

How to Write a College Essay Step-by-Step: The Ultimate Guide

Your college applicant essays should convey your values, the impact you have made on your school, family or community and how you think.

College admissions officers are looking for three things in your essay:

1. Who is this person?
2. Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?
3. Can this person write?

STEP ONE: WARM UP EXERCISES

This lesson covers four of our favorite ways to kick off a great first draft.

We like to call this “vulnerability training” versus “warm-up exercises,” which is intended to prime you to “go deep” so you can write an amazing essay.

Wait, why are we asking you to get vulnerable?

1. Vulnerability is one (of four) qualities of an excellent personal statement (in fact, it’s the “personal” part). The other three qualities will come up as we go...
2. Vulnerability is a great life-skill to learn, and
3. It’s one you can get better at as you practice.

Option #1: “If you really knew me...”

Begin by saying the phrase “If you really knew me...” and share something personal with yourself (by writing in your journal). Share something you’ve never told anyone. Go for it! Surprise yourself.

Here are some “If you really knew me...” examples:

- You’d know I’ve read over 150 books in the last 2 years on Spirituality, specifically on first hand accounts of NDE’s (Near Death Experiences).
- You’d know I try to walk barefoot as much as possible. Plus, I sleep with a “grounding mat” that supposedly stimulates the health benefits of barefoot walking and earth connection in your body.
- You’d know that I wake up at 5:30AM everyday because I love the stillness of the morning.
- You’d know I secretly wonder if I’m an alien sometimes.
- You’d know I’m secretly terrified of heights, but I’ll cliff dive anyway because the rush is stronger than my fear.

- You'd know I secretly love my best friends because of their so called "weaknesses" or "defects of character." Maybe it makes me feel better to know everyone is imperfect. However, I think it's because it's their imperfections that make them so darn loveable.

Now, you try!

Option #2: "I love..."

Set a timer for one minute and finish the phrase "I love..." out loud with something that you love. Do this repeatedly until the buzzer beeps. Try and list as many as you can. This association game will get your creativity flowing. You'll notice that you'll start saying things you didn't know you love!

My examples of "I love..."

- Ocean
- The way water feels on my face when I go under a wave
- Being clean
- Cold water that wakes up my nervous system
- Early mornings
- Silence
- Birds chirping in the morning
- My mantra music
- People singing in groups whether in prayer, song, ceremony, church or at an amazing concert
- Intimate gatherings
- A good glass of red wine
- Intimate dinner parties on patios in nature
- The pleasure of my best friends' company
- Exploring nature
- Being barefoot
- Hanging out in hot springs
- Rubbing mud on my face
- Swimming in rivers
- Facilitating retreats for women
- Connecting to my desire to change the world!
- Experiencing my continuous growth!
- Seeing the progress all of the women (and men) in my life have made in such a short time

- Teaching and watching my students learn and progress
- My connection to my work, my friends and my fun
- Knowing my value and appreciating it

Two rules are:

1. Don't think ahead
2. If you run out of ideas, keep going stream-of-consciousness style.

Option #3: Gratitude check-in

Want to get to know yourself even better? Gratitude helps us identify what we value most. Take turns with a partner sharing something you're grateful for. Get as specific and as personal as you can. Here are a few of my gratitudes.

I am grateful for...

- Being able to work from home
- The sunlight shining through my window
- Ocean swims that revive my energy and optimism for a new week ahead
- My mom's ever present love and support
- The variety of my day. It's always new and exciting. I never know what I'm going to get.
- A steady meditation practice. It makes space in my head for inspiration to come through. It gives me a feeling of expansion. And I love that dropped in, grounded feeling.
- This fresh fruit smoothie I just made. So yummy.
- My new inspiration to start a blog (just for fun) reviewing all of the books on spirituality I've read in the last 2 years (over 150!)

Option #4: Celebrations

This is similar to the "Gratitude check-in" but this time you're choosing things to celebrate! Here are a few things on my list.

Today I am celebrating....

- My 5:30AM wake up commitment and how much mental freedom I am enjoying during those early quiet hours
- Having lots of work that challenges me and is making me a better coach

- My students and their dedication and openness during our sessions together
- A Course in Miracles program. By studying the lessons every day, I'm learning to see my thoughts, clarify them, recognize them for what they are and become more present, still and whole.
- The fact that my house plants are thriving!! My San Pedro Cactus has grown 3 inches in two weeks!
- A homegrown, homemade lunch bought fresh from a farm yesterday! Can I get a heeeyeeck yeaaaaa for fresh tomatoes!?

15-Second Vulnerability Test: How'd you do?

- Take a 15-second review of how vulnerable you were in the last exercise on a scale of 1-10? How'd you do? Heads-up: You do not have to be level 10 vulnerable to write a great application essay. We happen to feel that the 5-7 range is the sweet spot. How can you tell? This is a totally intuitive, non-scientific thing, so go with your gut.

STEP TWO: BRAINSTORMING YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY WRITING

Now that we're ready to dig a little deeper, let's brainstorm some specific, concrete topic ideas that will help you figure out how to write your college essay.

ESSENCE OBJECTS EXERCISE

I consider the Essence Objects exercise the most complete exercise for the college essay. **It helps describe the world you come from.** By the end you should have almost all of the material you need to know how to write a college essay (seriously!). Definitely find a quiet space and dive in. Writing this assignment by hand produces the best results. Here's how it goes:

Imagine a box.

In this box is a set of objects.

Imagine that each one is one of your essence objects.

What does this mean?

Each object represents one of your fundamental qualities.

Thus, each object is more than just an object.

For example, in my essence object box I would place my **leather hoof pick**.

The hoof pick has a significant meaning for me, as it represents my childhood growing up on a horse farm, riding horses alone out on the trails (freedom), and cleaning manure out of horse stalls (responsibility). It represents the responsibilities of having my own horse and learning to take care of its needs (like its feet).

Also, it reminds me that with responsibility comes the requirement to clean out my own feet every now and again. In other words, to take inventory of my life, my goals, my challenges. How's my progress? The hoof pick represents a consistent review of my life. What needs adjusting? Or what needs some extra attention?

Furthermore, the pick represents the freedom of galloping this majestic animal up a mountaintop on my own (cue wind in my hair). That freedom came with the responsibility of the hoof pick. Therefore, the essence of the hoof pick reminds me of the balance between freedom and responsibility. Both are necessary and wonderful experiences. Often, they come as a pair.

Make sense?

I want you to make a list of 20 objects.

You don't have to write what the objects mean to you as I have just done, unless you want to. Your list might simply look like this:

- Hoof pick
- My Grandpa's gold rosary locket from WW2
- David Whyte's Poem Collection
- My first surfboard (so many memories attached to this because it traveled with me all over Southeast Asia)
- Butterflies connected to a photo of my best friend, Autumn, who passed on
- A Balinese sarong
- My motorcycle license
- The book "A Moveable Feast" which I read during my exchange year in Paris.
- The book "Many Lives, Many Masters" which woke me up to totally new ideas of spirituality
- The 2nd Harry Potter Book - Chamber of Secrets (first time I saw myself in an imaginary world - it became my obsession)
- Yoga mat (my consistent practice is my foundation)
- Kirtan Songs
- Peruvian shamanic medicine songs / icaros

You get the idea...try music to get your mind going and you'll be on your way to figuring out how to write your college essay.

Which essences are missing? Think of qualities not yet represented on the list. How could you phrase those qualities in terms of objects? For example, if you're a list-keeper, perhaps a post-it note? Are you easily angered (lighter fluid)? Good at lots of things (a Swiss Army Knife)? Or suuuuper sharp (like an Exacto knife)?

In other words, the object is more than an object. There are qualities, emotions, experiences attached to it. Now survey your list. Does it feel pretty familiar? That's how familiar your college essay should eventually feel.

If you've taken the objects exercise seriously, then you should have the material not just for a personal statement, but maybe even a few supplemental essays.

The next step: which essences or objects should you choose?

VALUES EXERCISE

This brainstorming exercise, called the [Values Exercise](#), is useful for identifying both your core values and your aspirations. This will help connect your experiences to what you value most. It will give you ideas for insights and uncommon connections you want to share with your reader.

My top ten values, in order of importance, are:

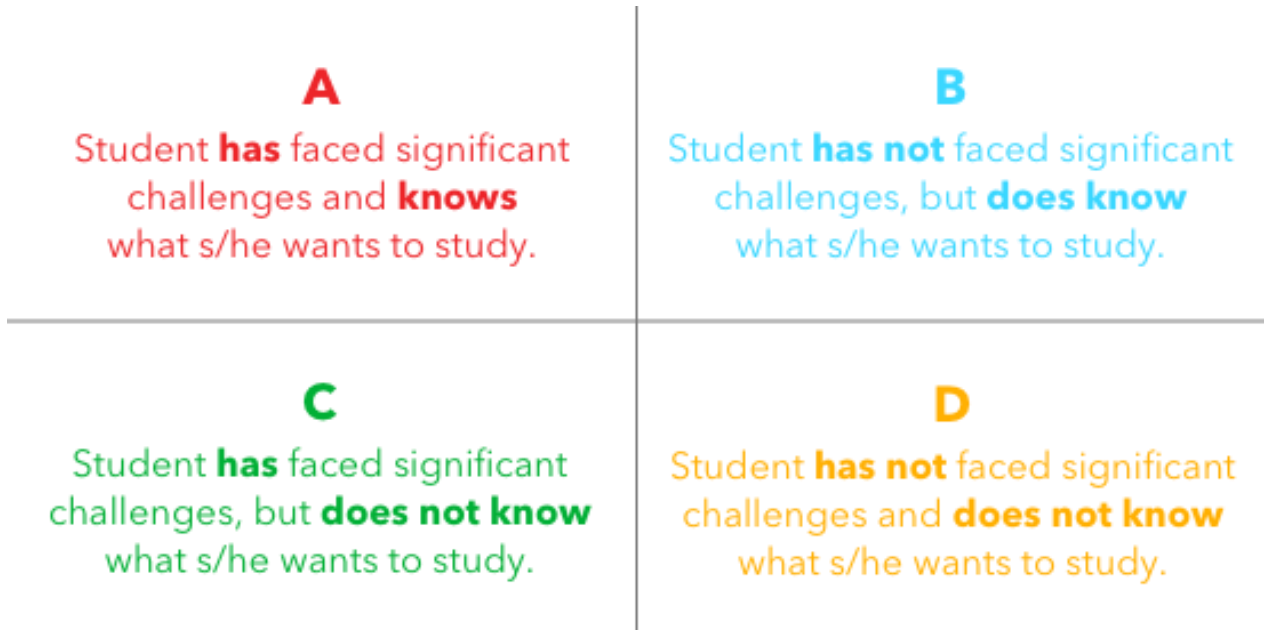
- **freedom**
- **empathy**
- **meaningful work**
- faith
- quality relationships
- nature
- creativity
- growth
- success

STEP THREE: STRUCTURING YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY

There are four possible paths for writing your college essay:

First, ask yourself two questions:

1. Have you faced significant challenges? (You define "significant.")
2. Do you know what you want to study?



Based on these two answers, take a look at the chart above and see which essay approach might work for you.

We believe a good college essay should either:

1. **Go deep**, discussing one moment that fundamentally changed your life, or
2. **Go wide**, discussing many different elements of your life.

The **Narrative Structure** will help you go deep while the **Montage Structure** will help you go wide. We'll discuss both structures in the next two sections.

It's important to remember that these categories are interchangeable and you can move from one to the other upon further brainstorming or reflection. So rather than thinking of these as "types of students," think of them as "different paths for a personal statement."

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

This is the structure of most American films and it's the structure humans have been using since way before films were around, so it's pretty reliable. Joseph Campbell called it the monomyth or Hero's Journey. I'll refer to it as **narrative structure**. The basic elements of this [college essay format](#) are:

1. Status Quo
2. Inciting Incident/Status Quo Change
3. Raise the stakes
4. Moment of Truth
5. Outcome/New Status Quo

STATUS QUO

Life as is. The hero, our main character, is living his/her normal life.

INCITING INCIDENT/STATUS QUO CHANGE

One day, something happens. A boy discovers he is a wizard (Harry Potter). A girl falls down a rabbit hole (Alice in Wonderland). A murder happens (almost every mystery). You get the idea. In short, the hero is called to adventure.

RAISING THE STAKES

Things get more dangerous and important.

- In small dramas, the events become more important inwardly, to our main characters' personal lives, threatening to change them forever.
- In action movies, events become more important outwardly, escalating until not only our characters' lives are threatened, but the country, the world, then (in big budget films) Civilization as We Know It.
- In some films, the character's inward journey (what s/he must learn) and outward journey (what s/he must do) are intertwined. See: Star Wars, Avatar, The Dark Knight.

MOMENT OF TRUTH

The climax. The moment of highest tension. The character must make the Ultimate Choice or fight the Ultimate Battle.

- Will Beauty kiss the Beast and save his life? (Beauty and the Beast)
- Will Neo realize—and accept—his role as The One before it's too late? (The Matrix)
- Will Frodo destroy the Ring and save Middle Earth? (Lord of the Rings)

OUTCOME/NEW STATUS QUO

The result.

MONTAGE STRUCTURE

WHAT IS A MONTAGE?

Montage is a technique that involves creating a new whole from separate fragments (pictures, words, music, etc.). In filmmaking, the montage effect is used to condense space and time so that information can be delivered in a more efficient way.

Take the classic “falling in love” montage, commonly used in romantic comedies. We don’t see every single interaction; instead, we see: he surprises her at work with flowers, they walk through the park, they dance in the rain, they pass an engagement ring store and she eyes a particular ring. You get the idea.

A few images tell the whole story. And you can use this technique for your essay.

But which essences should you choose? That’s up to you. (It’s art, remember, not science.)

FIND A FOCUSING LENS

The Type B “Endodontics” essay below employs what I call a focusing lens--in this case the author’s future career. Why choose a focusing lens? You can’t discuss every single aspect of your life; you can, however, show us a few important points through a single lens or metaphor. And it need not be a future career--it could be many things.

What type of focusing lens might you use to write your essay? A sport? A place? An art form? A hobby? Ask yourself: what’s something I know really well?

TIPS FOR FINDING A GOOD FOCUSING LENS

Make it visual. Storytelling is a visual medium. Use a lens that will help conjure images in the reader’s mind. We’ve had too many students try to write “soundtrack” or “mix-tape” essays in which their favorite songs provide the soundtrack for their lives. The problem with writing this type of essay, however, is that the reader can’t hear the music (and often doesn’t know or have the same emotional connection to the songs referenced).

Write what you know. Know how to cook? Use food. Play chess? Use that! Use your [essence objects list](#) for ideas.

Find a focusing lens that allows you to “go wide.” Using a metaphor that is “elastic” (i.e. stretchy) will allow you to discuss several different aspects of who you are.

SAMPLE ESSAY B: “ENDODONTICS” ESSAY

Written by a student who has not faced significant challenges, but did know what he wanted to study.

As a kid I was always curious. I was unafraid to ask questions and didn't worry how dumb they would make me sound. In second grade I enrolled in a summer science program and built a solar-powered oven that baked real cookies. I remember obsessing over the smallest details: Should I paint the oven black to absorb more heat? What about its shape? A spherical shape would allow for more volume, but would it trap heat as well as conventional rectangular ovens? Even then I was obsessed with the details of design.

And it didn't stop in second grade.

A few years later I designed my first pair of shoes, working for hours to perfect each detail, including whether the laces should be mineral white or diamond white. Even then I sensed that minor differences in tonality could make a huge impact and that different colors could evoke different responses.

In high school I moved on to more advanced projects, teaching myself how to take apart, repair, and customize cell phones. Whether I was adjusting the flex cords that connect the IPS LCD to the iPhone motherboard, or replacing the vibrator motor, I loved discovering the many engineering feats Apple overcame in its efforts to combine form with function.

And once I obtained my driver's license, I began working on cars. Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.

My love of details applies to my schoolwork too.

I'm the math geek who marvels at the fundamental theorems of Calculus, or who sees beauty in $A=(s(s-a)(s-b)(s-c))^{1/2}$. Again, it's in the details: one bracket off or one digit missing and the whole equation collapses. And details are more than details, they can mean the difference between negative and positive infinity, an impossible range of solutions.

I also love sharing this appreciation with others and have taken it upon myself to personally eradicate mathophobia, my Calculus teacher's term for "extreme fear of Math." A small group of other students and I have devoted our after-school time to tutoring our peers in everything from Pre-Algebra to AP Calculus B/C and I believe my fluency in Hebrew and Farsi has helped me connect with some of my school's Israeli and Iranian students. There's nothing better than seeing a student solve a difficult problem without me saying anything.

You probably think I want to be a designer. Or perhaps an engineer?

Wrong. Well, kind of.

Actually, I want to study Endodontics, which is (I'll save you the Wikipedia look-up) a branch of dentistry that deals with the tooth pulp and the tissues surrounding the root of a tooth. As an Endodontist, I'll be working to repair damaged teeth by performing precision root canals and implementing dental crowns. Sound exciting? It is to me.

The fact is, it's not unlike the work I've been doing repairing cellphone circuits and modifying cars, though there is one small difference. In the future I'll still be working to repair machines, but this machine is one of the most sophisticated machines ever created: the human body. Here, my obsession with details will be as crucial as ever. A one millimeter difference can mean the difference between a successful root canal and a lawsuit.

The question is: will the toothbrushes I hand out be mineral white or diamond white?

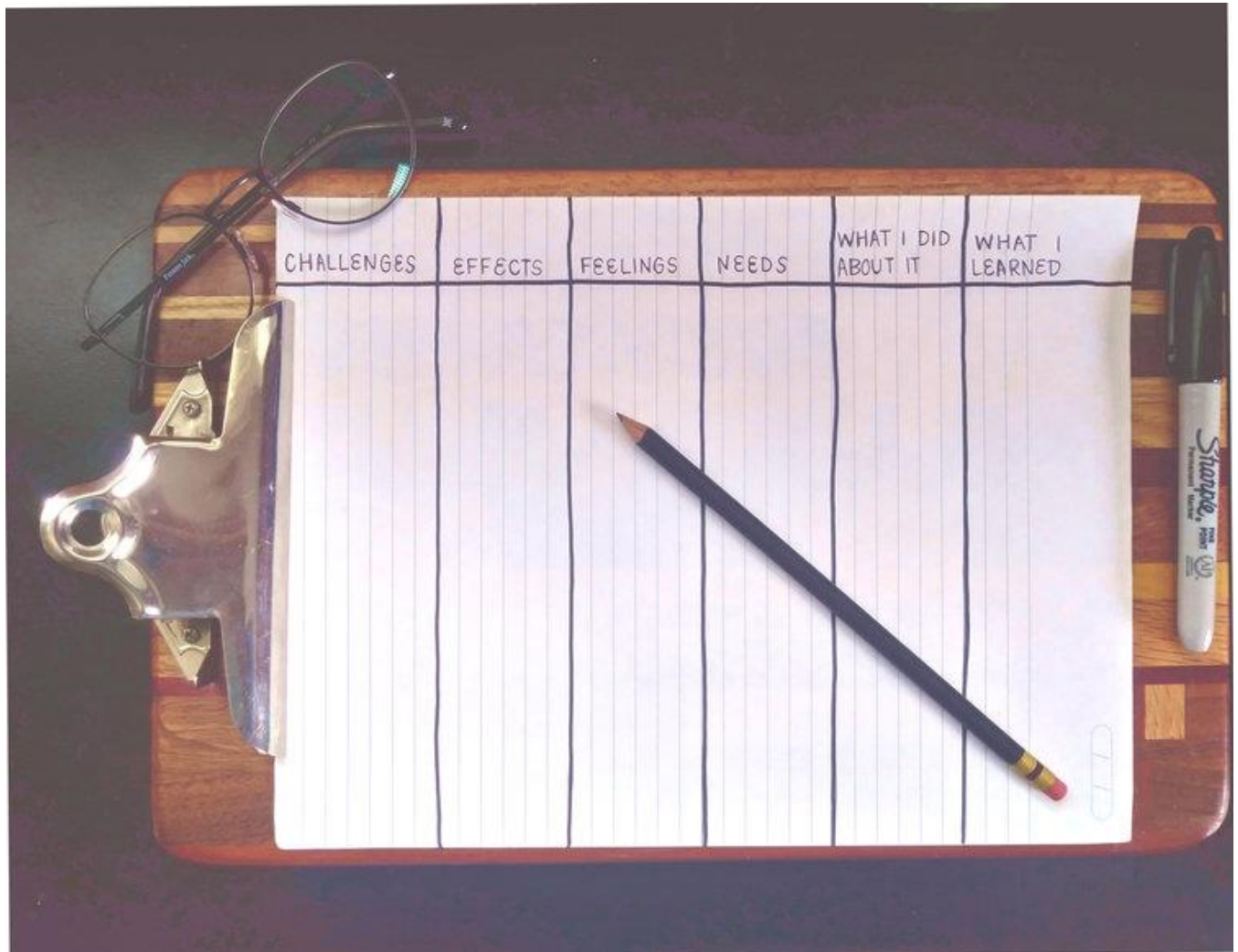
(Word count: 598)

HOW TO WRITE A NARRATIVE COLLEGE ESSAY

If you've faced challenges in your life, you can use the Feelings and Needs Exercise to map out your entire personal statement in about 20 minutes. Really!

Here's how it works:

Take a blank sheet of paper and a pen and turn your paper sideways so that it's in landscape mode, like this:



HOW TO WRITE A MONTAGE COLLEGE ESSAY

The montage essay structure is a [college essay format](#) most relevant to students who have not been through significant challenges and do not know what they want to study.

By the end you should understand how to reverse engineer your essay, starting with the end in mind (your dream) and describing how the events of your life (your world) helped shape that dream.

PART ONE: ESSENTIAL QUALITIES

- At the top of a blank sheet of paper in the center of the page write down **the name of the career you're likely to pursue.**

IMPORTANT: If you don't know what career you'd like to pursue, you may either write down a placeholder career (i.e. something that you're interested in) or leave this blank (if you really don't know).

- Underneath the name of the career (if you wrote one) write **“Qualities of an excellent [Write your career here: doctor/teacher/businessperson, etc.]”**
 - If you did not write down a career, just write the words “Qualities I Want to Show Colleges That Aren't Shown Elsewhere in My Application.”
- If you did write a career, make a list of the qualities necessary to excel in whichever field you've chosen. If, for example, you want to study business, you might consider “ability to work well with others” and “leadership skills” on your list.
 - If you did not name a career, refer to your Values Exercise and write down 5-6 values that you'd like to demonstrate in your personal statement.
- Either way, list at least five qualities along the right side of the paper. We'll call this your “tell” column (more on this later).

PART TWO: HOW I'VE DEMONSTRATED THESE QUALITIES IN MY LIFE

- On the left side of your page write at the top **“How I've Demonstrated These Qualities in My Life.”**
- For each quality in your “tell” column, write down a specific moment/example from your life that **SHOWS** that you have developed this quality. (For example, if you wrote “ability to work well with others” in your right hand column, write in the left hand column a specific instance that shows you work well with others—the time you worked with a large group to organize the Dance Marathon at your school, for example. Or if you've written “good listener” in the right hand column, you might describe how while volunteering at the hospital you found that the patients often felt comfortable sharing their life stories with you.)
- Keep going until the left hand column is filled with examples of the qualities named in the right hand column.

Eventually you are going to write one paragraph on each element on the left hand column (this is your show).

Important: You won't want to explicitly reveal (that is, “tell”) the qualities in the right hand column or how they connect to your future career until the last or second to last paragraph. See the Endodontics essay example to see what this looks like. Why? If you say at the beginning of your essay, “I've always wanted to be a doctor” and then say “...because I am a caring, hard-working and detail-oriented individual” and then you give examples of each of those, then the essay might be somewhat boring (or at least very straightforward). A good guiding rule is this: show first, then tell.

What if I don't know what I want to do in the future (for Type D Essays)?

That's okay! Keep in mind that you don't have to use your future career as a focusing lens--you can use anything! Go here for some tips on how to pick a good focusing lens.

PAIRED SHARING

This is where you get the opportunity to share your story with a partner and hear your story told back to you. It's a great way to get perspective on your narrative.

1. Find a partner.
2. Decide who will go first. We'll call this Partner A.
3. Partner A shares a story that was revealed during the Feelings and Needs Exercise, while Partner B listens, and maybe takes notes. You'll have just about five minutes each, so no need to give all the details, just tell your story.
4. Once Partner A is finished sharing, Partner B tells Partner A's story back to Partner A. (Don't worry, I'll demonstrate how to do this in the video below.) This gives Partner A the chance to actually hear their own story told back to them. Once Partner B has shared back Partner A's story, switch and repeat:
5. Partner B shares while Partner A listens and maybe takes notes.
6. Once Partner B has finished sharing, Partner A shares Partner B's story back to Partner B.

While your partner is sharing, your job is simply to listen. Taking notes is optional, but avoid it if it will distract you from being present with your partner.

STEP FOUR: PICK A TOPIC AND WRITE A FIRST DRAFT

Note: You won't know which topic works until you try writing your essay, so pick a topic and get started. Take the leap.

Remember that your first draft doesn't have to be perfect. You just have to begin.

Feeling reticent to begin? This meditation might help.

STEP FIVE: GIVING AND RECEIVING FEEDBACK

Remember a new idea can be fragile. Be gentle with your feedback.

Here are some ways you can help your partner pick a topic:

1. **Mostly just listen.** Imagine that you're interviewing them. You should do 10% of the talking and let them do 90%. So if you have a ten minute conversation, you're only talking for one minute. How can you make this happen?
2. **Ask lots of questions.** Here are some good, simple questions to ask:
 1. What topics are you deciding between?
 2. What do you like about each one?

Open-ended questions are great too:

- c. Can you say more about that?

Simple, right? Then listen some more.

YOUR JOB ISN'T TO FIGURE OUT YOUR PARTNER'S TOPIC FOR THEM; YOUR JOB IS TO HELP THEM FIGURE OUT THEIR OWN TOPIC.

Don't forget about the work you've already done in this assignment.

If, for example, your partner has experienced challenges...

1. Use the Feelings and Needs Exercise. Try asking your partner to walk you through one of the experiences that came up during the exercise. [Here's how to do that](#). If they can articulate a.) what the challenge was, b.) what they did about it, and c.) what they learned, tell your partner, "It sounds like a good topic--go for it."

If your partner has NOT experienced challenges...

1. Use the Montage Exercise. Ask your partner:
 - What are four or five qualities you definitely want to communicate to the admissions officer?
 - What could you use to connect all these qualities?
 - Here's a 90-second video with tips on how to help you make sure your essay isn't boring.

Here are some other questions you might have:

- [Should I Talk About Religion in My College Essay?](#)
- [Does it Matter Which Common App Prompt I Choose?](#)
- [What if I'm Worried that My Essay Will Sound Like a Sob Story?](#)

If you've tried all these and you or your partner is still totally clueless on their topic, here is a list of [100 Brave and Interesting Questions](#). Try these. See where they lead.

Oh, and if you're *super* stressed and deadlines are looming, here's the "break-in-case-of-emergency" resource:

- [How to Write Your College Essay in One Night](#)

Remember: you don't need a perfect topic right now, you just need a good one to get started.

How to Give Feedback on an Essay Draft

Already completed a draft or working with a partner who has? Skip ahead to the next lesson, The Great College Essay Test.

STEP SIX: REVISING YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY

Is your essay doing its job? Remember it's to demonstrate to a college that you will make valuable contributions in college and beyond. **Does your essay have College Essay Guy's four qualities of a great personal statement?**

Core Values (aka information).

- These are the values you would go to the mat for (ex. family, freedom, empathy).
- Which values are kind of there, could be clearer or should be coming through but aren't

Vulnerability

- This is where you can FEEL the writer coming through.
- Test your essay by reading it aloud to someone who knows you. Ask them two questions: "Do you feel closer to me?" and "What did you learn about me that you didn't already know?"

Insight (aka "So What?" Moments)

- You should have 4-5 of these moments in your essay. The ends of the paragraphs are a great place to put these. Look at the claims you are making and ask: what do they say about me? And are these obvious or unpredictable insights?

Craft

- Craft is a sense that you know why each paragraph, each sentence and, yes, each word is there. Make sure all are necessary. Fine tooth comb your entire essay with “necessary?” in mind.

That is, in broad strokes, how to write a college essay.