



The Wow Method – Essay Review Guidelines

The Wow Method

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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	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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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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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

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 (worksheet on following page)

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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Step 8: Review Draft 2 (Content + Structure)

Review Guidelines

The middle review focuses on content and structure. At this point the essay should be within the word count and moving toward its ultimate structure, though it might not be there quite yet.

Review Rubric

What did the student change/improve from the prior draft?

Where does the essay work well?

What could be improved? What could be done to improve clarity?

In the essay's margin, make comments and suggestions. Provide specific questions and recommendations, but do not edit the essay. Take a look back at the theme, the first draft and the Step 6 writing exercises (Writing Outside the Essay and New Openings). If you think some of the original content could be used more effectively, point out how and where. Be very specific. If you find a lot of areas that need improvement, focus on a handful for the first review, give the student a day or two to revise, then repeat this step with additional suggestions.

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Provide positive feedback whenever possible.

If your student's essay is veering into negative territory, try using this MadLib-type format to get them back on track:

- I know you're trying to convey _____ (I'm a committed volunteer) but it's coming across as _____ (I'm the only one who REALLY cares in my school.)
- I believe you. You sound like _____ (a really committed volunteer), but let's refocus on your audience and the purpose of this essay.
- If your audience was _____ (school administration) and you were trying to convince them to _____ (revamp the volunteer program), you might use this essay to _____ (demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the program).
- But your purpose is _____ (to demonstrate that you will be a great addition to the campus community) so you need to focus on _____ (yourself, not you in comparison to others.)

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Step 10: Final Review

Review Guidelines

It's easy to be critical when reading late drafts. We often want essays to be perfect, but perfection should not be the goal. Instead, strive for student growth and development. Does the voice shine through? Has the student made progress? When reviewing student work during the polish phase, after they have revised, we recommend the following:

1. Step away from the computer and put down your pen. Read the draft once without comment or judgment.
2. Read it again, still without comments.
3. What do you like about this draft? Make some notes about what the student did well.
4. What do you remember after reading it? What do you think admissions officers will remember? Note that as well.
5. Think about how much better the essay could be in four years, when the student graduates from college. Think about how much better it could be if polished by a professional. Then think about your 17-year-old student. It should sound like it was written by a high school senior. Don't let the vision of perfection cloud your ability to live in the present.
6. Focus on the essay's growth, not its potential. How did the piece develop? What did the student learn to do while writing it? Write that down.
7. As much as possible, make comments, not edits. Ask questions and focus on reflection. See yourself as a reviewer, not an editor.
8. Stay positive. At this point, the student is nearly done. Let go of the imperfect essay!

Review Rubric

The final review is primarily for polish. Consider how the essay has developed and what the student has accomplished along the way. The essay may not be perfect, but it should demonstrate some growth and change. Make any minor edits directly on the essay. Keep final edits to a bare minimum.

Editing/Proofreading Question	Notes If this area is problematic, mark a few examples on the essay
Uses consistent verb tense throughout	
Avoids sentence fragments and run-on sentences	
Has correct and consistent punctuation	
Spelling is correct	
Words are used accurately	
Primarily uses active voice	
Stays within word count guidelines	

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Step 10: Final Review (Guidelines for an Outside Proofreader)

If you are working with an outside proofreader, be sure to provide context so they know what to look for. These are the messages and guidelines we suggest sharing before they begin proofreading your students' essays.

During proofreading, we are reviewing for consistency and clarity only. The writer is a high school student and should sound like one. For our purposes, a proofreader is strictly a reviewer, not an editor.

Given the amount of time and effort that the student has put into the essay, please accept that the coach has taken the student as far as they are able and willing to go as a writer and thinker. A college essay should be effective. It does not have to be a piece of literary art.

We follow the ten-step Wow Method, which means that the essay has already gone through three phases:

Phase 1 - Content: We agreed on a topic, established a theme for the essay and considered how it fits into the larger application package.

Phase 2 - Structure: We discussed how the writer moves through the essay, including how to begin, how to end, how to balance the central story/moment/message with other context, and how much detail to share.

Phase 3 - Polish: We reviewed the essay for clarity and consistency, just as you are doing now. As the proofreader, you are double-checking the polish phase. That's it!

Here's what a proofreader should look for:

Consistent punctuation. If the writer likes the Oxford comma, great. If not, that's fine too. Just make sure they use it the same way throughout. Watch for semicolons, dashes, etc. Student writers are famous for inconsistent punctuation.

Accurate spelling. All words should be spelled correctly and consistently.

Consistent use of numbers or numerals. If you think one through nine should be spelled out and numbers over 10 written in numerals, that's fine. If you have a different standard, that's fine too. If a number is the first word of a sentence, it should be spelled out.

Clarity. If a sentence is incomprehensible, mark it; if you can think of a better way to say the same thing, keep your suggestion to yourself.

Malapropisms and homonyms. If the writer uses *collaborate* instead of *corroborate*, mark it and note the correct word. If they use bear/bare incorrectly, do the same.