



# The College Essay: putting yourself on paper.

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# A Bit About Me

11<sup>TH</sup> YEAR OF TEACHING

BA IN CREATIVE WRITING  
FROM SEATTLE UNIVERSITY

M.I.T FROM SEATTLE  
UNIVERSITY

ESSAYS AND POETRY  
PUBLISHED IN BOTH ONLINE  
AND PRINT LITERARY  
MAGAZINES

4-YEAR-OLD SON

TWO RESCUE DOGS AND  
FIVE CHICKENS

# Why are you at the BSD College Conference?

## Think and write

- ▶ Is college important to you? Why or why not?
- ▶ What is motivating you to go to college?
- ▶ What are your plans once you graduate college?

## Audience share



THE  
IMPORTANCE  
OF THE  
COLLEGE  
ESSAY

DO THEY *REALLY* READ  
EVERYONE'S ESSAY?

DOES THE QUALITY OF MY  
ESSAY *REALLY* MATTER?

The short answer(s)? YES  
AND YES!

When reading your essay colleges and universities may consider questions such as:

Do we want to spend four years with this student?

How is this student going to make our college/university a better and more interesting place?

Does this student “fit” our school’s mission and philosophy?

# Things for you to consider

Admission DOES NOT rest entirely on  
your essay.

However, if your grades and test scores  
are TOO LOW, not even the most  
phenomenal essay will get you  
admission.

Disparity between the quality of your  
essay and your grades and test scores  
raise concerns about academic  
honesty.

The essay is the portion of your college  
application that you have the most  
control over, so USE IT to your  
advantage!

Edit, revise, edit, revise...if you put in the  
work, YOU WILL become a better writer!

“Don’t try to figure out what other people want to hear from you; figure out what you have to say. It’s the one and only thing you have to offer.”

-Barbara Kingsolver

“Not that the story need be long, but it will take a long while to make it short.”

-Henry David Thoreau

STRATEGIES FOR HOW TO WRITE AN ENGAGING AND ORIGINAL  
COLLEGE ESSAY

Tell	Show
<b>I was tired and couldn't move.</b>	The lids of my eyes hung heavy, like wet bags of sand. I flopped down upon the couch, exhausted and defeated. Motionless, I sat for hours. The tick of the clock and the hum of the refrigerator mocked me with every passing second.
<b>My mom tried to make me, but I didn't want to go.</b>	Though my mother pulled with the strength of a locomotive, my feet remained rooted into the ground. If she wanted me to go, she would have to rip me from the house.

# Showing vs. Telling



# Be original and avoid clichés

- ▶ Avoid clichés! Do not say “time stopped” or “I climbed the highest mountain” or “my path to learning is long.”
- ▶ If you want to say something profound or use an analogy, put it into your original, unique voice; say something that hasn’t been said before.

# Style Choices to Consider

- ▶ Use 1<sup>st</sup> person point of view (never 2<sup>nd</sup> person “you”).
- ▶ Play around with transitions.
- Vary sentence length (syntax) to give your essay an interesting rhythm.
- It's okay to look up words in a thesaurus; however, don't CHOOSE a word you don't know. Even more powerful is using common words in unexpected ways—“my mother barked orders at me” or “the window wept with raindrops.”



# Content considerations

- ▶ Do NOT tell your whole life story. Instead, focus on a moment in your life or something specific you want to share.
- ▶ Tell YOUR story, not someone else's.
- ▶ If you are telling a sad story, you must show the reader that you somehow took control and do not see yourself as a martyr.
- ▶ The college essay is NOT a resume.
- ▶ Keep it simple and unique.

# Tips on how to get started



READ THE COMMON AND COALITION APP PROMPTS AND KEEP THEM IN MIND.

START EARLY AND WRITE OFTEN.

WRITERS ARE INSPIRED BY JUST ABOUT ANYTHING, SO PAY ATTENTION TO YOUR SURROUNDINGS.

YOU NEVER KNOW WHEN INSPIRATION WILL STRIKE! KEEP A SMALL NOTEBOOK WITH YOU OR USE THE NOTES APP ON YOUR PHONE TO A WRITE DOWN IDEAS.

READ! READ! READ! THE MORE YOU READ THE BETTER WRITER YOU WILL BECOME.

# Once you've chosen 2 prompts...

- BRAINSTORM EVERY POSSIBILITY FOR EACH
- CHOOSE 1 IDEA FROM YOUR BRAINSTORM AND WRITE DOWN EVERYTHING YOU CAN REMEMBER
- IF YOU DON'T LIKE WHAT YOU WROTE, TRY A DIFFERENT IDEA OR CHOOSE A NEW PROMPT AND GO BACK TO BRAINSTORMING
- WRITE A DRAFT ONCE YOU DECIDE ON AN IDEA
- READ YOUR WORK OUT LOUD
- EDIT/REVISE
- ASK YOUR FRIENDS, RELATIVES, AND TEACHERS TO READ YOUR WORK
- EDIT/REVISE
- AND REMEMBER TO LEAVE YOUR EGO AT THE DOOR

# Before you begin writing—Natalie Goldberg's Rules for Free Writing

- ▶ Keep your hand moving; don't pause to reread the line you have just written (that's stalling and trying to get control of what you're saying.)
- ▶ Don't cross out; that's editing as you write (even if you write something you didn't mean to write, leave it.)
- ▶ Don't worry about spelling/punctuation/grammar; don't even care about staying within the margins and lines on the page.
- ▶ Lose control.
- ▶ Don't think. Don't get logical.
- ▶ Go for the jugular! If something comes up in your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it (it probably has lots of energy.)
- ▶ Goldberg, Natalie. *Writing down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Shambhala Publications, Inc., 2005.

# Common Questions



**Q. When should I start writing my essay?**

A. The summer going into Senior year.

**Q. My life is so boring, and I haven't had to struggle...what do I write about?**

A. You don't have to experience hardship to write a great essay.

**Q. Can I write about my immigration experience?**

A. Of course! It's all in the way you show it.

**Q. Are there any topics that are "off-limits"?**

A. Not necessarily; however, consider the following:

Do you want colleges/universities to know about a personal tragedy or struggle you've faced?

Are you telling your story or someone else's?

Are other applicants going to write about the same thing? If so, how will your essay be different?

Is writing about your move in 8<sup>th</sup> grade from CA to WA, a sports injury, your parents' marital trouble, your sister's struggle to find herself, or Covid really the story you want to share?



Questions?