

# The College Essay

---

Becky Bowlby, Misty Whelan, and Abbey Morris

Becky Bowlby

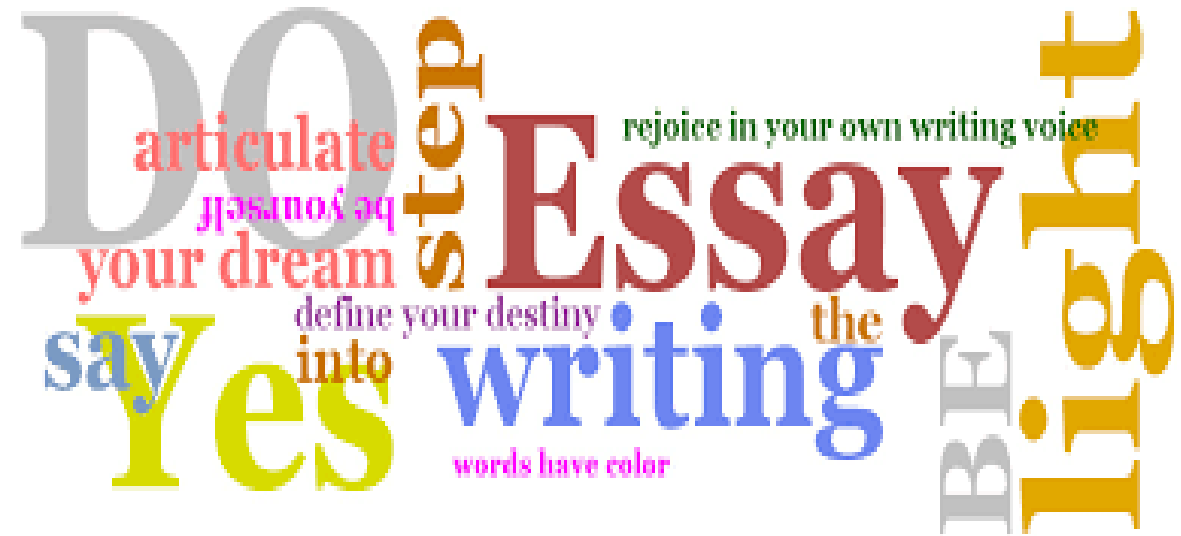
College Access Counselor  
Lower Merion High School

Misty Whelan

Career and College Access Counselor  
Harriton High School

Abbey Morris

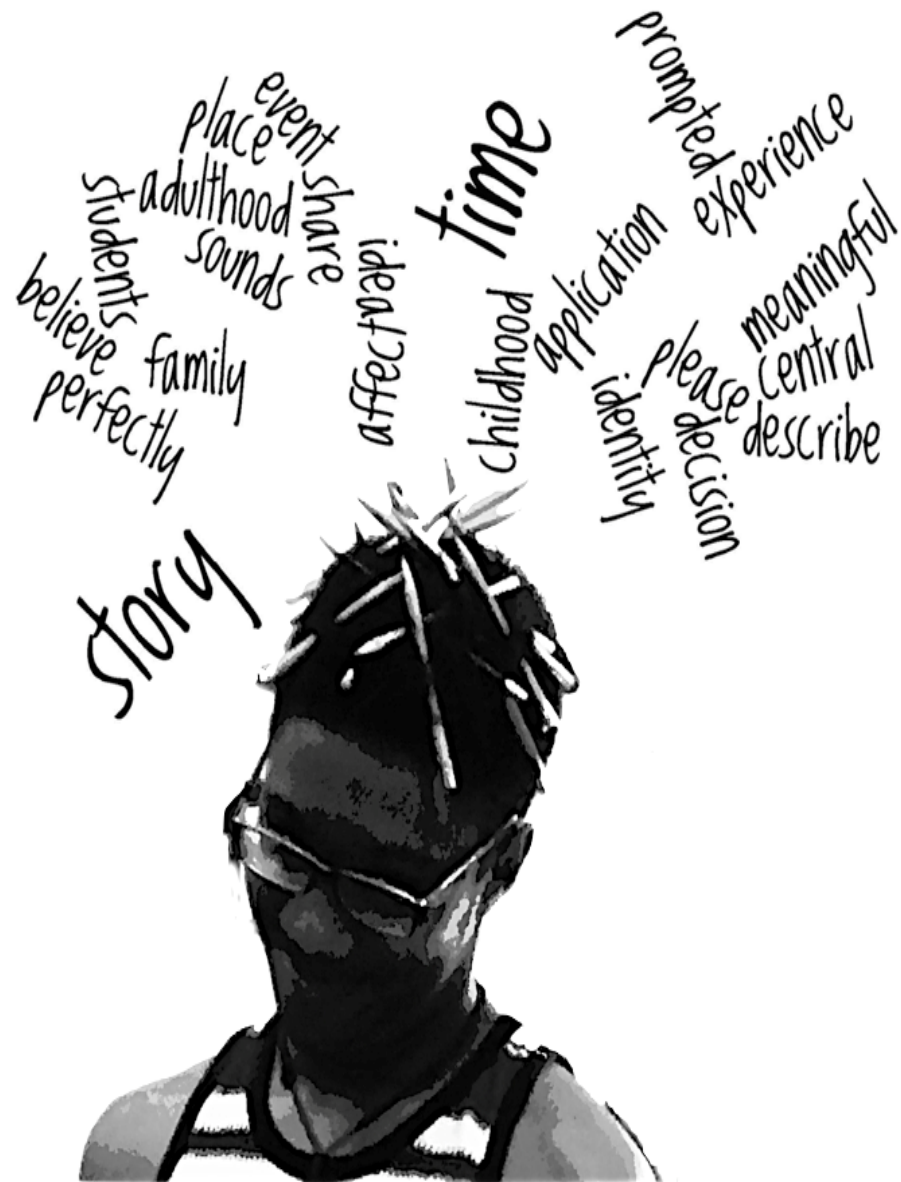
Associate Director of Admission  
Saint Joseph's University





# Agenda

- Overview of the college essay
- Fact or Fiction
- Pre-writing is important
- The essay structure
- The Common App prompts
- Telling Your Story
- Proofreading tips
- Do's and Don'ts
- How to get started
- Q & A



# The College Essay is....

- A unique opportunity
  - A tool to set yourself apart
  - The vehicle to bring to life those aspects about you that can't be found anywhere else in your application
- 
- A Personal Statement about 650 words
  - No more than 2 pages double-spaced, 12pt font
  - 1-2 additional short answer essays/application
  - Required or recommended by many but not all colleges and universities
  - A substantial amount of work – embrace it
- 
- Long essay
  - Short answer essay

# Fact or Fiction?

1

Admission committees put the most weight on your high school grades.

Fact

2

Admission Officers spend 20-30 minutes reading your essay.

Fiction

3

You should always use humor in order to make your essay memorable.

Fiction

4

Summer trips, volunteer work abroad, COVID are topics that everyone should consider.

Fiction

5

You should have multiple people edit your essay before submitting it.

Fact

6

You can use the same essay over and over again and just change the name of the college.

Fiction



# Getting started...

## Brainstorm!

- Brainstorming refers to quickly writing down or taking inventory of all your thoughts as fast as they come to you.
- Your ideas are like a gigantic storm swirling around in your brain, and it's your job to get them out of your head.

# Write about something that is important to **you**.

---



- an experience
- a person
- a book
- something that has impacted your life
- anecdotal (real), controversial, memorable
- reveals your character and values

❖ **It is okay to be forthright, candid, and bold.**

❖ **It is a personal decision to write about pain you have experienced but it is okay.**

# My Essence Activity



Imagine a box

In the box is a set of items

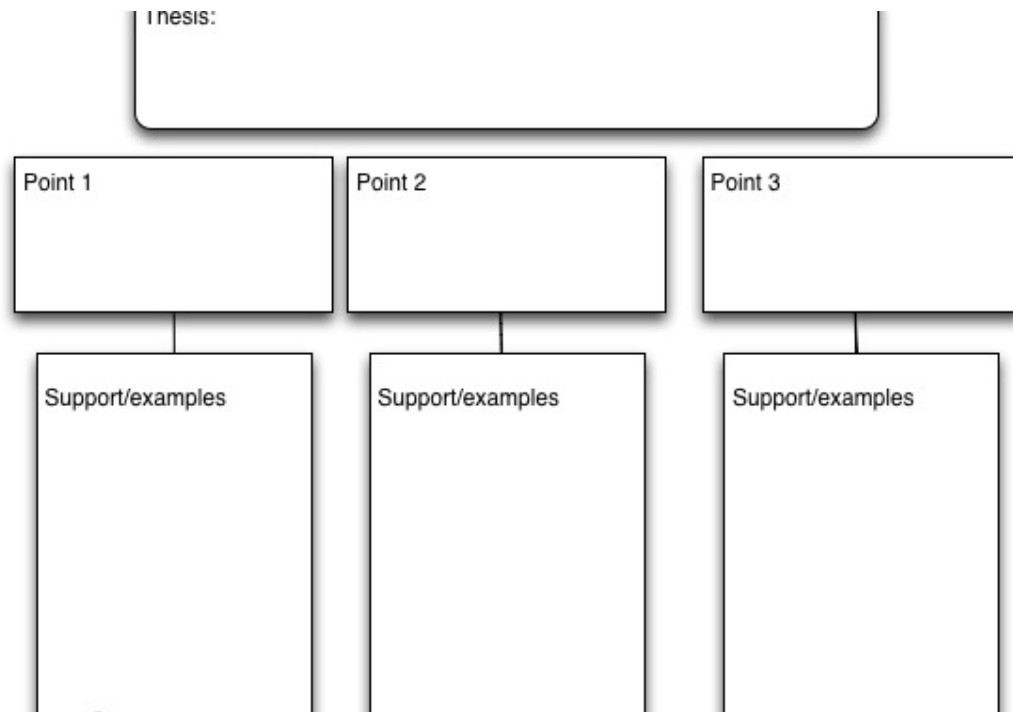
Imagine that each one of these is an “essence object”. It has meaning to you but you don’t have to explain it

Use your imagination

Come up with 5-10 items for your box

Freewriting usually takes the shape of more formal sentences. Even so, grammar, punctuation, and the like should be far from your mind.

It is difficult to jump into outlining without having done some preliminary work with one of the other techniques.



Pre-writing is important!



## Develop three essay parts:

- Introduction
- Body (Explain main ideas with examples)
- Conclusion

## Grab the reader's attention

The first board game I ever played was Disney Princess Monopoly against my mother.

The sound was loud and discordant, like a hurricane, high notes and low notes mixing together in an audible mess

For as long as I can remember, one of my favorite pastimes has been manipulating those tricky permutations of 26 letters to fill in that signature, bright green gridded board of Wheel of Fortune

This is the first stanza of a piece of slam poetry my friend and I wrote and performed at our school's rendition of TED Talks

# Common App Essay Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

# Common App Essay Prompts

4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

# The questions are not a secret – Go get them!



- You are required to spend the next year of your life in either the past or the future. What year would you travel to and why?
- To tweet or not to tweet?
- If your name were an acronym, what would it stand for and how would it reflect your strengths and personality?
- Winston Churchill believed ‘a joke is a very serious thing.’ Tell us your favorite joke and try to explain the joke without ruining it.
- Celebrate your nerdy side.



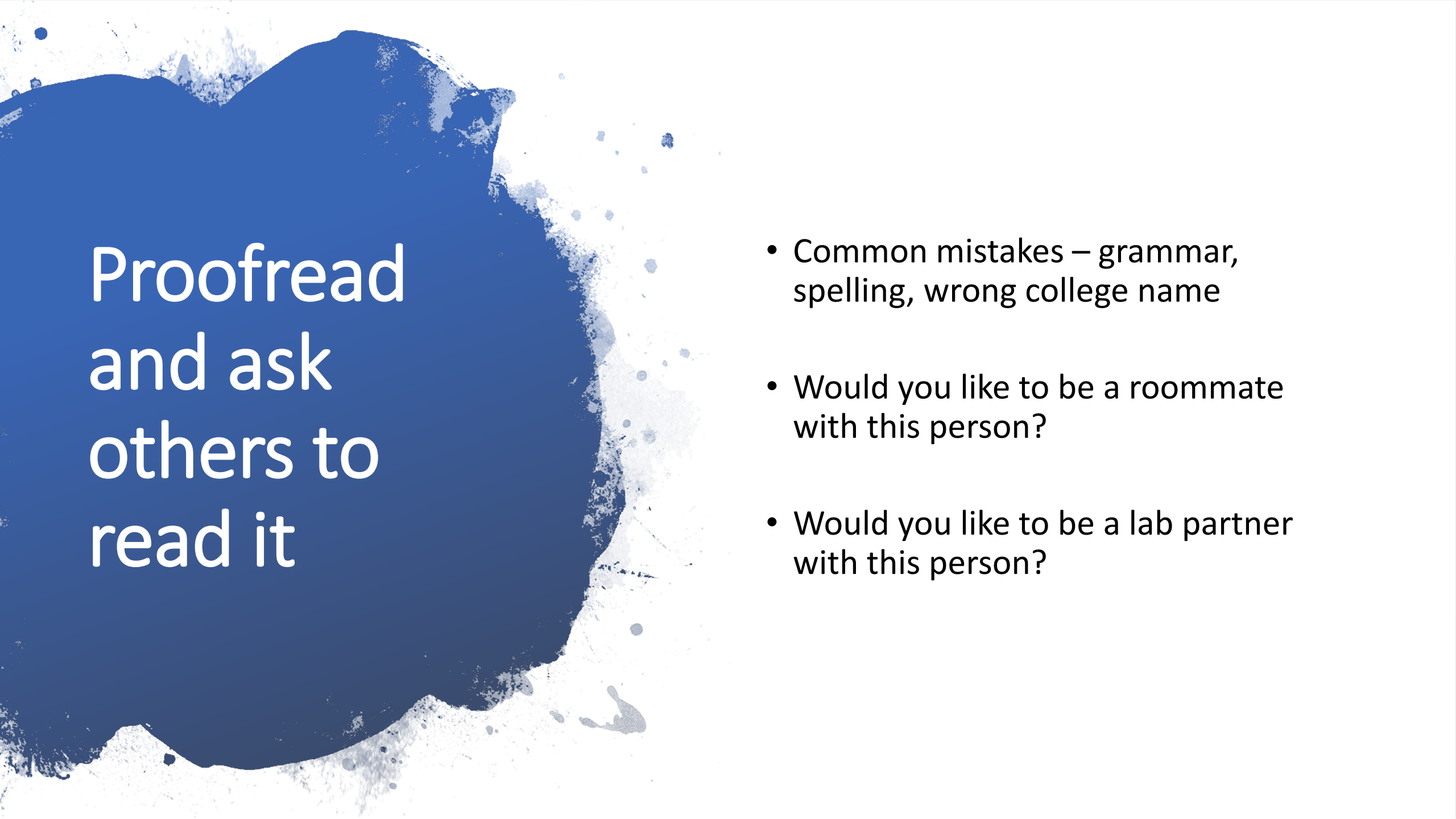
# Tell your story!

- Be honest and genuine
- Don't try to sound smart – just be you!
- **Boring and Generic:** *"I want to help people. I have gotten so much out of life through the love and guidance of my family. I feel that many individuals have not been as fortunate; therefore, I would like to expand the lives of others."*
- **Much Better:** *"My Mom and Dad stood on plenty of sidelines 'til their shoes filled with water or their fingers turned white, or somebody's golden retriever signed his name on their coats in mud. That kind of commitment is what I'd like to bring to working with fourth-graders."*

# Be Specific and Creative



- Describe what you learned from the experience and how it changed you
- It should be original and well written.
- Convey who you are in a way that is not seen by any other part of your application
- **Answer the question being asked**



Proofread  
and ask  
others to  
read it

- Common mistakes – grammar, spelling, wrong college name
- Would you like to be a roommate with this person?
- Would you like to be a lab partner with this person?



## **Make changes**



## **Reflect**

Does it sound like you?

Is the essay interesting?

Does it contradict any other part of your application?



## **Write several drafts**

Set it aside for a few days and read it again.

Do the ideas flow logically?





Should you use humor? Maybe...



What you think is funny and what an adult working in a college thinks is funny are probably different.



Are you naturally funny? Don't try to be someone you are not.



Warning – no one-liners, limericks and anything off-color.

# Do

- Share your **personal** story and thoughts
- Write vividly and honestly
- Be genuine, using your real voice and use your own words.
- Focus on one aspect of yourself so the readers can learn more about who you are
- Write about a real experience that you had and how it made you feel
- Ask a teacher or parent to proofread your essay to catch mistakes

# Don't

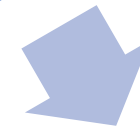
- Focus on the great aspects of a particular college
- Try to cover too many topics.
- Write in clichés!
- Use overly formal or business-like language
- Use unnecessary words or acronyms
- “Spill your guts “– this is not a diary, it is not meant to be therapeutic
- Write a humorous essay if you are not funny
- Plagiarize

Choose 3 items

Will this topic highlight me?

Can I be specific and show the reader who I am?

Is it narrow enough or do I need to scale it down?



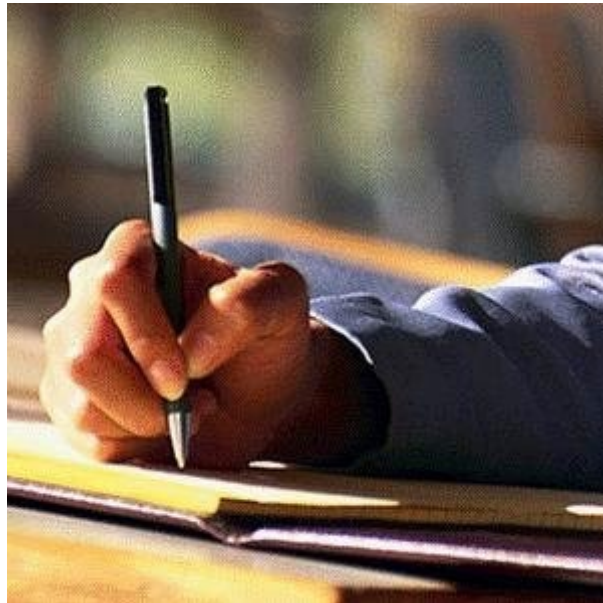
Exit ticket

Write your opening line

**Next workshop:**

**Completing your Common Application and SRAR**

**August 19, 11am – 12noon sign up on:  
(list link)**



Becky Bowlby  
College Access Counselor  
Lower Merion High School  
[bowlbyb@lmsd.org](mailto:bowlbyb@lmsd.org)

Misty Whelan  
Career and College Access Counselor  
Harrilton High School  
[whelanm@lmsd.org](mailto:whelanm@lmsd.org)

Abbey Morris  
Associate Director of Admission  
Saint Joseph's University  
[amorris@sju.edu](mailto:amorris@sju.edu)