

## 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.

## 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.

- 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!!!

### **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.

- 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.