



IECA Fall 2021 – College Essay Resources

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The Wow Method

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This packet was created for IECA’s Fall 2021 Conference. It contains selections from the College Essay Experience resource packet, along with Wow’s Willingness and Ability model.

You will find writing exercises for the Introduction, along with Steps 1, 2, 3 and 6. If you’d like the full packet (all 57 pages!!!) we invite you to join us for College Essay Experience training. Learn more about CEE here: learn.wowwritingworkshop.com/cee-checkout.

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Overview: Willingness and Ability



Ability: Factors to Consider

- Writing skills
- Creativity
- Complex thinking
- Time management skills
- Time constraints
- Family pressure/expectations
- Work constraints (when work is necessary – for money, responsibility, etc.)
- Stress
- Mental health
- Learning challenges
- And more ...

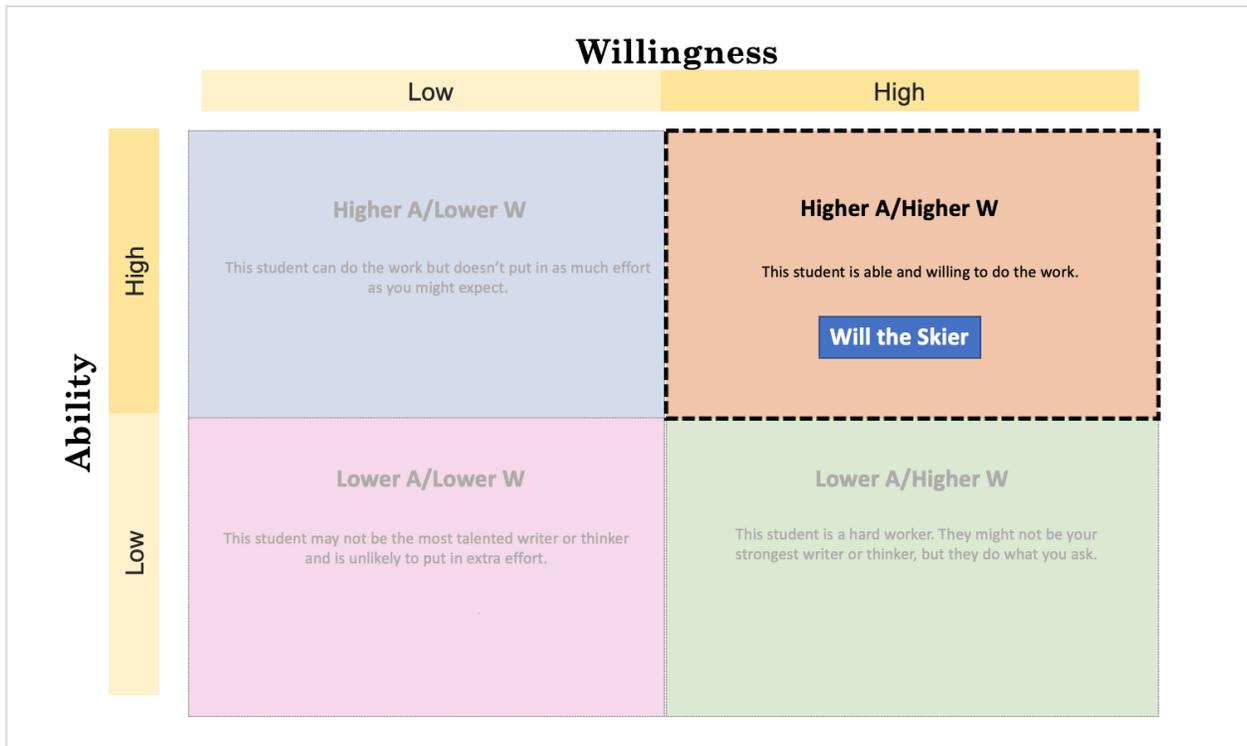
Willingness: Factors to Consider

- Interest/urgency (Does applying to college feel important?)
- Distractions and opportunities (spending time with friends, travel)
- Work constraints (when work is not absolutely necessary or the schedule can be adjusted)
- Commitment to the task (Is this student usually a hard worker? Or do things tend to come easily?)
- Rigor (Are they likely to get into these schools regardless of how much time and effort they put in?)
- And more ...

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Example: Higher Ability/Higher Willingness

Example from Abbie Rabin
"Will the Skier"



What happened? Brief summary of the situation, including where it fits inside the model.

- Will came to me just as 12th grade started, with finished essays in hand, hoping I'd help tweak them, and hoping to get a merit scholarship at the school of his dreams. He was open-minded and bright, at the top of his class, but his essays were duds. I told him, "Let's set aside these essays and take it from the top. Don't worry, what you've written will not have been wasted. You may be able to use some of it, but we need to start fresh."
- We set up a schedule for each step of the writing process, which involved looking at the essay prompt with new vision and attention. We brainstormed 3 different themes, discussed them, and he chose one to develop. He followed the schedule and was diligent about completing assignments and was always very responsive to my emails. He accepted my critiques willingly. (Meanwhile, his mom was getting antsy about the time it was taking; she was annoyed that we were wasting the essays Will had brought in in the first place. Credit the mom, when I asked her to trust the process, she went along.)
- Part of the assignments required Will to answer questions about his first draft, which made him dig into the *what* and *why* of his story, and really brought out some of his trademark character traits: he's a good friend, a risk-taker, he's athletic, he has

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- a great sense of humor about himself.
- He did not tire of working and took suggestions and ran with them. It was entirely his own, and he was very happy and proud. He was also surprised that it was a skiing weekend that served as the vehicle for his personal statement, but he had allowed the process to work. (He also got the merit scholarship).
 - When Will started, I would have placed him in the *middle* of the upper right quadrant: willing and able, but he proved that where he belonged was at the top right corner, very willing, very able.

Why does it matter? Why are we sharing the story? How will it help our colleagues work with their own students/families?

- Sometimes a super-bright student can be a real challenge.
- I wonder, "Can I let this kid know that he needs to do better? Will he/his parent be insulted?" The point is, that is why he is coming to me. He knows the essay needs to be better, and I have to be the professional who very kindly tells him, "Let's take it from the top and start at the beginning."
- Will quickly appreciated the benefit of my method (which is the Wow process), and had the understanding that the steps and assignments were helping him shape up a good story.
- We had really studied the prompt to be sure we agreed on what it was asking.
- When we brainstormed and he chose one topic/theme, we kept the theme and the "What happened?" and the "Why it matters" front and center at every step.
- This is a very clear approach, and it is individualized for each student because it draws out so much real information from the student about himself.

Applying lessons: How can attendees use what you are telling them?

- When you have a method that works and you therefore believe in it, the consultant is calmer and that makes it easier for the student to "trust the process."
- With a timeline at the ready, I was able to say, "No, do not write a whole draft yet, just focus on the theme we agreed on. Write all you can about it."
- Likewise, it can help calm a doubtful parent (who, by the way, wrote a testimonial for me).

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Example: Higher Ability/Lower Willingness

Example from Mira Simon
 “Alison the Exceptional”



What happened? Brief summary of the situation, including where it fits inside the model.

- Alison started way up high in the top right corner (very willing, very able), then came to a screeching halt, and for about 3 weeks slipped all the way over to the top left corner: high ability/low willingness.
- I already knew she was high ability, so that was a red flag to me.
- Then it was time to start her Stanford supplements.
- Because she was so ahead of schedule, I accepted her excuses for the first two weeks (super busy with planning homecoming, working technical of a play), while also working with the time constraints and building in scheduling and accountability opportunities (set a time for “college hour” each week, text me when draft is completed).
- After the second week, I asked her what was going on. What was it about this supplement that felt different? She told me she didn’t want to apply there but felt she should, that she was letting her family down and their expectations of her. We had a great talk about how true that really was vs how true she felt it was (HER thoughts, family putting NO pressure). And all was good!! She took the school off her list!

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Why does it matter? Why are we sharing the story? How will it help our colleagues work with their own students/families?

- Sharing this story because “low willingness”, especially paired with high ability and ESPECIALLY when it has been paired with HIGH ability, can often mask other issues: burnout, stress, fear, overwhelm.
- It’s a fantastic opportunity to open up discussion about broader issues and support the student both for the essay AND on a deeper basis.

Applying lessons: How can our colleagues apply this?

- This particular story was a willingness “block” but it could just as easily have been a general unwillingness to do the work. Ex: a student who has easily gotten all A’s and not had to work hard and is not willing to work hard at their essays. Someone who is more “1 or 2 drafts and then finished”.
- I can usually tell that from how much time and effort they put into pre-work.
- I have a brainstorming questionnaire I have students complete - both to learn more about them and to gauge their initial abilities and willingness to complete.
- While I don’t totally judge, it is a great “first glance.” Within the Wow Method, there are multiple opportunities for the student to “write freely” to get the details of the story and write about what happened.
- These are low pressure and done in a timed setting, no more than 10 minutes.
- These are also all FANTASTIC opportunities to explore both willingness to do the work and their ability to write.

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Example: Lower Ability/Higher Willingness

Example from Abbie Rabin
"Sofia the Gymnast"



What happened? Brief summary of the situation, including where it fits inside the model.

- Sofia is a down-to-earth person who does what she has to do and does it well. She's in the lower track for her classes, accepts who she is and works hard to achieve her goal of being an A- student. She's remarkable in that if she does C+ work for her first quarter, she says, "I'll bring that up" and does it. A hard worker, supremely motivated.
- Sofia was given a very adult role last summer. She took over the job of running the gymnastics program at a large sleepaway camp. She's 16. She was methodical, organized, and disciplined, but also made a point of adjusting her lessons to suit each group and maximize both fun and safety.
- At our brainstorm session, she told me quite lot of material that showed she's mature, knows when to give up her own fun when it interferes with performing her job at a high level, responsible... great stuff.
- When she sent me her first draft, it was ordinary, missing all the valuable stuff she had told me about. But, following the Wow way, I didn't even question her about it. It was a first draft, it was on time, and the next step was Step 6: "Write Outside the Essay." I asked open-ended questions about the content in her draft. What she returned was the gold I'd been mining for, and I told her it belonged in the next

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draft. We continued with assignments over the next few days and she submitted Draft 2 (Content+Structure). It was better than the first draft, but was still missing some of that gold. At this point, I felt it was fair to show her exactly where she could insert that gold -- sentences that are her own writing about her own thoughts and experience.

- The essay represented the hard working, motivated, thoughtful, fun person she is, all in her own words.
- Easy to love. She fits into the bottom right quadrant.
- “Lower” ability doesn’t mean a student can’t do the work. It just might not be natural for them. We have to be careful not to push them too far.

Why does it matter? Why are we sharing the story? How will it help our colleagues work with their own students/families?

- Although I gave feedback throughout, it was minimal and positive.
- I didn't critique until the second draft.
- I didn't correct her spelling, offer a more precise word, or intimate that something was amiss.
- It felt great for me to be able to tell her, "Here is some good stuff that you have written, and you may want to weave in. It really enlarges your story and brings you to life."
- Once again, calm consultant, calm student.
- This matters because a student of modest ability can produce an essay that represents her honestly and well.
- The student feels good that it truly is her creation, as does the consultant.
- While I can't expect more from her than she is capable of, I believe that I was able to lead her to what she is capable of, and without anxiety on either of our parts.
- This is such a departure from prior years, when I would make suggestions for every variation of the essay. That used to wear me out, probably hurt the student's confidence, and now I see it was not even necessary.
- Sofia owns this essay. I guided her but didn't tell her what she had to do. And her essay is Jackie all the way. OK, the spelling is mine.

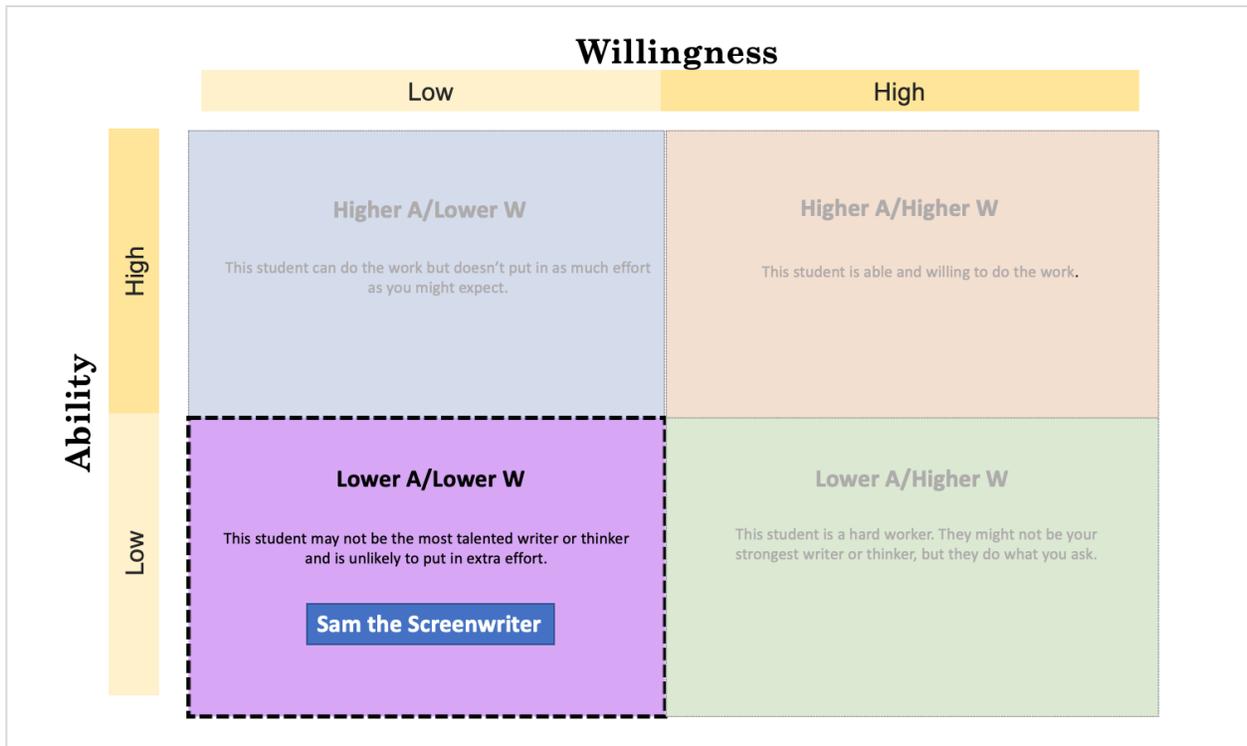
Applying lessons: How can our colleagues apply this?

- The overriding principle here is that I drew a lot out of her before she even wrote her first draft: made sure she could explain the prompt, could clearly state her theme and focus on it, write out details...each step was meaningful but not threatening.
- Only then did she write her first draft, and I expressed no expectations about the draft, either. I think this freed her up to write and not have writer's block.

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Example: Lower Ability/Lower Willingness

Example from Mira Simon
 “Sam the Screenwriter”



What happened? Brief summary of the situation, including where it fits in the model.

- Sweet Sam did not have the strongest writing ability and started with very low willingness as well.
- I did a pre-exercise with Sam and asked him to answer some brainstorming questions - in part to get to know him a bit better and in part to gauge his writing ability.
- His responses were one sentence at best.
- I started him out by applying to colleges without writing so he could gain some momentum and inspiration.
- But we couldn't escape the inevitable - the common app essay. Wow calls it the teaching essay and I SO agree, because not only does it teach the student about the writing process, **it teaches the IEC about the student and helps us know what to expect.**
- From the first exercise, Sam was not into it at all. Sweetest guy ever -- just not his thing.
- The goal was to get him finished with a good essay as quickly as possible and that's what we did!! And to make sure that his colleges were not supplement-heavy.

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Why does it matter? Why are we sharing the story? How will it help our colleagues work with their own students/families?

- This was such a great learning experience for ME and how I managed my expectations and made sure I was meeting Sam where he is - and not pushing my goals onto him.
- His colleges were not super writing heavy nor did they need a phenomenal essay - they just needed a way to get to know him and hear his “voice” and he delivered that!!

Applying lessons: How can our colleagues apply this?

- Not to sound like a commercial, but there is a Step in the Wow process that is my favorite - Step 6 - called “Writing Outside the Essay.” THANK GOD FOR STEP 6!!!!
- I choose to do this in a meeting with students and it involves having them do writing to provide more detail or clarity on parts of the essay.
- In this case, it served multiple purposes for Sam and me. It was a great tool to make SURE he was doing his own writing (I had evidence early on mom was “helping”) and it also allowed for me to approach him in a different way to see if I could help him with his willingness to do and gauge his writing potential.
- Sam wants to be a screenwriter (or something in film, he’s since expanded his options) and so I asked him to “tell me more” as if he was writing a scene in a movie.
- “Let’s say I was watching the sequel to this situation, what would happen next?” OR “If I was watching the backstory to how this happened, what else would I find out in this scene that I didn’t know”.
- He TOTALLY got into this and it helped him rise up in his willingness to engage and complete the process!!

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Copyright/Intellectual Property

You are welcome to use the materials in this packet as you see fit, as long as you credit the exercises to Wow. We are more than happy to share, but please respect our intellectual property; we have spent many years developing and refining these materials.

Either use the writing exercises with the copyright in the footer, or add language that credits the method and our company name: ***These materials were developed using elements of the Wow Method, Wow Writing Workshop's ten-step process for writing college application essays.*** If you're not sure if you are giving proper credit, please ask!

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Key Terms

Characteristics: What we learn about who the student is (not what they've done) by reading the essay (e.g., I'm a compassionate problem-solver; I never give up; I used to be meek, but I've learned to speak up for what I believe in.)

Accomplishments: Things the student has done. While these may be impressive, there are many places in an application to share accomplishments. A college essay does not have to focus on an impressive accomplishment or experience.

Theme: The core of the essay - 1) What happened? (the anchor story) and 2) Why does it matter? (the characteristics). A theme should be short and concise. Here are some examples from Wow students:

Example 1:

What happened? I started the first ever African society in my school. I did this because I was bullied in my previous school. So I decided to change schools and begin something new.

Why does it matter? I am a problem solver and I care about the well-being of other people.

Example 2:

What happened? While canvassing for SNAP, I was concerned that I would unfairly judge someone or offend them by giving them information about food stamps. This caused me to freeze up, but when I stopped worrying, I was able to hand out information.

Why does it matter? When I encounter moments that challenge and confuse me, I am able to understand why I am uncomfortable, come up with and execute a solution, and learn from it.

Example 3:

What happened? We took our time planning as a group once the prompt for the game design competition came out: "sacrifices must be made."

Why does it matter? I like to take on intellectual challenges with other people. I am a creative thinker and I love to solve problems.

Anchor story: A central story that helps hold the essay in place. The entire essay does not have to be about the anchor story, but having an anchor helps students stay focused. E.g., If a student wants readers to learn that they know how to solve problems with compassion, they might write about their experience as a camp counselor. The anchor story could be about an afternoon they sat with a homesick camper during free time and shared their own story of feeling homesick years earlier.

Context: The camp counselor story might include additional details about how the student learned to be so kind, or how they applied what they learned to support friends at school, or what it felt like for them to be a homesick camper. It's not necessary to plan out the context. Context generally develops as the student writes and revises the essay. It can be helpful to keep the student focused on the essay's theme by saying, "That would make great context. Now let's focus on the anchor story."

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Purpose of Each Step

Step	Purpose	How do I know the student is ready to continue?
Intro - Finding Your Voice	Engage the student in the process, make sure they can follow instructions and complete prework. Recognize what their writing sounds like when they are not trying to impress anyone.	Writing exercise completed and returned on time, before brainstorm appointment. Do not judge this exercise in any way.
10 Steps to a Great College Essay	Provide an overview of the ten steps.	N/A
Step 1: Understand the Prompt	Make sure student can work independently and meet deadlines. Confirm that student: 1) understands the purpose of the essay; 2) can distinguish between accomplishments and characteristics; and 3) has begun to consider positive characteristics to share in the essay.	Writing exercise completed and returned on time, before brainstorm appointment. If they answered any of the questions incorrectly, coach can correct misconceptions during the brainstorm appointment.
Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas	Make sure student can work independently and meet deadlines. Put student in the driver's seat. They are the expert on themselves; coach is the expert on the process.	Writing exercise completed and returned on time, before brainstorm appointment. These are conversation-starters, not a menu of choices. Coach and student will explore these ideas (and possibly others) during brainstorm appointment.
Step 3: Focus on Theme	Confirm that student knows why they chose a particular topic.	The theme should be relatively short and should be close to the theme coach and student discussed at the conclusion of the brainstorm appointment. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it should include 1) What happened? (the anchor story/topic) and 2) Why does it matter? (the characteristic(s) illustrated by this story).
Step 4: Free Write for Details	Focus on the "What happened" part of the essay. Get details on the page.	They just need to get words on the page. It doesn't matter what those words are or how many they wrote. Do not judge this exercise.
Step 5: Write Draft 1 (Content)	Focus on content.	The student has written a draft. Regardless of quality, continue with content-related exercises.
Step 6: Review Prompt and Theme	Review the draft for content and theme. Coach assign interim exercises, based on: 1) the content draft (Step 5), 2) the student's theme (Step 3), and 3) the essay prompt.	Content is solid, either inside or outside the essay. Student has spent some time considering the essay beyond the draft on the page.
Step 7: Write Draft 2 (Content + Structure)	Encourage student to consider which details are essential to clearly communicate their theme, then allow time for revision.	Student has answered pre-revision questions. After receiving additional instructions, they have revised the essay.
Step 8: Review Content & Structure	Review the draft for content and structure. Note if anything important is missing. Make notes in the margin, not directly on the essay. Consider what you asked the student to do in Step 6. How much effort did they put in? Did the exercises generate the type of content you expected? What else do you need? During Step 8, go back to the theme, the Step 4 free write,	Content and structure are strong. The essay is getting closer to its finished form.

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Step	Purpose	How do I know the student is ready to continue?
	the Step 5 draft and the Step 6 exercises. Most of what they need will be there on the page.	
Step 9: Write Draft 3 (Content + Structure + Polish)	Complete final revisions.	Student has spent some time polishing the essay and responding to coach's suggestions.
Step 10: Edit and Proofread	Review for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.	The essay has been proofed and is free of significant errors, while maintaining student voice.

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Writing Exercises and Review Guidelines

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Introduction: Finding Your Voice Writing Exercise

Part 1

What did you do this morning from the moment you woke up until you left your home?

In a moment, you will open a new document or a clean sheet of paper, and quickly write down as much as you can recall, using all of your senses. Be specific, but don't worry about making sense or sounding clever. You can write fragments, sentences, lists or run-ons. It doesn't matter, because you are not writing an essay; you are simply capturing details.

Write fast, and do not judge what you write. Don't even read it as you go along. Just keep moving forward.

1. Open a new document, or use a notebook and pen.
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes.
3. Write about your morning.
4. When the timer stops, stop writing, and read the instructions for Part 2.

Part 2

Your writing voice is unique, and often shines through when you relax and write freely. Look back at what you wrote about your morning, and find three segments that truly sound like you. Each one can be anything from a short phrase to a multi-sentence description. They don't have to be exciting or clever; they just have to sound like YOU. For example:

- Something you always say, do or think.
- A description of something that screams "my house!" or "my room!" or "my mom!"
- A phrase you like, a detailed description or something clear and specific that sounds just like you.

When you find your segments, highlight, bold or underline them. These are examples of your writing voice. This is what you sound like when you are not trying too hard to be clever or creative. This is the voice you should write in when you begin to compose your application essay. Keep it in mind as you work on the essay.

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Step 1: Understand the Prompt
Writing Exercise

Which prompt are you responding to?

- Common Application
- University of California (type the prompt below)
- ApplyTexas (type the prompt below)
- Coalition for Access & Affordability (type the prompt below)
- Other (type the prompt below)

In general terms, what is the prompt trying to find out about you?

If you are writing a Common Application essay, think about the Common App in general (not the 7 essay choices specifically.) What is the purpose of a Common App essay? If you are writing a different essay, read the prompt carefully. In your own words, what is it trying to find out?

What do readers already know?

Before you decide on an essay topic, think about what readers already know about you. Remember that an application contains a great deal of information. In the space below, make a list of some of the things readers can find out about you from the rest of your application (e.g., I play drums; I babysit; I have a 3.7; I got 24 on my ACT; I volunteered at a soup kitchen last summer.)

What do I want readers to know?

Now think about what you want readers to know about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application. In the space below, list some of your best characteristics (e.g., I am confident; I don't give up; I used to be a follower, but I have become more of a leader; I have always been a leader, but I have become more humble and able to follow others; I am creative; I love a challenge; I have overcome my fears and feel strong.) Think about how others might describe you. What kind of person are you? Stay positive!

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Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas
Writing Exercise

Consider Several Ideas

Before you decide what to write about, you'll want to explore several ideas. Depending on which essay you are writing, you could approach this task in different ways:

- If you are working on your Common Application essay, you might want to consider several different options from the choices they offer (a background story, a time when you experienced failure, a time when you challenged a belief, etc.), or you might have several ideas in one area (e.g., several background stories, several places where you are content.)
- If you are responding to a prompt other than the Common Application, keep an open mind and consider various stories that could effectively show readers something meaningful about you.

Here are two examples to help you.

Example #1

Prompt	Common App (A background story)
Story Idea	Teaching Ellie to swim
Notes	I worked with her all summer, she was scared, wouldn't put her face in the water, last day she finally tried it. I didn't feel frustrated, really wanted to help her. Pool was quiet that day, a little overcast, she was playful and trusted me.
What do I want readers to know about me?	I am patient and diligent. This was the first time I felt like I taught someone something. I want to do that again, whether as a swim instructor or in other aspects of my life.

Example #2

Prompt	Common App (A time I experienced failure)
Story Idea	Robotics competition
Notes	This year we almost won the State championship. Our coach always told us to focus on one important thing at a time. Under pressure, I remembered that advice, and encouraged my teammates to follow it. We worked so well together. Even though we didn't win, it was our best year yet.
What do I want readers to know about me?	I know how to focus and lead others. I apply the lessons I learn.

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Idea #1

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #2

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #3

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #4

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

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Step 3: Focus on Theme
Writing Exercise

My Prompt

In the space below, copy your prompt word for word. Even if your prompt is available elsewhere, record it here. You will refer back to it frequently as you write and revise your essay.

My Theme

A traditional personal statement is built around a theme, which has two parts: 1) What happened?
2) Why does it matter?

What happened?

What will you write about in your essay? Choose one scene/experience/moment from the ideas you came up with in Step 2. This is sometimes called your anchor story. You can add context later, but this is the central focus of your essay. Be brief. This is a snapshot, not an outline of your essay.

Why does it matter?

What does this story illustrate about you that the reader wouldn't know from the rest of your application? Focus on characteristics, not accomplishments. Be brief.

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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.

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Step 6: Review for Content – Write Outside the Essay Review Guidelines and Writing Exercise

Because we have read so many essays, we often convince ourselves that we immediately know what the student needs to do next. In truth, we owe it to the student and to ourselves to take a deep breath and absorb what we see on the page in front of us before jumping to conclusions.

As you move through the content phase of the essay and into the structure phase, it can be helpful to explore the essay's topic from a few different angles. This exercise and the one that follows (New Openings) help students do that. Completing these activities does not mean a student does not have the right content, or the essay doesn't have a strong opening. We're just trying to help students see the essay from a new perspective.

Before giving the student the Writing Outside the Essay assignment below, answer these questions:

1. Does the theme match the draft? In other words, is the essay beginning to achieve what the writer intended?
2. Does the essay address the prompt? In other words, have they answered the question?
3. If the essay does not address the prompt, would you suggest adjusting the prompt to match the draft or revising the draft to fit the prompt?

Assign the Exercise: Write Outside the Essay

Do not make a mark on the essay yet. Instead, identify three spots where the writer could elaborate and free write outside the essay.

Some possibilities:

- Identify places where more detail might make the essay more interesting.
- Find general statements. Ask the student to expand on what the generality means.
- Find spots that might benefit from more detail. Even if the essay “works” encourage the student to fill out some of the detail for the sake of exploring the essay.
- Ask for more reflection. If the student focused primarily on “What happened?” and “Why does it matter?” is not clear, ask the student to connect the dots.

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Step 6: Review for Content and Move Toward Structure – New Openings

Review Guidelines

This exercise helps students see their familiar essay from a new perspective. They will assume that you are asking them to explore new openings because the current one doesn't work. That is not necessarily the case, and as you move from Step 6 to Step 7, that will become clearer and clearer.

Assign the Exercise: New Openings

Note three spots in the essay or the Writing Outside the Essay free writes that the writer could explore as potential new openings. Keep in mind that the purpose of this exercise is to help the writer enter the essay from new perspectives, so they can consider alternatives and see the essay with fresh eyes. Don't feel pressure to identify the perfect new openings. This is not a formal editing exercise; it is all about revision/re-seeing.

Some possibilities:

- Choose a spot from the middle or end of the essay.
- Choose something from one of the Writing Outside the Essay free writes.
- Choose something that wouldn't be an obvious choice.
- Make a general suggestion (e.g., What if you started with the meeting on the pool deck? Try starting with the final tennis match.)

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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.

The Wow Method

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.

The Wow Method

- 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.