

Better Essays in Less Time with Less Stress

HECA Virtual Conference
April 15, 2021

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Overview

- Process. Process. Process.
- 3 Stages: Content, Structure, Polish
- Timelines & Templates
- Common App = Teaching Essay



The Wow Method: Ten Steps to a Great College Essay

Step 1: Understand the Prompt

Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

Step 3: Focus on Theme

Step 4: Free Write for Details

Step 5: Write Draft 1

Step 6: Review Prompt and Theme

**Steps 1-6
CONTENT**

Step 7: Take It from the Top

Step 8: Review Content and Structure

**Steps 7-8
CONTENT & STRUCTURE**

Step 9: Add the Wow Factor

Step 10: Edit and Proofread

**Steps 9-10
CONTENT, STRUCTURE & POLISH**



The College Essay Experience for Students

Plan. Process. Schedule.

PRE-WORK	Date	Steps	Task	Who
Monday	At registration		Questionnaire due (15 minutes) Log in to wowwritingworkshop.com for access	Student
Monday	5/17		Receive welcome email from your coach with link to brainstorm dates	Student
Monday	5/31		Make sure you've chosen a brainstorm date	Student

WEEK 1	Date	Steps	Task	Who
Sunday	6/7	Intro-2	Intro-Step 2: Pework due (1 hour)	Student
Tues-Fri	6/9-12	2-4	Brainstorm appointment; complete Steps 3-4 after brainstorm (2 hours)	Student
Wed-Fri	6/10-12	3-4	Steps 3-4: Respond to student ASAP; assign Draft 1 (Content)	Coach

WEEK 2	Date	Steps	Task	Who
Sunday	6/14	5	Step 5: Content draft due (2 hours)	Student
Monday	6/15	6	Step 6: Assign Write Outside the Essay exercise	Coach
Tuesday	6/16	6	Step 6: Write Outside the Essay exercise due (1 hour)	Student
Wednesday	6/17	6	Step 6: Assign New Openings exercise	Coach
Thursday	6/18	6	Step 6: New Openings exercise due (1 hour)	Student
Friday	6/19	7	Step 7: Assign Plan Your Next Draft exercise	Coach

WEEK 3	Date	Steps	Task	Who
Monday	6/22	7	Step 7: Plan Your Next Draft exercise due (1 hour)	Student
Tuesday	6/23	7	Step 7: Assign Draft 2 (Content + Structure)	Coach
Wednesday	6/24	7	Step 7: Content + Structure draft due (2 hours)	Student
Thursday	6/25	8*	Step 8: Respond to Content + Structure draft	Coach
Friday	6/26	9*	Step 9: Content + Structure + Polish draft due (2 hours)	Student

WEEK 4	Date	Steps	Task	Who
Monday	6/29	10*	Step 10: Respond to Content + Structure + Polish draft	Coach
Tuesday	6/30		Send essay to proofreader	Coach
Thursday	7/2		Return essay to student after proofreading	Coach
Tuesday-Friday	6/29 – 7/3		Prep for additional essays (depending on package purchased)	Both

*Please note that Steps 8-10 are sometimes more fluid than Steps 1-7. You may need an extra 1-2 hours to complete interim exercises during Week 4.



The Wow Method - Resources

2021-22 Application Season

**SAMPLE PAGES FROM
COLLEGE ESSAY EXPERIENCE
RESOURCE PACKET**

The Wow Method

Table of Contents

Overview	1
Putting Learning into Action.....	1
Contents of this Packet.....	1
Next Steps.....	2
Copyright/Intellectual Property.....	3
Key Terms.....	4
Purpose of Each Step	5
Writing Exercises and Review Guidelines	7
Introduction: Finding Your Voice.....	8
Step 1: Understand the Prompt.....	9
Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas.....	10
Step 3: Focus on Theme.....	12
SAMPLE PAGES FROM COLLEGE ESSAY EXPERIENCE RESOURCE PACKET	
Writing Exercise.....	18
Step 7: Write Draft 2 – Make More Notes.....	20
Step 7: Write Draft 2 (Content + Structure).....	21
Step 8: Review Draft 2 (Content + Structure).....	22
Review Rubric.....	22
Step 9: Write Draft 3 (Content + Structure + Polish).....	24
Step 10: Final Review.....	25
Review Rubric.....	25
Step 10: Final Review (Guidelines for an Outside Proofreader).....	26
Email Templates	27
Email A1: Kickoff (student).....	28
Email A2: Kickoff (parent).....	29
Email B: After Student Schedules Appointment.....	30
Email C: After Brainstorm.....	31
Email D: After Student Completes Steps 3 and 4 (student).....	32

The Wow Method

Email A1: Kickoff (student)

Subject: College Essay - Getting Started

[Friendly introduction]. Here's what happens next:

- Schedule an appointment for our brainstorming session [Insert instructions for scheduling appointment].
 - Our appointment will last about an hour.
 - Choose a meeting time that will allow you to 1) Complete the pre-work (described below) and send it to me 2 days in advance, and 2) spend another hour after our call completing some post-meeting tasks.
 - Please have your completed writing exercises available during our appointment.
- Go through the Introduction through Step 2 of Wow Online - College Essay before our appointment.
 - All the links are on your dashboard when you log in.
 - Watch all the videos, read the Read Its and complete the Try Its.
 - This should take you 1-2 hours.
- Send me the completed Try It activities for the Introduction (morning writing) and Steps 1 and 2 at least 24 hours before our brainstorm appointment.

When we meet to brainstorm essay topics, I'll tell you more about the rest of the process. Be sure to have your writing exercises (the Try Its for the Intro through Step 2) available during our meeting too.

Email Template (to Student)

The Wow Method

Email A2: Kickoff (parent)

Subject: College Essay - Getting Started

[Friendly Introduction]

[Include any sample timelines or instructions about expectations about due dates and how/when you will respond.]

I try to guide my students through the first essay within 2-3 weeks. That requires a lot of focus and quick turnaround (and paying attention to email!) Please help keep your child on track if you think they will need it. If you have any concerns about our progress, just let me know.

We will have a brainstorming discussion soon, which will help generate potential topics. I just sent an email with detailed instructions for scheduling an appointment and completing some pre-brainstorm assignments.

[Insert anything you'd like parents to know about their role. We include an article. You might have a tip sheet, a link to an article or book, or other resources.]

Email Template (to Parent)

The Wow Method

Email B: After Student Schedules Appointment

Subject: Writing Your Essay - Intro - Step 2

I'm glad to see that you scheduled your brainstorm appointment.

Please log in and complete the Introduction through Step 2 before we meet. Watch all the videos, read the web pages and complete the Try It writing exercises, then send me the Try Its by [Set deadline two days before appointment - e.g., for a Tuesday appointment, ask for pre-work by Sunday] night. That will give me time to prepare for our conversation.

[Provide instructions for how/where you'll meet – virtually or in person.]

Be sure to have your Try Its available during our meeting, and remember that you'll need another hour to complete some post-brainstorm activities by the end of that day.

I look forward to getting started!

Email Template (to Student)

The Wow Method

How to Facilitate a Student-Centered Brainstorm

Brainstorming ideas with a student can be challenging. If you carefully consider what you are trying to accomplish and what you can say and do to get there, the process will go more smoothly. The following pages outline a suggested brainstorming process, including pre-brainstorm activities. Help your students feel good about their ideas – the ones they bring to your discussion and the ones they ultimately choose to write about.

Before the Brainstorm Discussion

- Schedule your brainstorm meeting. Explain what you expect the student to do ahead of time, how long the work will take and when you want them to submit it. Use our sample pre-brainstorm meeting email as a template.
- Assign pre-work. Make sure you have either shared the written explanations or spoken to your student about what a college essay is and who is reading it ahead of time. Ask them to complete these writing assignments ahead of time:
 - Voice/Morning writing
 - Step 1/Understand the Prompt
 - Step 2/Brainstorm Ideas
- Receive the pre-work at least 24 hours in advance. If the student doesn't turn it in on time, find out why, then get it quickly or reschedule. Most students will get the work done when you remind them that writing is not a group activity.
- Review the pre-work, but don't obsess over it. Familiarize yourself with the student's responses so you can:
 - Say something positive about the Voice/Morning writing activity
 - Confirm understanding of Step 1. Prepare by checking to see if they understand the general purpose of the essay prompt (e.g., What does a personal statement do? Or What does a Why College X essay do? Or What is this community prompt really getting at?) and whether they can distinguish between accomplishments (what do they already know about you) and characteristics (what would you like them to know).
 - Review Step 2 together. Don't spend a lot of time trying to figure out which of their Step 2 topic ideas has the most potential. Assume that many (if not all) of their potential ideas will be too broad, too cliché, too long ago or otherwise ineffective. That doesn't matter. You are looking for conversation-starters.

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During the Brainstorm Discussion

Review Voice/Morning Writing (2-3 minutes): Praise the student for completing the exercise. Point out that this is what their natural, authentic voice sounds like when they are not trying to impress anyone. It doesn't matter if they included descriptive details or simply provided a play-by-play report of their morning routine. Do not focus on what or how you wish they could write. This writing demonstrates what they sound like at their most natural. This is what you should expect from their essays, with a little more polish. Set your expectations accordingly.

Review Step 1/Understand the Prompt (5 minutes): The goal here is to confirm understanding. Do they understand the overall purpose of a personal statement? Do they know the difference between accomplishments (what readers already know from the rest of application) and characteristics (what they wish readers knew)? Even if their list of characteristics is short or cliché, that's fine. It does not need to be comprehensive. Unless their responses are terribly off base, keep this quick.

Discuss Step 2/Brainstorm Ideas (30 minutes): Let the student walk you through their ideas. Be curious and willing to be surprised. Listen and ask questions. Use phrases like "Tell me about a time when ..." or "That's interesting... Can you say more about that?" After you review and discuss the student's ideas, help them choose a topic by doing the following:

- During your discussion, point out which stories have potential. Stories with potential meet these criteria:
 - They are relatively recent (i.e., they did not happen in middle school)
 - They demonstrate at least one positive characteristic.
 - They include an anchor story around which the student can build the essay (e.g., the first day I took the bus across town to physical therapy by myself).
 - The student likes the story. (For example, maybe they proposed writing about their ACL surgery, but upon further discussion, you discovered that during the recovery period, they had to figure out how to get to physical therapy across town while their parents were working. This story demonstrates their problem-solving skills and determination to make the most of a difficult situation.)
 - Quickly summarize the topics that have potential and skip the ones that don't.
- Once you are done reviewing and discussing the student's ideas, repeat back the ones that have potential so they can hear the ideas out loud. Be enthusiastic. Explain why each of these topics could work.

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- When you finish repeating the ideas, ask this question, “Imagine the deadline was moved up to next week. If you had to sit down and write the essay tomorrow, with almost no time for revision, which one could you write most easily.” The words *most easily* are the key here. You are trying to find out which story or stories they are most comfortable with. When you repeated the stories back to the student, you only included those that could work. Now the student gets to choose how to proceed.
- Most students will quickly choose a topic. If they ask which one you prefer, remind them that you only offered ideas that could work. You already eliminated the ones that couldn’t become effective essays.
- Praise their choice. Reinforce that they have good ideas and know how to choose what to write about. Even if you like another idea better, keep that to yourself!!!

STEP 3 Establish the Essay’s Theme (5-10 minutes):

- Explain the concept of theme, which has two parts: 1) What happened? 2) Why does it matter? (In other words, *Why are you sharing this particular story? What does it demonstrate about you?*)
- Also explain that while you are clarifying the essay’s theme together right now, the student will also review and write out the theme on their own after your meeting, to ensure that it sticks with them. The theme will become the touchstone of your reviews.
- Briefly state the theme as you see it (e.g., What happened? *You found a way to get to PT even though your parents weren’t around to drive you back and forth. You’ve never had to arrange transportation before, and even though it was complicated, you made it work and never missed an appointment. Why does it matter? This shows that you are resourceful. You are a problem-solver. You take initiative.*) Keep your remarks informal and light. Your proposed theme does not have to be perfect.
- Ask the student to state the theme in their own words. They are unlikely to say exactly what you said, and that is just fine. They might nail it the first time or launch into a long story. Some students will state the theme in two concise sentences; others will recite an outline of the entire essay. If that happens, ask them to try again, keeping it simple this time and sticking to the anchor story and the characteristics the topic illustrates.
- Keep going until they get it right.

Set Expectations and Discuss Next Steps (5 minutes)

- Remind the student that Steps 3 and 4 are due today. They need to complete that work on their own and return it to you by your agreed upon deadline. By doing this, you are confirming that they own the topic and are clear about why they chose a particular topic. Step 3 is an opportunity to focus on the theme; Step 4 is a free write for details, not a full essay draft.

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- Set a deadline for the first draft of the essay as well, even though they won't start writing it until after they submit Steps 3 and 4. Say something like, *If you send me your writing activities for Steps 3 and 4 today, I'll respond by noon tomorrow. With that in mind, when should I expect to receive your first draft?*
- Unless it's impossible, that draft should be done within three days. It is a content draft and should only take an hour or two to write.
- By doing this, you are establishing another norm: They will work on their own, help set their own deadlines (within reason) and then meet those deadlines, so the process stays on track.

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Step 3: Review Prompt and Theme Review Guidelines

We always make sure the student is clear about the essay's theme before they start a draft. Confirm the following before assigning Step 5.

1. The theme includes two parts: 1) What happened? and 2) Why does it matter?
2. The theme is relatively short and is very close to what coach and student discussed during the brainstorm discussion. The theme is a capsule, not an outline of the essay.
3. Part 1 (What happened) focuses on a specific incident, story or example (the anchor story).
4. This incident/anchor story/example occurred in the relatively recent past; not when the writer was in middle school.
5. Part 2 (Why does it matter) focuses on a characteristic or characteristics that the writer wants to share with readers.
6. The theme adds something to the application and does not simply repeat information that readers will already know.
7. The theme addresses the essay prompt.
8. If you answered *No* to any of these questions, help the writer focus the theme before moving forward. The theme does not have to be perfect. In our experience, most students get this right (or close enough) the first time.

Review Guidelines for Coach

The Wow Method

Email D: After Student Completes Steps 3 and 4 (student)

Subject: Step 5 - Content Draft

Beautiful work. You are right on track. [something personal – challenge/ strength, etc.]. Please continue with Step 5. Watch the video, read the Read It segment and complete the Try It activity (a content draft.) As we discussed, please send me your draft by [weekday night]. After you write the first draft of your essay, I will give you some interim exercises to complete before you move on to the structure draft of Step 7. Through the writing exercises, we will complete Step 6 together.

I look forward to reading the first draft of your essay. And don't forget - it can be too long or disorganized. Just tell your story and get all of your ideas down. Think content!

Email Template (to Student)

The Wow Method

Email D1: After Student Completes Steps 3 and 4 (parent)

Subject: We're off to a great start!

I wanted to check in and let you know how pleased I am with the direction your child's essay is headed. The topic illustrates [insert characteristics], and I am confident admissions officers will find the story compelling and engaging. Highlighting these positive traits will help round out the application.

We encourage our students to write a first draft that's messy and too long, so they feel free to explore their topic in depth without worrying about word count, first lines or other structure and polish concerns. With that in mind, I encourage you to wait till the final draft to take a peek!

If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch.

Email Template (to Parent)

Common App = Teaching Essay

- Keep to a schedule
- Students do prework before meetings
- Students provide conversation starters
- Focus on content first
- Address structure next
- Pay attention to polish last

Pre-Brainstorm Tasks

University of California Personal Insight Questions 2020

Step 1: Understand the Prompt

Parse the prompts with or for your student. Alternatively, send them to the UC website and ask them to parse the prompts themselves.

Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

Give your student the tasks below. They should complete these tasks before you meet to brainstorm ideas.

Task 1

Look at the essays you have already written, including the Common Application personal statement and supplements. For each, make notes in the table below.

Essay	Brief description of essay	What characteristic(s) does this essay convey?	Which UC PIQ (s) might fit?	How would I modify the original to fit the UC PIQ?
<i>Example: Common App</i>	<i>Helping Jane with her trash</i>	<i>I care about my community</i>	<i>7. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Use Common App version as a base. • Edit to fit UC word limit. • Focus on how this makes my community a better place.

Task 2

List any additional characteristics you want to illustrate. For each, note at least one RECENT example that demonstrates that characteristic, and indicate which prompt (or prompts) that example could address.

Sample:

Characteristic: I am a problem-solver

Example: When I attended the robotics competition, one of our best teammates got sick. I stepped in and took care of the tasks he is usually responsible for.

UC prompt 2: Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Task 3

Based on your notes from tasks 1 and 2, which four PIQs do you think you will answer? What stories could you share for each?

PIQ	Story Idea	What will readers learn about me (characteristics)?

Why College X? Essays

Help students prepare by asking them to answer questions like these:

1. What is the prompt really asking?
2. What appeals to you about the college/university/program?
3. What do you want the readers to learn about you from reading your response?
4. Why are you compatible with this school/program?
5. What examples/illustrations can you share to demonstrate your compatibility?
6. Before drafting your essay, write out a simple paragraph or bullet points responding to this question: *When they are done reading this essay, what will readers know about me that they can't find out from the rest of my application?*

Pework:

For students who have already written a Why Us essay:

1. Note how this prompt is similar to or different from the other school's Why Us prompt.
2. Use your other essay(s) as a starting point for this one, but use examples for this school.
3. Make some notes about what you are interested in and what this school offers that address those interests (academic, social, intellectual, cultural, etc.)

For students who are writing a Why Us essay for the first time: Using this chart as an example, create a chart of your own with the same headings. Consider the different categories noted in the prompt (academic, social, intellectual, cultural, etc.)

The School (What attracts me to this university?)	Me (What do I want readers to know about me?)	Stories (How does what I know about the program mesh with what I want them to know about me?)
Survey classes supplemented by smaller learning opportunities	I am independent enough to make the most of large settings and also stay engaged in a small group	I took language courses at the community college last year. I had to keep my own schedule, turn in assignments without prompting, etc. For English, I took a junior/senior seminar at school, where every student had to participate in discussion and even lead the discussion sometimes. The day I lead our session on <i>She's Come Undone</i> was fun and invigorating.
Opportunity to explore areas I'm not familiar with	I am curious about so many things	I am always going to programs at the art museum, library, etc., whether they are about composting, poetry or investments.

Standard Processes & Tools Help Us Handle Almost Anything

- Students who can't think of ideas
- Demanding parents
- Procrastinators
- New prompts
- Students who are not strong writers
- Students applying to elite schools

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*Abbie Rabin, Personalized College Consulting
Englewood, NJ*

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