



THE ESSAY WHISPERER: HOW TO WRITE A COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY



In your senior year of high school, the pressure is on to write your college application essays. Your mission: to present yourself in a way that is real, substantial, and authentic, and thereby boost your chances of getting accepted to the school of your choice. But the anticipation of writing your college application essays may be harder than actually writing them. In this guide, we will show you how to write a winning college essay in a proven, practical, and (almost!) stress-free method. Have no fear: Accepted is here!

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Introduction

If you're a high school senior, you already know all the reasons why writing your college application essays can be a daunting prospect:

- You have to talk about yourself and make a good impression on the group of faceless people who will be judging you and determining whether to accept you.
- You have to reflect on your experiences to show something important about yourself, but you may worry whether what *you* think is important 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 requires taking a "personal inventory" of experiences and lessons learned to make a point about your abilities and interests. How will you know which of your life experiences will be considered significant? What if you think something is a great idea, but it really isn't?

As you get started, you may want to solicit suggestions from your parents, teachers or other trusted adults, but then again, maybe their ideas and suggested wording wouldn't feel right. Maybe you don't want to feel the pressure of having to take their ideas.

You've got a lot riding on these essays. With your busy academic and extracurricular schedule, however, finding the time and emotional space to sit down and begin discovering what you want to say to college admissions committees may feel especially intimidating.

But enough with the potential problems and roadblocks. Here's the good news: This guide will show you how to get the job done. Whether you have three months, three weeks, or three days to complete the essay (and we'd vote for the three months, but some application decisions are made late, and inspiration sometimes needs a tight deadline), this process will help you not only write a quality personal statement, but even enjoy doing it. You'll also learn about yourself and grow as an individual — something that will help prepare you for college.

Ready for more good news? This guide will show you how to invite your parents or other adults to play a role that will benefit you, and that will not be overbearing or intrusive. You can help parents feel included in a meaningful way.

Part 1: An Action Plan for (Almost) Stress-Free College Essay Writing

In your senior year of high school, the pressure is on to write your college application essays.

Let's look at 7 steps to get you started:

1. **Get the essential information you need organized**-- With your list of target colleges in front of you, 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. Save or print out this information for each school.
2. **Start brainstorming** -- Focus on the essay questions that appeal to you most. Then let yourself free-associate with images, words, memories, and writing strategies based on these essay questions. Write whatever comes to mind, without thinking, censoring, or deliberating. This exercise is called "freewriting" and we will go into more detail in Part 4. You may be surprised by what comes up and how useful your ideas will be. If you are still stuck, you can invite parents or other trusted adults to brainstorm with you.
3. **Put that writing away**-- Let your ideas marinate for a few days. You will have started an important creative process in your mind.
4. **Exercise**-- You probably already know that exercise isn't just great for your body, but also stimulates intellectual creativity. Exercising clears your mind and opens the door for original and new ideas for your essays. Keep a pad and pencil or pen by your bed so that you can jot ideas down if they come to you in a dream or upon waking, before your mind has taken on the day and you lose the idea.
5. **Read your freewrite aloud**-- When you return to these notes, listen to how they sound, and let your parents listen to them also. (If the material or situation is too sensitive for your parents to hear at this time, think of another adult who will listen in a non-judgmental manner. Perhaps one of your teachers would be a good choice, or perhaps your parents might suggest a colleague, relative, or friend.)
6. **Identify key ideas**-- How did your freewriting thoughts resonate with you, and with your trusted listener? Based on having had some distance from the ideas and revisiting them with fresh eyes, identify where your energy, honesty, convictions, and interests lie. You may already be homing in on your essay theme.

7. ***Let the writing begin!*** Start your draft using the advice in this guide as your roadmap.

Part 2: How To Involve Parents in a Helpful Way

Your parents love you and only want the best for you, however, their efforts to help you may go awry. For example, they might worry that you aren't planting your bottom in the chair and getting cracking on that essay early enough. They may also worry that you might not come across in the way that they want you to, wondering if you might sound too modest, too revealing, too simple, or perhaps not serious enough. All those worries will filter down and add stress to you both.

There are other common scenarios when parents involve themselves in the college essay writing challenge:

- They focus on the competitive nature of college admissions so much that they can be quick to judge your writing, and fail to nourish the spark of individuality that is in early drafts.
- Focusing on the looming deadlines, they may stress you out by telling you that you are falling behind schedule in completing the applications, but when they start nagging, you stop listening.
- They may pressure you (even if subtly) to write what they think is best.
- They think they are better writers than you are--which may be true--and correct your drafts in a way that makes you sound unnaturally adult, or makes your essay too general. These sorts of "interventions" can alienate you and make you feel your true life experience is being falsified.
- Alternately, parents really may not understand the writing process themselves. Feeling incompetent as writers, they worry, worry, worry about how you will ever write the essay. When is the last time you responded enthusiastically to worry? Or nagging? Or corruption of your story? Right--never.

As if these potential minefields aren't enough, you may also resist your parents' help for your own reasons:

- You understand your experiences differently than your parents do.
- You may worry that you will put your thoughts and reflections on the page in a way that may not please them or meet their expectations.

- You may get the feeling that your parents don't really know you as well as they think they do. Therefore, having parents as a first audience can short circuit your own way of thinking things through.
- You and your parents may not agree on which schools you should apply to.

The essay whisperer is here to help!

Now that we've laid out so many potential areas of conflict, we're ready with a plan of action to avoid them as much as possible. Here are steps to plan for a smooth and logical plan of action that preserves family harmony, or at least avoids World War III:

- ***Have a family meeting***—The purpose here is for both you and your parents to honestly state each one's needs, fears, and understanding of this process. If you and your parents don't agree on the appropriateness of some of the colleges chosen, agree to hear one another's lists of pros and cons for each choice. *It is important that everyone feels heard.* Be careful not to shut your parents out, but to hear them respectfully.
- ***Be honest with your parents about what kind of help you need most from them***—They will want to be included and know that you value their insights. But just as importantly, let them know what you are confident you can manage on your own. If you and your parents decide that it is better that someone not as intimately connected with the family help you with ideas or editing suggestions, brainstorm names of those who might offer help, such as relatives and neighbors who write well or are easy to talk with, books, or professional college admissions counselors like those at Accepted.
- ***Show your parents your college application deadline calendar with each school's deadline requirements***—This is especially useful if you or your parents are worried about getting the application and writing tasks done on time given your myriad activities. Some schools will be higher priority for you than others, but consider starting the application for the less important schools first, just to get your feet wet. Of course, if your top-choice schools have the earliest deadlines, move on those as Priority #1. Offer to update your parents on your progress weekly, but not more often than that. Agree together that parents bugging kids to finish the essay is not a good idea, and that kids not communicating their progress to their parents is also not a good idea. Make sure your calendar has scheduled plenty of writing time and time for editing each essay at least three or four times. This is normal.
- ***Express appreciation for your parents' support***—They may well be paying for your college education and of course want to see you succeed. They will be reassured that you are mature enough to handle this task if you are also mature enough to validate and

acknowledge what they have always done for you, and what they are doing now. Listen to their suggestions, and don't automatically pooh-pooh any of their ideas.

- ***Plan to celebrate!***– Mark your calendars for when you will have submitted your last application, and choose some way to CELEBRATE! It's a great thing to look forward to.

When should you consider going to your parents for help with your essay themes or content? A good rule of thumb is that even after you have given a lot of thought to the various essay options and you are still uncertain, or you know what question appeals to you most, but are not sure which among your experiences will make the best case for it, that is the time to sit down with your parents or the friends and other adults you have chosen to help you.

Tell them why you have chosen these essay topics and how they speak to you. Ask them what comes to mind about you for each of your chosen topics and write down their ideas. Re-read your initial brainstorming notes, and see what starts to click.

Part 3: How Writing Your Essays Will Help You Grow as a Person

Did you know that the word “essay” comes from the French word meaning “to assay?” An essay is an inquiry into experience — a finding out what is true. We read personal essays to find out how the writer thinks. We read them hoping to enjoy the writer’s skill with language, insights, knowledge, life experience, and perhaps sense of humor also. Through reading about another person’s life, we enrich our own experience vicariously.

While many people wish they didn’t have to “assay” into their thoughts and reflections to write a personal essay, many applicants end up grateful for the experience. In modern life we have so little time when we aren’t connected to our phones, social media, messaging, Whatsapp-ing. We don’t have much time to simply sit, think, and reflect. It may feel weird or uncomfortable at first, but taking the time for this reflection helps us get to know ourselves. Shouldn’t we know who we are a bit better than we do?

Thinking about your college essays, taking the time to brainstorm ideas for them and discuss them with a few trusted adults who know you and your abilities, is a wonderful opportunity. You’ll not only get to know yourself better, but you’ll gain an appreciation for the budding adult you are becoming. You’ll realize what you have experienced and what you are made of. Sometimes, allowing others to see you searching for the truth can make you feel vulnerable. You may shy away from it. But you know what? People who show their vulnerability are also showing their strengths. In fact, people who can be revealing (in an appropriate way) are usually much admired, and seem more relatable to other people.

The poet Robert Frost said, “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 you have used their question for honest self-reflection about your life events, they will feel moved, interested, and excited. These are the qualities in an essay that make you real as a human being, beyond grades, test scores, and other statistics.

The best essays will emerge when you are writing about experiences and ideas that deeply interest you. Essays that are the product of “just going through the motions” will lack vitality.

When you approach essay writing as an opportunity for greater self-knowledge, you won’t be sorry. You’ll be that much better prepared for the exciting and transformative years ahead in college.

Part 4: Identify Each School's Values

Thinking about what attributes are most important to the schools according to their promotional material will help you devise a writing plan that works.

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 your target schools. After you read the questions, thoroughly read the schools' promotional and catalog material. Find the wording where the school states what it values in their applicants and class members. For each school, write a list of attributes you cull from their materials: talented, diverse backgrounds, self-starters, and community minded. For instance, Stanford University's motto: "The wind of freedom blows," is an invitation to free and open inquiry in teaching and research. Indeed, as of January 2021, Stanford has 625 organized student groups, 18 institutes, 20 libraries, and a \$1.6 billion research budget. On its homepage Stanford writes under "Academics," "Preparing students to make meaningful contributions to society as engaged citizens and leaders in a complex world" In making a list of attributes that go along with these stated qualities, you might write down the following: being multi-talented, displaying high performance, contributing to your community, school, team or other organization." and thriving in a place where your own talents would flourish while working with others of similar strong ability. In exploring the Stanford site, you will see the following topics:

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

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, let's look at how Lidia, (a fictional applicant) who is a star of her high school girls' soccer team, might use her skills on the team to draw a profile of herself as someone who fits the school's student body.

Lidia can write about the time she influenced her teammates' strategies and led the team to a victory in State Championships, a victory that happened because she successfully learned to communicate well with a student from an ethnic background that deals with competition and criticism very differently than she had been taught. Her compelling essay centers on learning how to communicate effectively with a teammate. Through this example, Lidia is demonstrating not only her soccer skill and the discipline involved to be part of a winning team, but also team-building, attempting to lead rather than accept the status quo. She also demonstrates openness to people unlike her and mature communication skills, thereby ensuring the team worked smoothly together toward common goals.

After you have made a list of the attributes each school seems to value, brainstorm the stories you can tell about yourself that illustrate these attributes. Write down various events, experiences, challenges, and successes that all relate to those attributes, and then prioritize your writing tasks.

Even if some of the schools you choose are not using the common application, you can often find similarities among various application essay questions. Certainly you can use some of the same core experiences for many of those essays, though you will need to tailor or focus experiences a bit differently to highlight how you reflect the values that each school looks for in its students.

Part 5: Brainstorm Ideas

Let's review where we are in this process.

1. You know [what questions you'll be answering](#).
2. You have your calendar showing when the applications are due and your target dates for completing the writing, editing, and having a trusted adult review your essays.
3. You've begun brainstorming about content for your essays and the special qualities, abilities, interests, and goals that you can highlight in them.
4. You are clear about the various values that each school emphasizes in its promotional materials, as well as through its extracurricular clubs and activities.

Try as much as you can to make some measurable progress each week with your applications. The process will probably take longer than you anticipate, unexpected things will come up to delay your efforts, and the last thing you want is the added stress of the clock ticking toward the deadline and little to no progress on your essays. We will talk about editing later on, but keep in mind that it is entirely normal for drafts to require several edits--anywhere from three to six or more edits of your drafts are all typical, and each edit takes time. Aim to submit a week before the actual deadline. Don't assume that you'll be able to upload at the last minute when possibly thousands of other applicants are trying to do the same thing! A popular site could get swamped very close to the deadline and possibly crash.

Let's get back to brainstorming. Here's how to start:

Focus on one question at a time, and when you start the next question, do another freewriting exercise, jotting down whatever ideas come to you for each topic. Don't judge your ideas as good or bad. Just keep free-associating and writing ideas down.

Now, here are two options for a more detailed brainstorming session:

One way is linear — just make a list.

The other way is circular — clustering. In this method, you mine your experiences by writing the topic of the question in the middle of a page and circling 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 are energized to start a new cluster on a second page because you are curious to find out more about what you are remembering and thinking. 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.

Using this approach, you might start your cluster based on choosing to answer this common application essay question: *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 take to identify a solution.*

Circle this question and then connect an experience you've had and how it fits this question. Let's look at a hypothetical with an applicant named Sam, who tutored underprivileged kids in math and reading. Sam can immediately start "bubbling" related experiences:

1. The first day as a tutor and how nervous he was.
2. Discovering that one of the students was painfully shy and even had a hard time making eye contact with him.
3. Wondering how he could get the child to feel more trusting and open.
4. Talking to the tutoring center director for her suggestions on bringing the child out.
5. Doing some reading on his own time about creating trust with young, shy children.
6. Having a breakthrough moment and getting his first smile from the child, followed by real progress in math and reading.
7. Lessons learned from this experience.

Notice how each of these circled or "bubbled" memories connects to the question, while showing how Sam tackled this problem. This was partly an intellectual challenge but more an interpersonal and psychological challenge, one where he gained important insights.

Let's look at another example, this time from our soccer player, Lidia. Her experience in learning about cross-cultural communication and understanding, as well as leadership, encouraged her to answer this question from the common application: *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? Lidia can immediately start bubbling the following memories:

1. Observing early in the soccer season how personality conflicts among team members start to hurt their game.
2. Her attempts to encourage better cooperation and having them backfire when a girl from a different cultural background only dug in her heels further, making the team's problems worse.
3. Feeling personally frustrated that the team might flame out due to interpersonal tensions--soccer is very important to Lidia.
4. Discussing the problem with a teacher at school who is from the same culture as the girl whose sense of competition seems to have inflamed conflict, and gaining insights into that culture and suggestions on a new way to approach her.
5. Finding and reading a book about dealing with difficult personalities, and gaining some important insights about listening with compassion in order to win cooperation.
6. Using her new insights, testing some new approaches with the team and seeing results.
7. Connecting these experiences and lessons learned and seeing how Lidia will benefit from them in college classes, extracurricular activities, and other involvements.

From initial strategy through final editing, our experienced advisors can help you create each element of your college applications. Work one-on-one with your personal coach, submit an application you're proud of, and get ACCEPTED to the college or university that will help you achieve your dreams! [Check out our application services for more information.](#)

Part 6: Finding Your Essay Theme or Topic

Your topic doesn't have to be the most earth shattering or amazing experience, but it has to be about something that matters to you. Something that engages you. Something you are interested in describing, exploring a bit further than you have so far and learning from as you write. It should be an experience that you describe with specifics, colorful anecdotes, and emotional truth.

Let's look at an example by a candidate we'll call Anna, who aspires to become a fashion editor for a national magazine. Anna 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 fundraising, long-distance bicycle ride to benefit medical research on a disease that took the life of a local boy. But what was the link between these two activities?

Anna considered two outcomes: One was that her classmates responded enthusiastically to her redesign ideas for the yearbook and turned out for the yearbook club in record numbers. Second, more than 1,000 people in her town supported the bike riders raising money for research. After some thought, Anna realized that both outcomes had something in common: her ability to mobilize numbers of people and have an impact. This realization helped her think about fashion magazine editing as a way to reach even greater numbers of people and for goals that are profoundly meaningful to Anna -- foster green manufacturing, develop industries in impoverished areas, and strengthen global child labor laws.

As she made these connections, Anna was able to view her high school experiences as training for joining important clubs in college and for obtaining the internships that would help her connect with the publishing and fashion industry, and to make a difference in the world by using her talents and interests. As a consequence of writing her essay, Anna saw herself as directed, purposeful, and ready for new challenges.

Another candidate, Madison, really enjoyed the work she was doing part-time at an early childhood education center. Although she didn't want to become a teacher, Madison was learning much about education from the teacher for whom she was working as an aid. She was also learning a great deal directly from watching how the children learned. While she didn't yet have a vision for her career, Madison was able to harness this experience and the insights she gained about learning and discuss how she would approach her own higher education — with joy and appreciation, by helping peers, and by extending learning from one area into others. She drew a compelling portrait of herself as a student who was excited to learn and who would contribute to the education of those around her.

A third candidate, Kayla, 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 Kayla had made to India, as her father had always gone alone while she was growing up. Although Kayla attended a Jewish high school and had never actively identified with her Indian heritage, now that she'd met her father's family, including many cousins, she could see how many of her traits had come from her father's upbringing, and how they merged very nicely with the traits she'd inherited from her mother's family and traditions. Kayla was excited to see this blend for the first time, and eager to bring what she was learning about her background to college. While she still planned to major in Jewish studies, she now planned to also join activities in East Asian clubs and possibly some East Asian elective courses. We will get to look at Kayla's essay in a later chapter.

One more candidate, Jasmine, was the middle of three sisters. Her older sister suffered from manic-depression, and it fell to Jasmine to tell her parents that her sister was cutting herself, despite psychiatric help. When her sister was hospitalized, her parents spent much time visiting her, leaving Jasmine in charge of her little sister, tending to house chores, doing her homework and studying for tests, all while she was extremely worried about her sister and feeling a little guilty that she had had to be the one to inform her parents. As she freewrote about these experiences, Jasmine began to realize just how much she had learned about her own need for close friends and mentors during this time, a time when she felt like hiding the family truth. This essay theme was a moving testimonial to the way peers, teachers, and bosses contribute to helping individuals maintain a life of their own when family problems threaten to overwhelm them.

Writing down what comes to mind through brainstorming and freewriting will lead you on a path to discovery of your essay theme or topic. You'll learn more 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 7: What You Can Learn from Reading Sample Essays

Successful essays don't only convey feeling; they have both logic and structure.

There are many places to find sample essays, [including Accepted's popular sample essays](#). You will find others in the many books published for those applying to college. There is much you can learn from reading sample essays, but remember that writing your authentic story in your authentic voice is what matters most. You want to read other essays only to see how they were structured and to understand what made them successful. Then, combined with your own ideas that you've been developing, you'll be ready to craft your own.

When reading other essays, take note of what you like about them-- the honesty, simplicity, sense of humor, cleverness, innovative nature, poignancy, relatability. Ask yourself how did the writer create that tone or feeling? What specific details help to set the scene? What did the writer reveal that let you understand and care about him or her? What about the essay convinces you that the writer will be an asset to the class? What can you learn about the way the essay was written and apply it in a way that is relevant to you and your story?

Good Writing Has Shape

Successful essays don't only convey feeling; they have both logic and a logical structure. Most solid essays usually rely on one or more of the following elements. You only need a few, but let's look at what these elements are so you can identify which ones will be most useful for you. Here they are:

1. **Description** tells us about someone, something, or some event and makes it so real that we feel we are there. There is [a lot of showing and not as much telling](#). You show people, feelings, and things by using words that appeal to the five senses. If you want me to know your grandfather was a kind perfectionist, quote something that he said, as well as his expression and tone of voice when he said it. Show him doing a characteristic task, such as maintaining a backyard garden. Did he shrug his shoulders a lot? Smoke a pipe? Go to the horse races? Wear a favorite aftershave that was his signature scent? Play the guitar? Bring your grandfather to life for the reader by sprinkling in these lively details when you show him doing or saying something. Let the reader know what you see, hear, touch, taste, and smell if appropriate, for instance, his signature aftershave, or the freshly turned earth in the backyard garden that he maintained as a hobby.

2. **Narration** takes the reader through an event through time. For example, if you lost something important, such as a friendship or a competition you were passionate about winning, narrate that story, emphasizing why it was important to you. Use the descriptive details mentioned above, while also conveying to the reader an insight you arrived at as a result of this loss.
3. **Compare and contrast** allows you to highlight the stark difference between how things are versus how you would like them to be. You might compare yourself to someone you admire today, or a historical or literary character, and discuss how college will facilitate becoming the person you want to be in the world. You can also highlight a situation in your life or society that bothers you now, and contrast it with how you hope it might one day become, with you aspiring to make that difference for the good.
4. **How-to** explanations allow you to share knowledge about how something is done or made. Offering specific steps, this element in an essay can be useful for talking about how you made a meaningful achievement, or how you'll approach your college years in a strategic way.
5. **Cause and effect** is a cousin to "compare and contrast," because it shows the relationship between how you have evolved in your understanding of certain situations, events, or experiences, and how these situations and their results have shaped your life and outlook.
6. **Definition** comes in handy when discussing a defining role you have in life and how it has influenced you. It could be coping with a chronic condition, your experience as an immigrant, a minority, being the sibling of a special-needs individual, or having won a degree of fame because of an achievement.
7. **Argument and persuasion** are essential elements when you are stating a case or taking on an issue that concerns you. In a persuasive essay like this, you cannot rely solely on your own personal experiences to support your belief; you'll need real evidence, data and research from a reputable source for your argument to be persuasive and to convince others of its importance.

You probably already use these elements of thinking and communicating every day, whether in conversations with friends, classroom discussions, writing and research assignments, and test taking. Just becoming aware of these strategies will expand the number of tools in your tool box when you are deciding on your writing topic and approach.

Now look at the sample essays you have read once more. How many of these approaches and elements can you find? Jot them down. What was it about each element that helped the writer make their experiences come alive on the page?

Want to make sure that your college application essays present you at your best? [Work with an experienced admissions consultant!](#)

Part 8: How Outlines Help You

Keep your eye on the prize by following a planned structure

Making an outline helps you stay focused on the details of your story and its most vital elements. It also keeps you mindful of the architecture of your story: What comes first? What needs to follow? Ironically, it is harder to write a good short essay than it is to write a good long one. Every sentence counts. In fact, every word counts! Essays that are summaries of your experiences or are too general will be utterly forgettable. No matter how short or long, your essay must contain specific or colorful details, convey relatable feelings and goals, and offer specific evidence about how you will add value to the class and become a credit to the school. That's why following an outline will help you make every word count.

While your outline doesn't have to be formal, you should list what your opening will be about, how you will build on that opening to make your argument or describe a transformative life situation, and then move to demonstrate self-revelation and greater self-knowledge, which then leads to the conclusion.

Still unsure how to start? Take a look at an essay you have read and liked. Read the essay closely and outline its beginning, middle, and end. This will help you easily recognize its structure, and make you more comfortable with the level of detail and specificity you should aim for in your own essay.

Let's look at some real essays from high school students who have given their permission to reprint their work and then look at how they were outlined. This first essay answered a college-specific question about how the applicant had used his education 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.

This outline suggests how this essay was organized:

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

Also, notice that the writer used the elements of narration, how-to, and argument and persuasion to state her case. Discussing all the courses and other efforts she has made to excel in Spanish is plenty of evidence that she is sincere and committed to her goal.

This next essay was written for the topic of your choice question from the common application. We had been introduced to this writer, Kayla, earlier in this guide, and we will see how she set out to explore the ethnic backgrounds she was born into and tie it in with her goal of studying Jewish studies in college. Kayla had already chosen a particular university as her first choice based on the strength of its program in this major. Let's see how she weaves these narrative threads together, demonstrating the cause and effect of her parents and their backgrounds with how they have shaped who she is and who she wants to be. Her dramatic opening ground the essay in a moment of conflict:

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 is 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.

If you weren't ready to make your outline before, we hope that with these examples you feel ready to take on the task now!

Part 9: Write Your Draft as if You Are Talking to a Friend

When you think of your essay as a conversation on the page, it will make your job easier and more successful

There--we've just given you one of the best-kept secrets in the world of writing advice. Hold on to it tightly and don't forget it. The reason why this is such great advice is that so often, even though you've done the thinking, the brainstorming, maybe even the "clustering" and "circling" of interconnected ideas, you might still--still!--feel a bit intimidated by this process. There is a lot on the line.

But if you freeze up even a little, your writing will show it. It will be stilted, formal, and yes, cold! Instead, write the essay exactly as if you are sitting across from a friend and telling him or her that same story. Think of it as a conversation on a page. Almost immediately, you will relax, and what flows from your pen or keyboard will be more natural, honest, and with more vibrant details than if you considered the writing process as THE WRITING PROCESS, something much more formal and forbidding. Yes, the essay is very important. But sounding self-aware and natural is crucial.

In fact, when you think of "talking" your draft instead of "writing" your draft, you will almost certainly be ahead of the game.

So now, with this trade secret in your pocket, it's time to take out your outline and start writing. Allocate a reasonable amount for each writing session--an hour would be ideal. Put your phone away to avoid distractions!

Even if you are really relaxed, you probably won't produce a masterpiece with the first draft. They're not called *rough drafts* for nothing! With each revision, you will sand down those rough spots, eventually earning the satisfaction of having a polished, smooth essay with a flowing, logical narrative, enlivened by memorable, meaningful, and perhaps even elegant language. Now, don't overthink the process. Just look at your outline and start writing your opening paragraphs.

If you need to get up after twenty minutes or a half hour to stretch or something else, go ahead, but be disciplined. Don't check your phone during the break, and need be, park it with a roommate or someone else with instructions not to give it to you until a prearranged time. (I know; it's hard.) Get back to writing until you have written for one hour and get as far as you can in the story.

Don't stay stuck in the same first few paragraphs, rewriting and rewriting them. Move on to the next section of the essay. While you are writing, don't be surprised if entirely new ideas come to mind. You might think of a different anecdote or story from your life that you like better and that still fits the criteria for telling the story you are telling. Writing is not just a structured process but also an organic one. When you need to go with the flow, go for it.

If you still have energy to keep going after one hour, keep going. The important thing is to get one draft, or at least a good chunk of the draft, on paper. Take pride in having started, because starting is usually the hardest step of all.

Now, some people still freeze up a little at the idea of writing the introduction. This is natural--the hardest part is starting, right? If this happens to you, don't sweat it. Skip the opening for now and start in the middle. If you feel more confident putting the "meat on the bones" before you write your introduction, go ahead. You will gain a sense of satisfaction for getting this down. You do not have to write it all in order. In the revising and editing process you will put the pieces where they belong.

Still, keep the outline front and center each time you are working on the essay. It is your roadmap to tell your story, and you have chosen good examples to illustrate your points. Well, but what if you get stuck further into the essay? Don't worry--we have a solution for that, too.

Let's look at an example of an essay where a student describes losing his tooth at a Red Sox game. That story was important to the essay, but he didn't know how much detail to give, either about the game, or about losing his tooth. He felt stuck and couldn't move on. In this case, just to keep the story juices flowing, he started describing other aspects of the game. Here's what he 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.

Don't you feel like you're watching this scene up close? The poor guy! Showing what happened has much more impact than just reading that his teeth were knocked out and he went to the first aid booth. Seeing his friends help out is part of the experience of resiliency. Details make the story captivating. When in doubt, include them. If you're going over your word limit or your "beta readers" tell you it's too much, you can go back and trim.

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's 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.

It's been said that often, people don't remember exactly what you told them, but they will always remember how you made them feel. So, while you are writing an essay with a serious intent and which must have substantial and compelling content, you want your readers to finish your essay feeling that they have a good sense of who you are as a person, what's important to you, what has influenced you so far in your life, and something about your vision for the future.

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. This is always a mistake. The admissions committee readers want to know you, and they can best learn about you by seeing you in your life.

The details in your essay will collect meaning, adding to the foundation of your story. The goal is to show the decision-makers at your colleges of choice are that you any one of the following: a skilled team player, a person who can communicate well with others, that you are interested in getting to know people from diverse backgrounds, that you have imbibed important values from your family's background, that making up your own mind is the most satisfying of experiences, or that you have made an impact on others in your community. Most of all, you want to convince them based on your thoughtful essay that you are a person who is mature enough to engage in self-reflection. When your writing is alive with fresh insights, 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 feel overwhelmed or confused, and you will need to 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.

Let Your Draft Rest

Done with your writing session? Great! Print it out and put it aside till your next scheduled writing session. Don't skip the step of printing it out. Reading something on a printed page is a different experience than reading on a screen. You are almost certain to see it a bit differently, to find new things you'd like to fix or change. Also, seeing it printed out will give you a feeling of momentum. When you come back to it in a day or two, you will bring a fresh perspective to it. Don't show it to anyone else unless you feel you need some encouragement or advice on going forward. If you're pleased with your progress, wait to show a more polished draft to your readers. Their perspective will be important. Your writing goes into the world separate from you and it must perform its magic without you there to fill in gaps or answer questions.

Now that you have given the draft a rest, you will see better what is missing, what can be stronger, tighter, clearer, or more convincing. You will realize there are details missing or sentences that don't say what you meant them to. In your next writing session, you'll start rewriting and editing where needed.

Part 10: Get Feedback from Trusted Readers

When you have brought the draft as far as you can, show it to a few carefully chosen, trusted audience members. Ask these readers to keep the following questions in mind as they read it and to offer you their feedback on these questions afterward:

1. What words and phrases jumped out and stayed with them?
2. How did the essay make them feel?
3. What else are they curious to know about you based on the essay?
4. Does the essay feel cohesive and compelling?

Remember that what people enjoy reading is subjective; not everyone will have the same response to your essay.

Your goal is to keep your ultimate audience -- the admissions committee members-- interested in your essay, so pay attention to any patterns you see and hear from your beta readers. If more than one person is flagging the same problem, or conversely, telling you what they especially like, you know what you have to fix and what you should be proud of and try to do more of. You'll know where you need to add details or context, which sentences may be confusing and need to be clarified, where to put a clear referent in for a pronoun, and where to break overly long sentences into two or more sentences. Since you know your life story, you can easily assume the reader will also know your backstory, but they don't. Therefore, don't skimp on including enough details to make your story clear. Even if you are still overlong on the essay, get everything down on paper that you feel is important. Cutting comes later.

We hope that even when your trusted readers raise problems or issues with your essay that they feel need attention, that they do so in a way that is both constructive and supportive. You have worked hard on these essays, and you want your efforts to be rewarded by cheers. But try not to take any of the essay criticism personally. It surely will not be meant that way. The suggestions are only meant to help you show yourself to the admissions committee in the best possible light. And it will be important going into your adult life to be willing, even grateful, for wise advice kindly meant.

Part 11: Edit and Polish

Once you have clarified, corrected, and edited your essay according to your beta readers' suggestions, you still have work to do. For one thing, the essay may be too long, possibly by several hundred words. Where do you cut?

Start by checking adverbs and adjectives — have you gone overboard with them? 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 — not only is it a completely overused word, but let your details show rather than tell.

You also may have more details than necessary: “We came out of the ocean shivering with 30-degree water dripping off our skin. We were very cold.” Cut the second sentence; the reader will know you were cold. Many common phrases waste words. For example, the phrase “in order to” can usually be replaced by the single word “to.”

Favor verbs over nouns: “I decided on vanilla ice cream” uses fewer words than “I made the decision to have vanilla ice cream.” This change also creates the active voice rather than passive voice. The more active voice you have, the fewer words you need.

And speaking of active voice, root out as many forms of the verb “to be” as possible. These include the words “is,” “are,” and “was.” For example, “She is a skillful teacher” could be shortened to “She teaches skillfully.” “I was the one who made the decision” could simply be “I decided.” “He was able to fix. . .” could be streamlined to “He fixed.” These “fixes” throughout your essay will perform major trimming.

Look for ways to make dependent clauses instead of using all independent clauses: The lines “My father became a dentist and he used his fine motor dexterity to make model planes with me” can be reworked to, “Using his fine motor dexterity, my dentist father made model planes with me.” The second sentence saves five words. It doesn't seem like much, but if you do this throughout the essay, the deleted words can add up.

Do some sentences repeat what the reader already knows? Here's an example: “When Kelly and I came around the corner, our mouths opened in surprise. We could hardly talk or even laugh. It was awesome.” Much better to stop after the first sentence and get on with the story. Your reader has many other essays to read; don't keep him or her waiting. Finally, look for ways to simplify your narrative and edit out unnecessary explanations. For example: “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.”

You also need to check spelling, grammar and punctuation, but don't rely on spell-check alone. We all know the pitfalls there! A program such as Grammarly works very well for shorter documents, but it may flag many things that aren't of concern to you, such as the program's preference for the Oxford comma or other style preferences that are not specifically right or wrong. It's certainly a good idea to have a skilled writer or a professional editor review your essay, not only for overall readability, strong connections, and correct grammar, syntax, spelling and punctuation, but also to flag any potential major flubs. In the process of reworking the same essay over and over again, it is easy to start missing errors that a fresh pair of eyes will catch right away. Now look at your margins, line spacing, and font. Make sure they conform to what the schools are asking for.

You're Done... Celebrate!

Woo-hoo! You did it! Great job! We hope that this has helped you in this process, and provided some valuable lessons that you will take with you into your future writing assignments. Writing can be a growth experience, and ideally, you now see yourself in sharper focus than before you began this process.

Perhaps you've read this action plan before you've started writing your essays and still would like to benefit from professional guidance. Our consultants at Accepted.com are here to help. We have decades of experience helping applicants not only choose the schools best suited to them, but can help you map out a winning strategy for writing your personal essays as "personal bests." You can read more about our services here:

Now it's time to celebrate. Dinner out, a new piece of sports equipment, getting tickets to an event, inviting special guests over, whatever it is you choose, you deserve a reward for the hard work invested. And let your parents celebrate with you — it takes many people to support the solitary writer in the writing experience; they are all happy when the writing succeeds.

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!

Conclusion

You've taken an important step towards creating a successful application by reading *The Essay Whisperer: How to Write a College Application Essay*.

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!

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