



Willingness and Ability

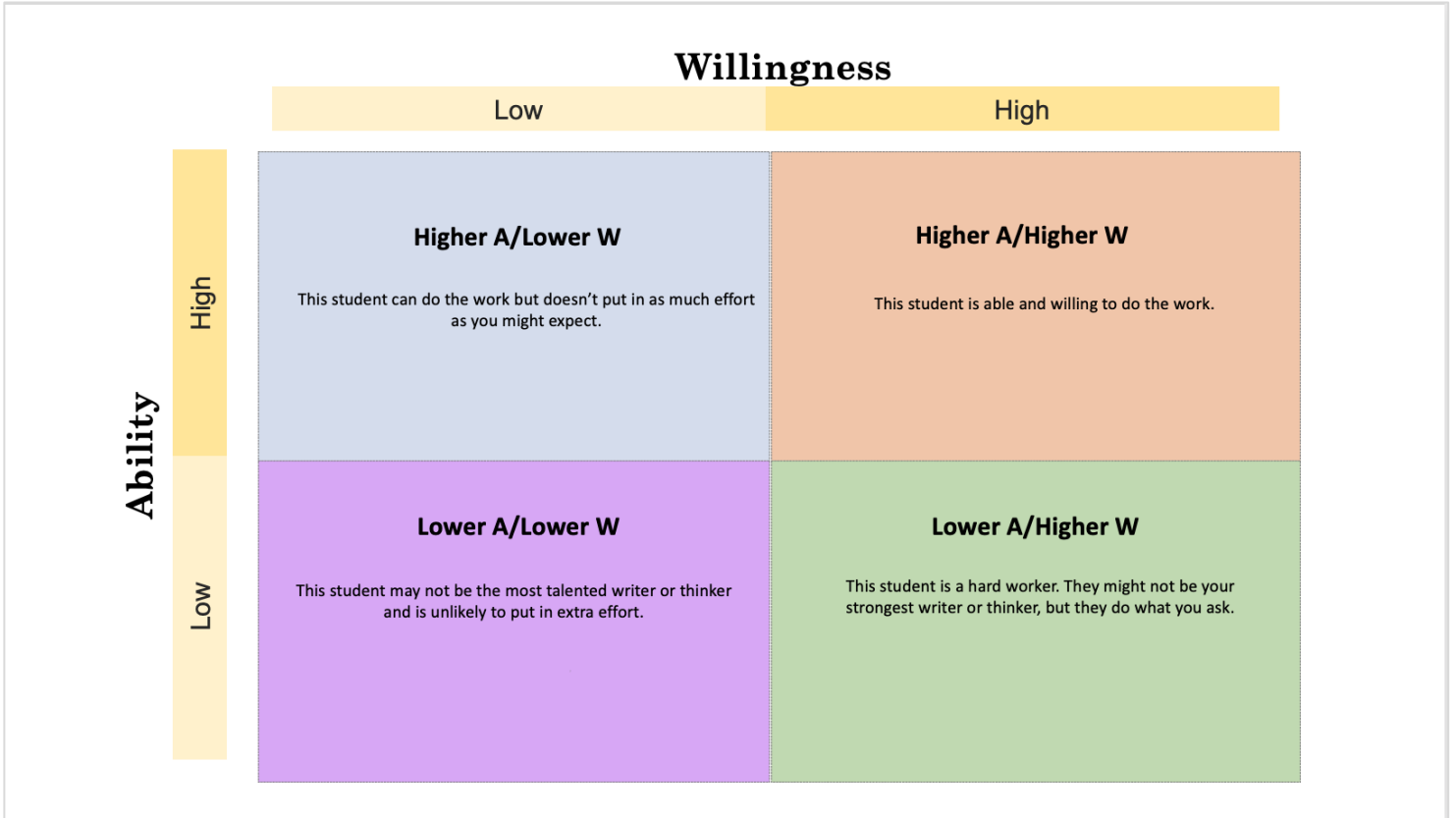
Prepared by Susan Knoppow, CEO
susan@wowwritingworkshop.com

with

Mira Simon: mira@coachmira.com

Abbie Rabin: abbie@personalizedcollegeconsulting.com

Overview: Willingness and Ability

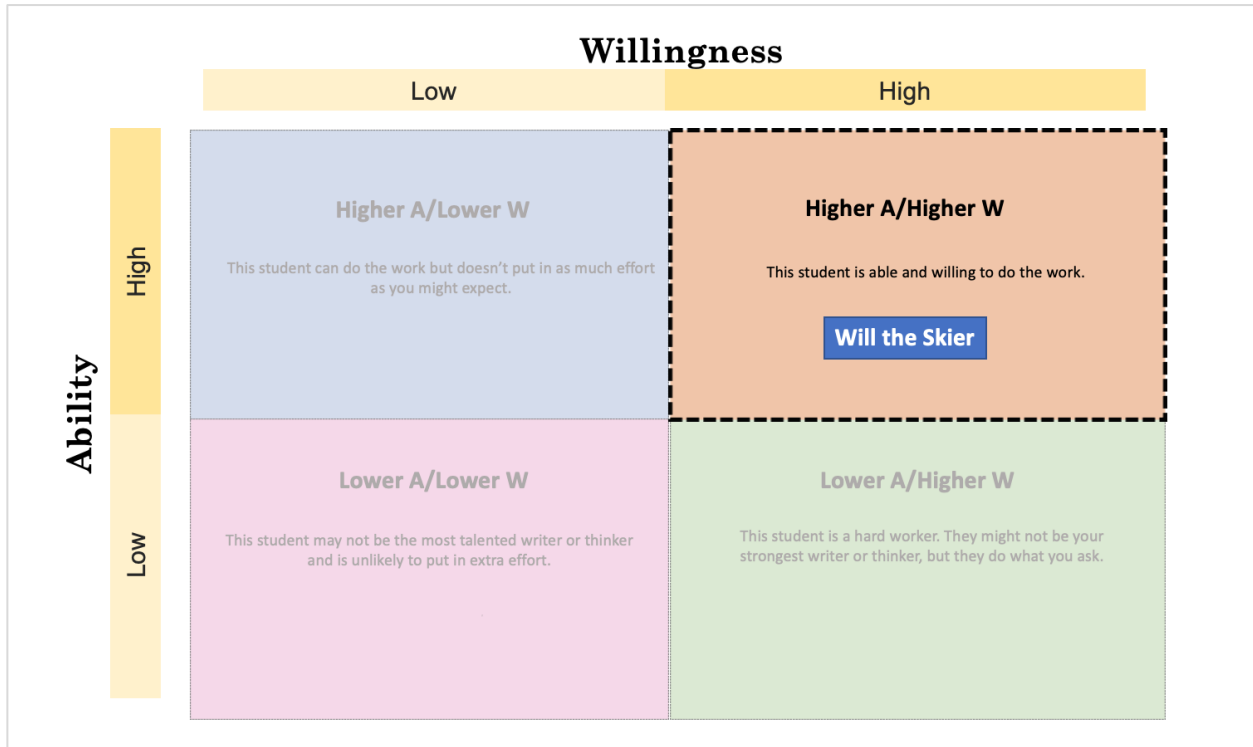


Factors to Consider

Ability	Willingness
Writing skills	Interest in the task
Creativity	Distractions and opportunities (spending time with friends, travel)
Complex thinking	Urgency (Does applying to college feel important?)
Time constraints	Commitment to the task (Is this student usually a hard worker? Or do things tend to come easily?)
Time management skills	Rigor (Are they likely to get into these schools regardless of how much time and effort they put in?)
Work constraints (when work is necessary – for money, responsibility, etc.)	Work constraints (when work is not absolutely necessary, or the schedule can be adjusted)
Family pressure/expectations	<i>And more ...</i>
Stress	
Mental health	
Learning challenges	
<i>And more ...</i>	

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 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).

Other situations that fit in this quadrant (Wow students)

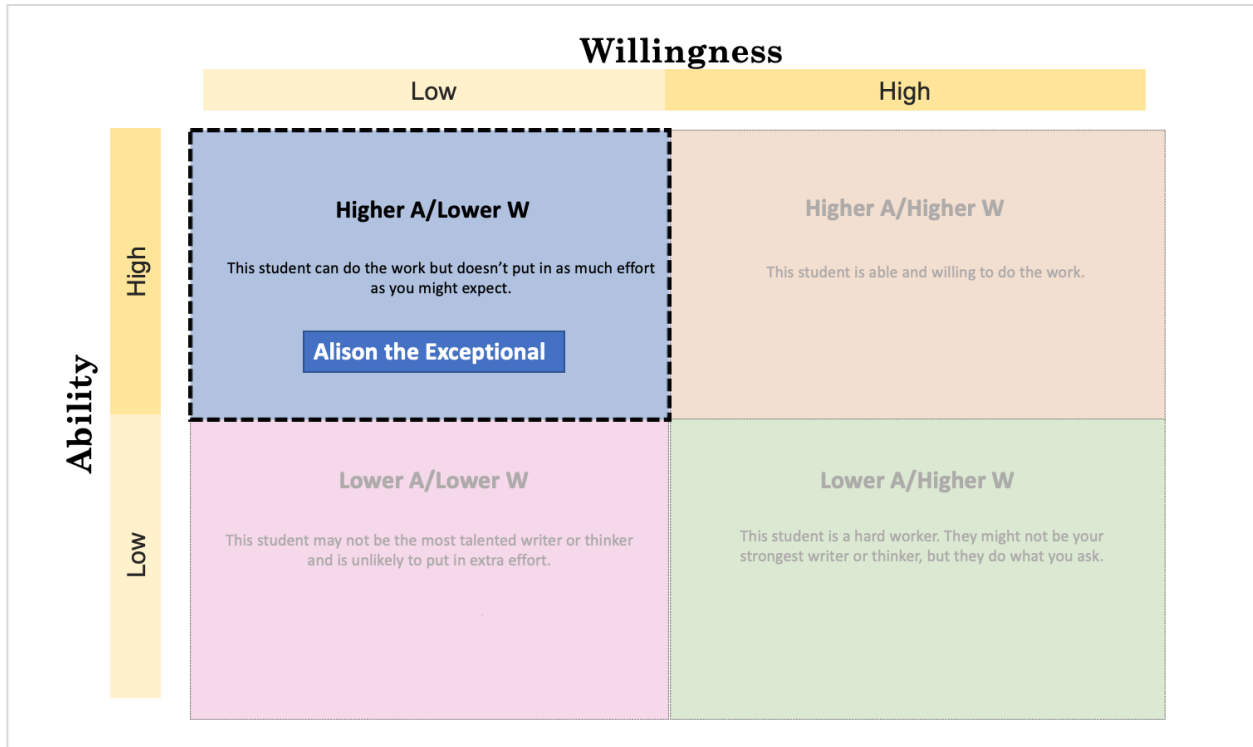
Susan: Ari

Ari was a nationally ranked tennis player and brilliant student – the kind of kid who really can get into Yale.

- Was only able to work on essays on the weekend – generally late Saturday afternoons and Sundays
- She had no time during the week – school, practice, matches
- She knew what it took to succeed in her high-pressure world. She told me what she needed and how she worked.
- I followed her lead and she did an outstanding job.

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!

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.

Other examples that fit in this quadrant (Wow students)

Susan: Sienna

Sienna wrote an essay in English class, got an A, and didn't want to keep working on it.

- Explain how the essay fits in context of the application. This might have helped her shift to the right. In this case it didn't.
- I offered a few ways for her to improve the essay, then left it alone. The essay was passable – not great, not terrible. We moved on to supplements, and she was thrilled when she was done sooner than her friends.

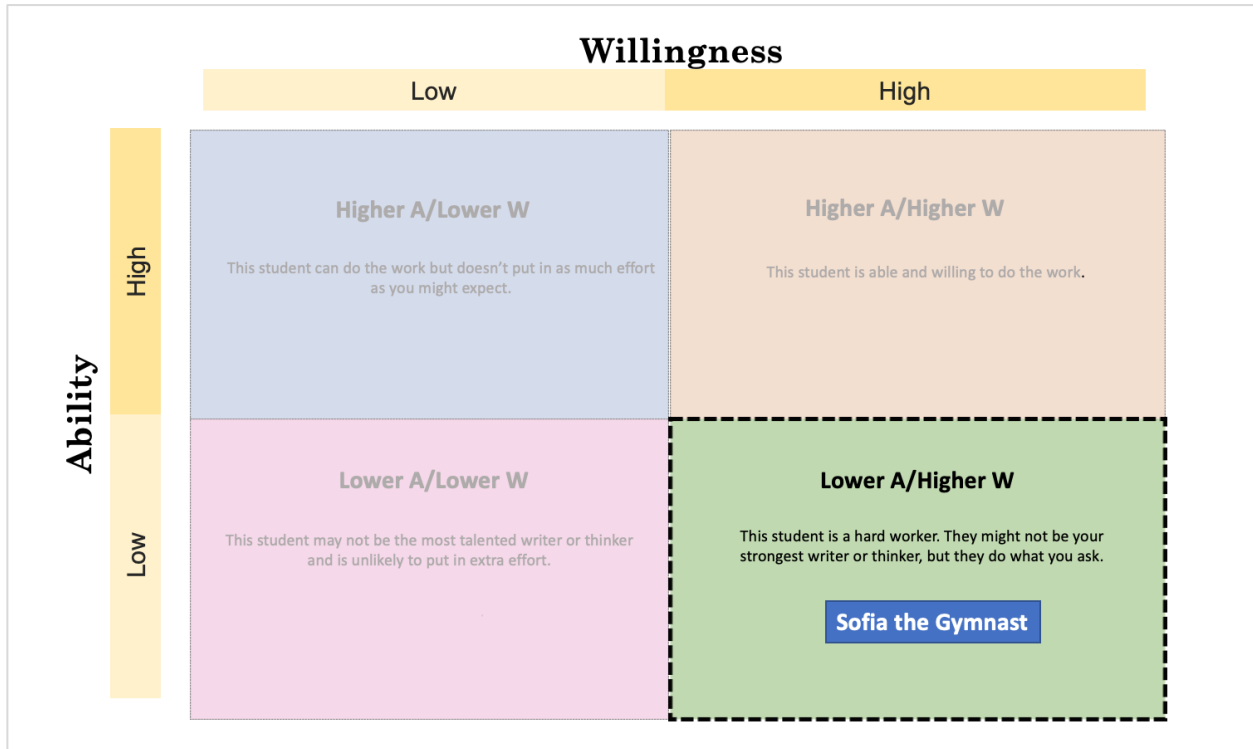
Susan: Leo

Leo was a bright student who was trying not to get too stressed out about applications.

- They had good reasons for not giving it their all.
- They were busy with the school play, work and spending time with friends.
- Leo was qualified for the schools they applied to. They didn't have to push too hard.

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 a 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 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 Sofia 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.

Other examples that fit in this quadrant (Wow Students)

Kim: Riley

Riley did everything I said, followed every instruction, asked questions if he had them and met his deadlines.

- While he was not a deep thinker, he still did everything I asked, was willing to do extra work, and turned in a final product that was beautiful and perfectly imperfect - the way we like it.
- I let him be done when I thought he was done working. He came back to me, and said he wanted to improve the essay.
- That is how I knew he was willing to do the hard work.
- I made the choice to give him another chance to write another draft. It was so much better.

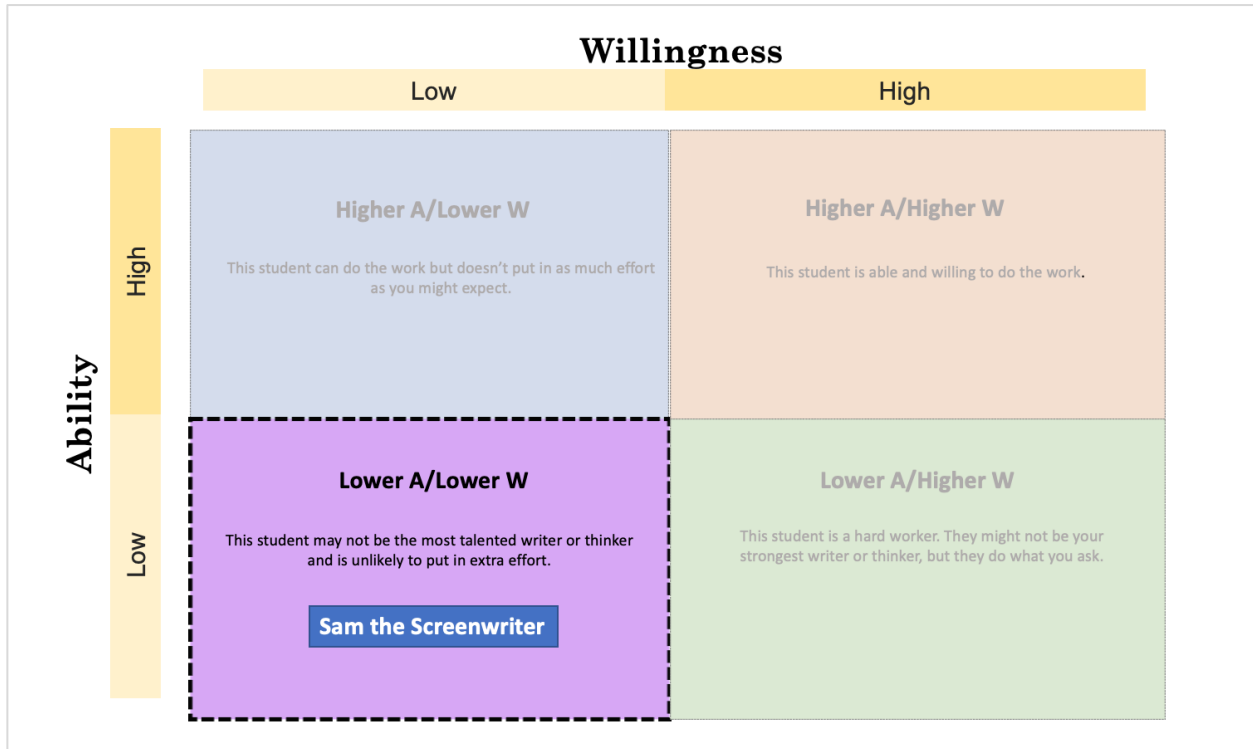
Joe: Noah

From the beginning, Noah was open about how he found writing challenging.

- From his first communication with me, even before our brainstorm, I could see that he struggled with grammar and used repetitive sentence structure. (He even pointed out that he sounded repetitive when commenting on his morning writing.)
- That being said, he followed directions and never missed a deadline.
- During our brainstorm, I was delighted to discover that he understood the big picture goals of the essay very well.
- He had a clear story to tell and a positive characteristic that his story clearly illustrated.
- He could talk about his experiences and reflect on them. He just struggled to express them in writing.
- When he sent me a first draft that was much too short (about 250 words), I didn't assume that he was being lazy. I already knew that writing was a struggle for him, so I took the draft seriously and discovered that it actually contained most of the story's main ideas.
- I could tell that he was working in good faith, so I knew that the Wow process would work for him.
- I just guided him through the process, with a special focus on elaborating key details.
- After five drafts, his essay still sounded repetitive and was only about 500 words long, but I knew he was finished.
- He clearly communicated everything that he wanted to say and showcased a positive side of his personality. It didn't sound eloquent, but it sounded like him.
- When we finished, I didn't lie to him and say that it was the best essay I'd ever read. Instead, I celebrated his hard work and clear theme, and pointed out how far the essay had come since draft 1.
- Both Alex and his mother were delighted. They knew that, for him, this was an impressive essay.

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.

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!!

Other examples that fit in this quadrant (Wow Students)

Kim: Celia

Celia wrote an essay in English class. It focused on something negative.

- She is super insecure but acts tough.
- She did not want to do more work.
- My goal was to just help her improve her theme, make it more specific and more positive.
- I helped her find a theme, a prompt and took her to step 6 to get more content.
- It worked. She had specific examples.
- She still submitted generic work.
- In the end, she made it better, changing to tone to be more
- She is able, not that talented, did the work, but did not put in a lot of effort.

David: Elliott

Elliott was a nice kid, able to do the work, though wasn't the strongest writer or most reflective.

- He wanted to do well and get into his schools but consistently had trouble meeting deadlines, probably because of a mix of being busy with school, the pandemic, and just not pushing himself to finish his essays for whatever reason.
- His mom was a little bit too relieved that we'd be taking him off her hands.
- He'd need me to prompt him with questions to build content after draft 1, and he also needed polishing suggestions to help with clarity, though in hindsight, I could have given him less feedback on each essay to help us work more efficiently – His essays still would have been effective.
- He took much longer than expected to complete his essays.
- Based on past experience, I used weekly meetings, email and text reminders, parent check-ins, and a mix of encouragement and "you need to get this done" direction to try to get him on track.
- He ended up writing effective essays that he felt pretty good about, though the experience felt harder than it should have for both of us.
- This season, I'm really learning to pay attention to willingness and ability right away and reacting accordingly, instead of waiting until things are going poorly, can make a big difference.