help:

- They understand their experiences differently than their parents do.
- They feel that by putting their experiences and thinking on the page, they may fail their parents if their parents don't find enough in the experiences to please them.

- Kids begin feeling their parents think they know the kids better than the kids know themselves. Therefore, having parents as a first audience can short circuit the kids' own way of thinking things through.
- There may be disagreement about which schools students should apply to.

What everyone can do to be more effective and get the essay done and done well:

- Have a family meeting in which students and parents honestly state their needs, fears, and understanding of the task ahead. If parents and students don't concur on the appropriateness of some of the colleges chosen, agree to put forward reasons pro and con, just so they are heard.
- Write down everyone's suggestions about how to get through the weeks ahead and accomplish the task of writing for the college application essay. Really listen to the suggestions and don't pooh pooh any of them.
- Parents listen to students state what help they most need. If parents and students decide someone else's help might work better, brainstorm names of those who might offer help, including services experienced in [coaching students](#) to write the application essay.
- If parents and/or students are worried about getting the application and writing tasks done on time despite a myriad of activities, spend some time discussing the chosen colleges' application requirements, agreeing to and writing down a timeline, and proposing other sources of help — books, professional college admissions counselors, relatives and neighbors who write well or are easy to talk with, as well as reputable editing services that work with high school kids, honoring their abilities to write and coaching them one-on-one.
- Become more effective by discussing ahead of time why waiting until the last minute is not a good idea, why parents bugging offspring to finish the essay is not a good idea, and why kids not communicating their progress to their parents is also not a good idea. Discuss what sort of system can be put in place to emphasize writing time, complete the essay, and handle privacy issues during the drafting process.
- Be sure to designate some sort of celebration or reward to honor the finish of each application.

And students, remember that physical exercise can be a great way to think of good writing ideas or clear your mind so you can continue the writing process. Keeping a pad and pencil by

your bed means you can jot ideas down if they come to you in a dream or upon waking before your mind has taken on the day. Parents — don't quiz your kids on whether they have gotten any new ideas when they wake up or have come in from shooting baskets! Ideas need time to gel. They often flee when talked about too soon.

Part 3: Where to Start

To begin your essay writing process, if you haven't done so yet, [download the current Common Application questions](#) and any school specific application essay questions you are aware of for the schools you wish to apply to. After you read the questions, thoroughly read the schools' promotional and catalog material. Get a feel for what they say they value in their applicants and class members. For each school, write a list of attributes you cull from their materials: talented, diverse backgrounds, self-starters, community minded, for instance. Next, record each school's application deadline beside the list of attributes you distinguish so you'll have a sense of which schools' applications you need to finish first.

For instance, Stanford University's homepage quotes the school's motto: "The wind of freedom blows," and calls it an invitation to free and open inquiry in teaching and research. The page's link to Stanford's 600 organized student activities explains, "Having the ability to engage in multiple interests and find friends who are not only similarly engaged, but also exceptionally talented in those areas, is one of the values of Stanford's diversity." When I set out to list attributes that go along with these stated qualities, I thought of being multi-talented, displaying high performance, and thriving in a place where my own talents would take off from working with others of similar strong ability. Looking at the list of categories for the student activities I see:

1. Academic
2. Athletic/Recreational
3. Careers/Preprofessional
4. Community Service
5. Ethnic/Cultural
6. Fraternities/Sororities
7. Health/Counseling
8. Media/Publications
9. Music/Dance/Creative Arts
10. Political/Social Awareness
11. Religious/Philosophical

I begin thinking this way: I should somehow combine any athletic, academic or artistic talents I have with the idea of freedom. Another attribute I should incorporate is curiosity and the ability to inquire rather than accept the status quo. I should include ways I give back to my

community, involve myself with people of diverse backgrounds, and demonstrate good teamwork.

Thinking about what attributes are most important to the schools according to their promotional material will help you devise a writing plan that works. In the Stanford example, for instance, someone from a high school girls' soccer team might think, "How can I use my excellent ability at soccer to draw a profile of myself as someone who fits the school's student body?"

Well, I can talk about the time I influenced my teammates' strategies and led my team to a victory in State Championships, only after successfully learning to communicate well with a student from an ethnic background that deals with competition and criticism very differently than I have been taught." The compelling story becomes learning how to communicate effectively with a teammate. Along the way, the reader will learn about the student's soccer skill and team building experience, the way she connects with others and their skills, and the way she attempts to lead rather than accept the status quo. Since the student will show how she made an effort to learn about the teammate's ethnic background and successfully figure out a way to communicate effectively, she can illustrate how she ensured the team worked smoothly together toward common goals.

After you have made a list of the attributes each school seems to value and brainstormed about the stories you can tell about yourself to focus on these attributes through specific events and experiences, prioritize your writing tasks:

In setting a writing schedule, consider which schools have the earliest deadlines as well as which schools are most important to you. Often candidates who have time start writing for the less important schools first to get their feet into the process, and then write the essays for the schools they deem most important to them.

Note that even if some of the schools you choose are not using the common application, you can often find similarities among various application essay questions and can use some of the same core experiences for many, even if you have to focus things a bit differently for each particular school and what it most values in its candidates.

Part 4: Brainstorm Ideas

Now that you know [what questions you'll be answering](#), when the applications are due, and something of what you might tap into about yourself to write the essays, take out the timeline you made for the whole process. Make a sub-timeline now for writing for each of the schools, remembering to allot ample time for generating the essay idea, writing a draft, using trusted readers, revising, re-showing the essay to your readers, proofing, and submitting (include postmark deadline dates and suggested hours of time needed to upload if done electronically when the site gets swamped). If you start on a second or third school choice to warm up to writing, be sure to figure on enough time to convert those essays to essays for your first choice school before its deadline. Ideally, you will allot one day for each of the subtasks — that's seven days. Most people don't have several hours a day seven days in a row to work on their essays. Will you need seven weeks? A month? If you have only a week or less for an application, you will have to put almost everything else aside to get the work done.

Here's how to start:

Take each one of these questions or the questions on the college application you are using if it isn't the common application and jot down a few ideas for each topic. Don't judge what comes up as a good idea or a bad idea. Just write the ideas down.

One way to do so is linear — just make a list. Another way is circular — clustering. Many think that there is writing power in “encircling.” The pattern making, creative mind is invited in when things don't go in a straight line. To cluster as a way of mining your experience, write the topic of the question in the middle of a page and circle it. Then when something comes to mind, write a phrase about it somewhere on the page, circle it and connect it to the middle words with a line. Then make little clusters of images and phrases that go with the words you've thought of, circling them and connecting them to the “balloon” of words you wrote down. When you have thought of all you can, start fresh with another image or phrase you jot in another area of the paper, once again circling it and connecting it to the question topic you've put in the center of the page. Keep coming up with fresh ideas and images until you think you know which one most interests you. Sometimes you know by how big the cluster is, or sometimes because you think to start a new cluster on a second page to find out more about what you are remembering and thinking.

Using this cluster, I might start an essay with my community service coaching underprivileged kids in a game I excel at. I might start with a scene of working with one or more children. I can

show how by sharing my competence and joy, I am teaching those in need a lot about their self-worth. I can show what I am learning from them that will help me. I will also show how I use my love of soccer to enjoy other activities that make me a well-rounded person: dance class, leadership training, knowledge of the world's people and history.

Or, I might start an essay with a scene of me running or kicking a ball on the soccer field and listening to cheers and feeling free to be myself. Then I might go on to say that from this feeling I am able to restore myself and then take my spirit and abilities to others in ways that help: my soccer team members, my classmates in dance class, the kids I coach, and ultimately my future peers at Stanford and the people I will intersect with in my career and community.

What way I start will depend on where the excitement is for me and how I see it connecting to the attributes I know I need to portray.

Part 5: Ask Friends and Family

Sit down with your parents or the friends and other adults you have chosen to help you, and ask them what comes to mind about you for each of your chosen topics. Jot those ideas down. In a day or two, re-read your brainstorming and clustering, as well as the list of others' ideas and honestly assess where you are interested to know more about the topics you have come up with. When you have identified the one that you inherently feel most interested in — just because you feel that way — you are ready to commit to that one for the essay. If you are writing to find out more about your experience because it interests you, you are bound to write a more interesting essay than if you are going through the motions just to get what seems the right thing to say on the page. The poet Robert Frost is often quoted as saying, “If there is no discovery for the writer, there will be no discovery for the reader.” It’s the same with you and the college admissions committee –if they can track the way the applicant has used their question for honest self-reflection and reexamination of events, they will feel moved, interested, and excited. These are the qualities in an essay that make it matter and introduce you the candidate beyond grades, SAT scores, and other statistics.

Your topic doesn't have to be the most earth shattering or amazing experience — it has to be about something that matters to you and engages you, something you are interested in telling about, exploring a bit further than you have and learning from as you write. It has to allow you to really show what life is like for you.

Here's an example: A candidate wants to become a fashion editor for a national magazine. She has worked on her school's yearbook two years in a row, as assistant editor and editor-in-chief. She has also participated for years in a fund-raising, long-distance bicycle ride because her parents were active in the organization that was raising the funds to benefit medical research on a disease that took the life of a local boy. What interested her most about her experience was the way her classmates took to her redesign ideas for the yearbook (based on iPod advertising style), turning out for the yearbook club in record numbers, and how much of the town turned out to raise funds by supporting the bike riders. After some thought about how these two activities could support her interest in becoming a fashion editor, she realized that what was important to her was mobilizing numbers of people and having an impact. She began to see fashion magazine editing as a way to reach great numbers of people globally and to foster green manufacturing, development of industries in impoverished areas, and interest in global child labor laws. She saw her high school experiences as training for joining important clubs in college and for obtaining the internships that would help her connect with the industry she wanted to be a part of to make a difference in the world by using her talents and interests.

As a consequence of writing her essay, this candidate saw herself as directed, purposeful, and ready for new challenges.

Another candidate most enjoyed the work she was doing part-time at an early childhood education center. Although she didn't want to become a teacher, she was learning much about educating herself and others from the teacher for whom she was working as an aid and from the center's children in terms of how they learned. By writing about this experience and the insights she gained concerning learning, she was able to discuss how she would approach her higher education — with joy and appreciation, by helping peers, and by extending learning from one area into other areas. She drew a compelling portrait of herself as an exciting student and contributor to the education of those around her.

A third candidate was the child of a father who'd come from India and a mother who was an American Jew from the Midwest. The couple had met at school in California. The family had very recently all gone to visit the father's extended family in India. It was the first trip the candidate had made to India, as her father had always gone alone while she was growing up. Although she attended a Jewish high school and had never actively identified with her Indian heritage, now that she'd met her father's family and lots of cousins, she could see traits in herself that came from her father's upbringing and that merged very nicely with the traits she'd inherited from her mother's family and traditions. She was excited to see this blend and eager to bring what she was learning about her background to college where she wanted to major in Jewish studies, but combine activities in East Asian clubs with her studies.

One more candidate was the middle of three sisters. Her older sister was suffering from manic-depression and she was the one who had to tell her parents that her sister was cutting herself despite psychiatric help. When her sister was hospitalized and her parents spent much time visiting her, the candidate had to baby-sit her little sister, tend to house chores, and do her homework and study for tests, all while she was worried about her sister and feeling badly that she had had to be the one to inform her parents. As she wrote, she realized just how much she had learned about her own need for close friends and mentors during this time when she felt like hiding the family truth. The essay was a moving testimonial to the way peers and teachers and bosses matter in helping individuals maintain a life of their own when family problems threaten to overwhelm them.

A male student who didn't know what to write about, recounted a funny line going around school about him. It was a take-off on his name that people enjoyed chanting so much that even teachers and students who didn't know him were familiar with the chant. Because so many people at school were asking who this person was, he had to ask himself who he thought

he was. The resulting exploration of his values and ways of demonstrating them made a very good essay.

So, writing down what comes to mind and trying to see how what comes to mind goes with the application questions helps you learn more about what you know about yourself, what you want out of life, and how you'll contribute to others. This kind of self-knowledge, supported by specific experiences, shows the admissions committee what your abilities, talents, and interests are, as well as what kind of a person you are. Your writing allows you to appear real and believable.

Part 6: The Importance of Reading Sample Essays

There are many places to find sample essays, such as [here](#), for example. You will find others in the many books published for those applying to college. When you read an essay, write down what you like about it — the honesty, simplicity, sense of humor, cleverness, innovative nature, poignancy. Once you have settled on the characteristic that engages you, figure out how the writer created that characteristic. What scene does he or she set? What details set the scene? Which ones allow you to know the writer? Become involved immediately in his or her life and thinking? Why does what the person wrote matter to you the reader? Why does the essay mean they will be a good person to add to the class? What strategy does the essayist use that you admire and would like to use? Explain this to yourself.

Notice that Good Writing Has Shape

In writing there are eight patterns of thinking that you can look for in the essays you enjoy. Most essays combine two or more of them, but all essays usually rely most on one for overall organization: description, narration, how-to, comparison and contrast, cause and effect, division and classification, definition, and argument and persuasion.

1. Description tells us about someone, something, or some event, and makes the subject so real to us that we feel we are there. This requires the use of words that appeal to the five senses and as little exposition (telling) as possible. Show, don't tell is the rule here. If you want me to know your grandfather was a kind perfectionist, write some remembered direct dialog, something as he might have said it; show his characteristic gesture, or him doing a characteristic task. Let the reader know what you see, hear, touch, taste and smell if appropriate (for instance, woodchips in his shop or the pasta he is stirring on the stove).
2. Narration tells about an event through time — you can narrate the story of a time you lost someone or some opportunity that was important to you, and in telling that story arrive at an insight about what matters most to you.
3. Comparison and contrast allows you to tell how things are in comparison to how you would like them to be or to compare yourself to someone or some historical or literary character you admire, and discuss how college will facilitate becoming the person you want to be in the world.

4. How-to is a way of sharing knowledge about how something is done or made and can come in handy for talking about how you made a meaningful achievement or how you'll approach your college years.
5. Cause and effect is a way of thinking about what situations, events, or reading impacted you and shaped your life and outlook.
6. Classification and division allows you to talk knowledgeably on a subject by dividing it up into categories and building to the category most meaningful to you — ways of approaching life, for instance, or types of mentors or kinds of achievements, always ordered for impact's sake with the most important group placed last.
7. Definition comes in handy when discussing a role you have in life that has been instructive to you — coping with a chronic condition, being an immigrant, a minority, the sister or brother of a developmentally disabled sibling, or someone with local fame because of an event reported in the newspaper.
8. Argument and persuasion is a pattern useful for taking on an event that concerns you. In this pattern of thinking, you can use your personal experience to support a belief and persuade others of its importance.

Think about how you use all of these patterns in everyday and school life — in conversations, classroom discussions, assignments, and test taking. Just recognizing these patterns will help you mine yourself for writing ideas and find strategies for presenting them on the page.

Look again at the sample essays you have read. Label the areas where you can discern one of the eight patterns of thinking. What about each pattern helps a writer put experience on the page?

Part 7: Freewrite Your Way to a Great College Application Essay

First, write the question you are going to address at the top of a new document. Next, freewrite an answer to it for 10 to 15 minutes. Set an oven timer to keep yourself from looking up at the clock. Keep your fingers on the keyboard or the pen to the page and just keep slamming out the words, any words that come to you on the topic. You don't have to read the screen or scan what you have already written on the page. Keep new words coming.

When the alarm rings, shake out your hands and re-read what you wrote. Underline or highlight the words that surprise you, the ones that feel as if they might lead you to saying more. If you can, read this freewrite to someone or ones you trust and let them tell you two things: the words and phrases that they remember from your reading and what they'd like to know more about. You can also have others read to themselves, but we always learn a lot about how our words perform on the page when we listen to ourselves read aloud to others.

Do a second freewrite with their responses in mind.

Read the second freewrite to your trusted listeners and ask for the same responses. This time, though, also be sure to ask if any of the images, sentences, or thoughts you've written confuse, distract, disappoint or bore. These are the places where you most probably stray from your subject or get shy about putting it fully on the page. You might be sticking to details that are safe rather than exploring the occasion. You might be summarizing and using intangible words rather than words that describe by appealing to the five senses.

Caution:

1. Let your responders know that their responses must be in the form of "I" statements: I am bored in the part about XYZ because the images don't seem fresh to me; I am confused when you mention going to Alaska because I thought you were talking about being in Cincinnati; I am distracted by wondering why you post a rhetorical question in the middle of the writing because I think you must know the answer if I do.

2. Take notes as they speak and don't explain what you've written. When you hear their response to the writing itself without any explanations by you, you will receive a useful jumpstart for knowing what you need to do to keep the reader with you.

Part 8: Write an Outline

Where does the essay start? What information must the middle have to properly fill the reader in? What is the discovery that leads to the ending? In following the outline form, which requires we have no I without a II, no A without a B, no 1 without a 2, and no a) without a b), you will push yourself to fill in the details.

One way to warm up to doing your outline is to make one for an essay you have read and liked. This also allows you to figure out which question you have strong material for answering. To do this, read the essay closely and outline its beginning, middle, and end.

I have been collecting copies of student application essays for years and often request permission to share these essays anonymously with the students I am teaching. Here are examples from the applications of three high school seniors who have agreed to allow the reprinting of their work.

This first essay is written in answer to a college specific question about how you have used your education to date to good advantage:

Hello. Hola. Privet. I am proud to be able to greet you in three languages. I came to this country from Tashkent, Uzbekistan as a nine-year-old. One year later at the end of fourth grade, I was fluent in English. Now, I am on my way to fluency and proficiency in Spanish. Being multilingual in Slavic, Germanic and Latin languages familiarizes me with diverse cultures, opening my mind and allowing me to gain insight into the world.

I continue to speak Russian with family members and friends and read Russian books; I attend Russian theatre productions, ballets, plays, and community events to retain my connection to my roots. I have taken four years of Spanish, going beyond the minimum high school requirement, and I still rush to my Spanish classes eager to gain a new piece of the Spanish language puzzle. I have learned from four different instructors and understand the diversity of the language. I regularly read Spanish books and do Spanish book reports and have made a short movie with Spanish dialogue. I visit museums to learn about the Latin culture.

In college, I plan to continue my Spanish studies and participate in a year abroad program in Spain to better comprehend the culture and become absolutely fluent in the language. Furthermore, I will study French because the culture's extensive and dynamic history of rulers,

such as Louis XIV, and engaging authors, such as Alexander Dumas, fascinates me. By learning the language, I know I will better appreciate the culture and add even further to my interpretative skills, creating a solid foundation for my career in communication and international and political affairs.

Here's an outline that suggests the method of organization for this essay:

1. Show lingual ability and where it came from.
 - Home country
 - Immigration
 - Talking with native speakers at home
 - Current and future school studies
 - Four instructors
 - Read books in foreign language and write book reports
 - Made a movie with dialog
 - Visit museums
 - Plan on more courses and studies abroad

2. The experience and studies will help with future career goals in communication and foreign diplomacy:
 - Better fluency
 - Better understanding of culture
 - Better interpretive skills

Making an outline of an essay that works for you provides a short cut for you to create one for writing on your own topic and being able to zero in on what details are important. Too often in short essays, writers think they have to summarize and generalize, when well-chosen details do more to show who the speaker is and how he or she will add to the class and become a credit to the school.

Think of the ways you have utilized your education. Which of the ways is most important to you? See what happens when you attempt an essay from an outline similar to the one presented here. Even if you don't have to answer the particular question this outline addresses, you will get some experience going on the "write" track before you tackle longer essays.

Part 9: Sample Essay and Analysis

Here is a sample essay written for the topic of your choice question from the common application. It is by a high school senior who wanted to write about the ethnic backgrounds she was born into and was searching for a way to tie this in to what she'd already decided she wanted to study in college. In fact, she'd already made a particular university her first choice based on its program in this major. Here's her essay linking the backgrounds of her parents with how they have shaped who she is and who she wants to be. Notice that she grounds the essay in a moment of conflict when who she is meant losing a good friend:

My eighth grade best friend and I were inseparable until one morning when she told me she had a fight with her father, who banned her from seeing me. Since he'd already told her to date boys from her background, my parents thought he feared she'd fall into a mixed heritage crowd, as I am of Indian and Jewish descent.

I am proud of my world, and fortunately, my father had his first chance to bring us with him to India. Relatives rushed us from the airport to a welcome party at my grandfather's house. Everyone gave us huge hugs and kisses as we made our way around the room. Among thirty relatives, I noticed likenesses between our families; we are fun loving, family oriented, argumentative, stubborn, open-minded, and welcoming of other cultures. Whether I was at a picnic, birthday party, or lunch, an amazing family embraced me.

Upon my return, I paid attention to attributes from my mother's background. She loved religious school, being a Bat Mitzvah, and celebrating the Jewish holidays. While she was pregnant, my father decided to convert from Hinduism to Judaism to foster family cohesiveness. He played an active role in our Jewish community and signed up for Hebrew lessons to help me learn prayers for my Bat Mitzvah and read from the Torah at my service. After this, he wanted to become a Bar Mitzvah. I helped him learn the prayers and his Torah portion.

I then became a teacher assistant, helping out in classes and tutoring children in Hebrew. Temple was my home away from home and certainly my rock during the time of confusion and discovery following the abrupt loss of my best friend. I was confirmed in tenth grade, receiving the Rabbi's award for being an active and dedicated participant of the temple. This past summer, I took my Jewish involvement to another level and traveled to Israel, feeling a deep

connection when I arrived by ship. I had learned about ancient Jerusalem and the famous Red Sea, and seeing the land sparked me.

Now that I have traveled to India and Israel, I see my heritage shining through daily life. During any Jewish holiday, my mother makes festive food: latkes, Homatashen, and Mandel bread. My father makes Indian food for dinner sometimes, the whole family enjoying a spicy, exotic taste. I use terms from India such as “bus” (enough) and “kem cho?” (how are you?). I use Yiddish words such as “oy veh” and “shlep” without even realizing I am switching languages. My father inspires us with stories of running five miles to school barefoot from a small house with five siblings, and like my mother’s New York family, we enjoy argument and persistence. We stay up until two AM debating.

I am not jarred when people are surprised by my name, with its boy’s name in the middle and the sounds of two cultures, and when they look at me thinking I am Persian or Mexican. At the university, I will major in Jewish Studies and spend a semester or even a year abroad in Israel. I will join Hillel to meet classmates with a similar religious background to mine, and I will find an organization to deepen my knowledge of my Indian roots, keeping an open mind and an open heart while helping others do so as well.

Here’s an outline of the essay:

1. Upsetting incident incited by someone’s judgment about my background:
 - a. Day a good friend wouldn’t talk.
 - b. Told parents and learned possibly that family didn’t like their daughter having friend of mixed heritage background now that they were of dating age.
 - c. Reaction: pride and dedication to exploring own background
 - i. Father’s family are from India and soon I met them for the first time.
 1. Events in India taught me about my relatives’ attributes.
 - a. parties and meals
 - b. impressed with qualities: generosity, family orientation, fun loving.
 - ii. Mother’s background: grew up Jewish
 1. mother’s commitment to raising her children Jewish
 2. father’s decision to convert from Hinduism so the family could all belong to the Jewish community
 3. personal involvement in Jewish education
 4. helped Dad with his Bar Mitzvah a year after own Bat Mitzvah
 5. involved further as summer camp counselor

6. more involvement as teaching assistant, with studies and the Rabbi's award
 7. trip to Israel and what it meant
2. Personal qualities now recognized – as seen with use of phrases from both languages, enjoyment of diverse food, traits of perseverance and love of debating.
3. Studies in college will further develop knowledge of my heritage and career plans.
4. Conclusion:
 - a. Statement about being used to people's amusement on hearing full name and why they are confused about ethnic background.
 - b. Looking forward to meeting people of diverse backgrounds in college and, with them, delving into heritage and the beauty of religions and culture.
 - c. Will work to help others experience diversity with open minds and enthusiasm so culture and societies thrive.

Part 10: How to Use Sample Essays

Take a look at these [sample college essays](#) or a book of application essays and find sample essays that you like. Make an outline of one or two of them. Then, after you have outlined an essay by someone else, substitute your personal experience to make an outline of something similar that you could write. In this way, you will learn about the essay's strategy in a hands-on manner and be able to incorporate the patterns of thinking without thinking too hard. Your organization of experience will fall into place. You will also see how every finished essay has a moment at the end that makes the speaker feel he or she has looped back to the opening. Something comes full circle and announces that this is a satisfying moment with which to end the essay.

Reviewing How the Patterns of Thinking Help

Writing about her background, [the first student in our examples](#) chose to define herself as a student of languages and talk about what goes into those studies. The [second student](#) narrated a cause and effect story of losing her friendship and what happened in her as a consequence.

As you outline, you will come to see the shape of various essays, how the essays use particular patterns of thinking as strategies for keeping the information coherent and moving along to insight. Experiencing the shape of individual essays and applying the shapes to your own experience by making the outlines your own will help you learn the significance of your experience — the reason you are presenting this experience to the admissions committee (a deeper reason than just because you are required to write an essay — a reason from inside the essay itself). When you learn something new by viewing your experience through the lens of the essay's pattern of thinking, there is a lively quality to the writing that impresses the readers who are considering your application — you appear alive and not canned, someone who is invested in becoming a great person.

Something to know: The word essay comes from the French word meaning “to assay.” An essay is an inquiry into experience — a finding out what is true. It is something we read to find out how a particular person thinks and enrich our own experience vicariously. Outlining how others have done it allows you to find out the mechanism by which you are following their thinking and to make this mechanism something you can use in presenting your “assaying.” Sometimes finding out what is true through writing and allowing others to see you searching for the truth makes you feel vulnerable and shy about showing what you have written. A good

notion to hold onto is that people who show their vulnerability are also showing their strengths and are usually much admired and have others soon feeling close to them.

Part 11: Writing a Draft

Now that you have an outline to follow for presenting your own experience, set an oven timer or an alarm for 15 minutes. Set your fingers to the keyboard or your pen to the paper and write from your outline as far as you can get. When the timer goes off, shake out your hands, take a break of some kind for up to 15 minutes to clear your head, and then get back to writing from the outline for another 15 minutes. Keep at this until you have written from the beginning of your outline to the end of it. If you prefer to write from beginning to end rather in parts, that's okay, too. A useful aspect of the outline is the way it will keep you on track whether you write in one or more sessions.

If you get stuck, start describing something that has to do with the part of the essay where you are stuck. For instance, in one sample essay, a student describes losing his tooth at a Red Sox game. Perhaps he was writing and got stuck at the point of describing the game because he didn't know how much detail to give. Instead of writing a lot of detail, he became afraid it would throw him off track. But then he didn't know what to write.

In cases like these, start describing the event or place or activity that you have come to in detail. You can decide later what to leave out if anything. In one college application essay, the student wrote:

I ran down the aisle several rows and put my hands up as if I saw all the nearby fans doing. As the ball sailed towards the seats, I did not react fast enough and was not ready when it came at me. The ball struck me straight in the mouth and knocked out two of my teeth, lacerated my tongue, and put a hole in my lip. My friends quickly found one tooth and fans rushed me to the first-aid room where the doctor pushed that tooth back into the hole in my gums within minutes to be sure it would adhere to my bone. He checked my mouth, reported one tooth still missing and told my friends to return to our seats to find my other tooth so he could push it back in.

As a reader, I like being privy to the emergency. It has more impact on me than just hearing that his teeth were knocked out and he went to the first aid booth — showing us his friends helping is part of the experience of resiliency. Details tell the story. When in doubt put them in. When you get response, your readers will tell you whether they got overwhelmed or bored — and if they did you can easily trim.

Put the Document Away for At Least One Hour

Printing out the document and putting it away overnight is even better. Mailing it to yourself by snail or email (and printing the attachment) is also a way of putting some distance between you and the draft. When you come back to it, you want to see it with fresh eyes. Having someone read it with you even if they don't say a word and/or reading it aloud are also ways of being sure you get a new perspective. The writing goes into the world separate from you and it has to perform its magic with its readers without you there to fill in gaps or answer questions. There is something about letting it go into the world as a draft that helps you see what it is missing, what it needs to succeed by itself. You will realize there are details missing or sentences that don't say what you meant them to. Now is a good time to fix what you find.

Part 12: Getting Feedback

Get Responses from Trusted Readers or Listeners

When you have brought the draft as far as you can or as far as you feel like doing for this round, read it to someone who has heard it before, or better yet to someone new. Ask this person to give you response in these three steps:

1. What words and phrases jumped out and stayed with them
2. How they felt while reading the essay
3. What they are curious to know more about

They do not have to, and actually shouldn't, give you any reasons for their responses. The less they explain the better since it is your job to hear the problem areas and figure out your own way to fix them. The more you remain silent listening and taking notes on what they are saying, the better — in the end, your writing will not have you with it to explain itself, so you want to hear what the response is to the writing so far, not to what you have to add that is not on the page. After this response, you'll continue working on your essay, and the next time around, the response you get should show you that you have fixed areas that were not yet working.

You may want to select another two or three trusted listeners or readers. Taking notes from a variety of responses can assist you in finding the words that will help you keep your ultimate readers interested. You will start to see patterns concerning missing elements, and also see a variety of ways to fix problems for your readers — where to give them more information, where to clarify something in a sentence, where to put a clear referent in for a pronoun, and where to break long confusing sentences into two or more sentences, for instance.

In Step One, readers' memories make you realize that your writing, even in its early form, has made an impact, been listened to. There is no more powerful lesson about writing — what we say is what people hear. If we don't say things fully, they don't hear fully. Belt it out on the page! That they heard as much as they did is proof that you are worth listening to. This feeling gives you confidence and willingness to listen attentively to the Step Two and Step Three responses.

In Step Two, when readers tell you how your writing makes them feel, they have two categories of response. I call them Feelings A and Feelings B. Feelings A are those feelings you think the essay wants you to feel — excitement, pleasure, happiness that the writer made it, the sincerity of the writer, sometimes sadness, for instance. Everyone likes hearing and saying Feelings A — it is in keeping with the idea of being heard. Then there are feelings B: where the reader was kept from full satisfaction — feeling left out of knowing, disappointed not to have a description of something so they can see, hear, feel, taste, and touch it, confused. When they tell you their feelings as “I” statements, it is almost always fairly easy to see a way to put in the information readers need. Since we know what we have lived through, our minds don’t always feel the need to put everything out there on the page, but will when we learn others need the information we have omitted if they are to experience what we are talking about.

Lastly, your readers should tell you where they are curious to know more. They will probably pose many questions. You have to decide if what they want to know belongs in this essay or, if you fixed the essay according to the Feelings B responses, readers wouldn’t complain of digressions. A very common writing problem in early drafts is that the author writes his or her way to something important and then never shows or says what it is — i.e. if a writer claims a particular fight parents had affected the way he views education, but he doesn’t talk about the fight because he thinks it is too personal, he is going to leave his readers curious to know what the fight was. If someone claims that the turning point in her life was losing a friend to a car accident, but doesn’t say how old they were or how she heard about the loss or the ways she has missed that friend, readers will be curious to know more about her relationship to her friend.

Honoring the readers’ willingness to immerse themselves in your experience is half the battle of writing a good essay. This kind of honoring allows you to offer the tangible details of experience — what you heard, saw, smelled, tasted, and touched — because you know that others are interested. So often, especially when working against word and page limits, it is tempting to generalize and sum up to save words and often to sound more scholarly, more serious, and more important. Usually, this is a grave error — the admissions committee readers want to know you, and they can best learn about you by seeing you in your life.

What makes the details of the essay interesting is the way they collect meaning and become a way of expressing what you are learning from writing: that you are a skilled team player, a person who is able to communicate well with others, that you are interested in a social group made up of people from diverse backgrounds, that your family’s background has instilled important values, that making up your own mind is the most satisfying of experiences, or that you have made an impact on others in your community. Whatever it is, the details of your

specific experience are what allow the reader to gain insight along with you as you write about your topic. When your writing is alive with insight that seems fresh — wrought from the details of the experience as a consequence of writing about them — readers feel interested and moved.

So remember, when readers are curious to know more, it usually means the writer has generalized where specifics would have told the story, or the writer has stopped before the story ends, or the writer has left out a chunk in the middle. When you have told readers too much, they will report in Feelings B that they are overwhelmed or confused, and you will decide which details are the right ones to take out. Another thing to remember is that taking out is usually easier than finding examples and details to put in. So, when you draft, put a lot in. You'll have more to work with and so will your early responders.

Part 13: Reworking Your Draft

After You Get Feedback on Your First Draft...

Using the responses you got and took notes on, go back to the beginning of your essay and rework what you think needs reworking. Do the best you can. If something sounds awkward but it is the best you can do, leave it in for now. If something sounds silly to you but is just the information a trusted reader asked for, leave it in. If you can't think of the right detail exactly, think of something close that will do for now. Just keep fixing the draft — don't worry about word limits yet. Get a story on the page that compels readers to keep going so they can learn more about you, and to exit the essay feeling like they've been on a reflective journey with the speaker and know more about life and the speaker at the end of the essay. You don't have to take on weighty subjects for this to be true — we can learn a lot about someone and life from an essay about taking care of a sick cat or resolving to do better in a physics class or losing two front teeth.

Get More Response

You know the drill. Go back to your first trusted reader or readers or find new ones and read them this second draft. Get response in exactly the same three steps. You will figure out if your revisions worked or if you need to keep working on them. Most likely, you have done a lot of good work. but may find that some of what you have introduced hasn't done what you want it to yet.

Remain quiet as you hear the responses. Take notes to use when you sit down to rework your draft.

Rework Your Second Draft

After you read this one to trusted readers you should be pretty close to having the essay you want. But you might have exceeded the length, character or word limit. Using your outline should have helped you find a focus from the get-go so you didn't have to use space with too much set up and meandering around for your entrance into your topic. However, many of us write in "loose" sentences. We use more words than needed to convey information. Sentence tightening is a bit of an art, but you can get the hang of it.

Start by checking adverbs and adjectives — are the ones you used really necessary, or do words you have modified already contain the meaning you are emphasizing by using the modifier? For instance, many people write “very unique” when, if something is unique, it is one-of-a-kind. How much more one-of-a-kind can it be? Often the word unique is not needed either — the details show rather than tell.

In fact, the next thing you can do in tightening is look for sentences that retell what the images already showed and therefore the reader knows: “We came out of the ocean shivering with 30-degree water dripping off our skin. We were very cold.” It’s obvious, isn’t it? You may find you have done a lot of this kind of writing — the design part of your mind is working in images and the logical side wants to sum up what the images already said. Not necessary.

Next find out if you used a phrase when one word would have said the same thing — i.e. the phrase “in order to” can usually be replaced by the single word “to.”

Look for ways to use verbs instead of nouns: The phrase, “I decided on vanilla ice cream” uses fewer words than “I made the decision to have vanilla ice cream.”

Look for ways to make dependent clauses instead of using all independent clauses. In other words, the lines “My father became a dentist and he used his small motor dexterity to make model planes with me” can become “Using his small motor dexterity, my dentist father made model planes with me.” The second sentence represents a five-word savings. It doesn’t seem like much, but if you do this throughout the essay, the deleted words can add up.

Then you start seeing that some sentences merely repeat what the reader already knows just because it sounds good. Keep the sentence that comes first or the one you like the best and chop the other one. Here’s an example: “When Kelly and I came around the corner, our mouths opened in surprise. We were so surprised! We could hardly talk or even laugh. It was awesome.” How about stopping after the first sentence and getting on with the story? There is no need to build suspense and keep the reader, who wants to charge ahead, waiting. And there is no need to remind the reader that you know the whole story and the reader doesn’t yet.

Finally, you’ll see that some of the words you’ve used, thinking you had to connect events, aren’t necessary because the reader intuitively relates them: “I went into the kitchen and when I heard a loud noise in the living room, I quickly walked toward the kitchen door and into the

hallway that leads to the living room.” This can be: “When I heard a loud noise coming from the living room, I ran to see what had happened.”

Part 14: Edit and Polish

You must spell and grammar check, and if you are in doubt as to whether the software is correct in what it is suggesting, consult an English teacher or anyone who writes a lot for their work — tech writers, copyeditors, and freelance writers are good bets.

How's your punctuation and capitalization? If you don't know the rules, check with your English teacher. There are also easy-to-use books out there. Among my favorites are the *The Least You Need to Know About English* series, written for ESL students by Paige Wilson and Teresa Ferster Glazier. The books are expensive since they are textbooks, but the rules are expressed in language that is easy to understand and easy to remember, and a review wouldn't hurt as you prepare for college.

Now look at your margins, line spacing, and font. Make sure they conform to what the schools are asking for. Look at the way you have done paragraphing — if you haven't indented the beginning of paragraphs, you must make an extra space between paragraphs. If you have indented the first line of each paragraph, you do not put an extra space between the paragraphs.

Find a Picky Reader for Final Proofing

Even though you've gone over the essay with a fine-toothed comb, it's time to have someone's hawk eyes take a look. If they find polish editing to do, don't take offense. Learn why they are suggesting the changes they are suggesting. Feel lucky if they find typos or missing words and punctuation. But do remember to stick to your guns when you truly feel what you have presented works and there is no reason for change. It is usually a body sensation that lets you know — there's a feeling associated with realizing you know what you know, and there is a different one associated with thinking you thought you might have made a mistake, but didn't investigate it and now someone is confirming it. If you've worked the process up to this point, this final editorial eye will not be asking for major changes in the essay.

In fact, leaving this final polishing editorial help to the end of the process assists you in expressing yourself earlier as you outline, write, and rewrite using reader response. You fix the final essay and not all the drafts in between because this kind of editing can get in the way of creating the very best story you can tell.

Part 15: You're Done... Celebrate!

Well, you finished your college essay! And probably you are pleased with yourself and your parents are, too. You see yourself in more focus than you did before you wrote the essay. Writing is a growth experience, and learning that you learn more about yourself by writing is an important lesson. It's time to celebrate. Dinner out, a new piece of sports equipment, getting tickets to an event, inviting special guests over, preparing food you love, buying and reading a book just for fun. Come to associate the work of writing and revising with rewards. And let your parents celebrate with you — it takes many people to support the solitary writer in his or her experience, and they are all happy when writing succeeds.

If you really like your essay, think about sharing it with family and close friends who matter. Think about sending it to a magazine or newspaper that might publish it in a particular section after the deadline for applications. If you like writing, continue to write from your life experience through journaling or writing more essays. If you have a group of friends who all like their application essays, have a reading for your parents and relatives — the blend of voices and experience will make them proud, and will be a wonderful gift for all they've done hoping to get you healthy and skilled and strong to this time in your life when you are preparing to leave.

What You've Learned about Your Writing Process Will Help You in College

Everything you've learned in this process for writing the college application essay will help you in college writing, whether you are writing for Freshman Composition, other courses, doing research papers, or taking essay exams. Read the question or topic you are to write on. Brainstorm experiences (including what you have read and heard in lectures) concerning that topic, think about what attributes the topic is hoping to lead the writer to explore, and write an outline that incorporates those attributes into a story of some kind — an essay that utilizes one or more of the patterns of thinking we discussed.

Then use the Three-Step Response method as many times as needed. You can have someone send you responses in the three steps over email: one email might be for Velcro Words, a second for Feelings A and B, and a third for curiosity. Or cram the responses from each step into one email. Or use the phone. Or make new writing buddies you meet with in-person at school. You will be writing full, insightful papers, learning more about yourself and the world, and not suffering from frustration.

May your essays get you into the schools you desire to attend. Most importantly, may putting yourself on the page help you realize your depth, spirit, and love of learning.

Keep writing. It's not going to be so bad!

Conclusion

You've taken an important step towards creating a successful application by reading *Write Great College Application Essays and Stay Sane*.

Now it's time to move from general tips to personalized advice tailored just for you. Here's how it works:

1. [Explore our college admissions consulting & editing services](#) and find the option that best suits your needs.
2. You'll be paired with an admissions expert who will work with you 1-on-1 to help you discover your competitive advantage and use it to get accepted to your dream school.
3. Shoot us an email letting us know when you've been accepted. It makes our day!

Need help figuring out which service is best for you? [Click here for more guidance](#).

GET ACCEPTED!