

Brainstorming Exercise Workbook



SHORT BRAINSTORMING EXERCISES

Time: 20–25 min

The exercises below will take a few minutes each. Some may seem random at first, but give them a shot. You may actually find your essay topic.

#1

I Love + I Know

Spend a minute or two making a random list of things you love. If you have a partner nearby, set a timer and speak your list aloud while your partner writes down what you say. Examples: I love ... the ocean. I love ... the way clean laundry smells. I love ... physics. I love ... my grandmother's pupusas. Then switch roles. [Here's a video of Ethan doing this one.](#)

I love...	I know / I could geek out on...
e.g. Games, Tea, Teaching, Blank page, Pens that write well...	e.g. College essays, Snacks, Free throw form, Facilitation...

#2

Essence Objects

Spend at least five minutes naming 10 **essence objects**. These are tangible things that represent memories, moments, relationships, or values that are important to you. Briefly say why each one is meaningful (e.g. "The beads on my desk were hand-painted by my friends and they represent the love from my community.")

My essence objects and why they're meaningful...

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Here are 20 questions to help you brainstorm:

- What's an object that reminds you of home?
- What object makes you feel safe?
- What's a food that reminds you of your family?
- What object represents a challenge you've faced?
- What's a dream or goal you have for the future?
- What's something about you that sometimes surprises people?



- Who are you with and what are you doing when you feel most like yourself?
- What brings you joy?
- What's hanging on your bedroom walls?
- What are you proud of?
- What's an object that reminds you of something that still feels unresolved in your life?
- What's an object that represents something you know now that you didn't know five years ago?
- What action or gesture represents love to you?
- What do you like to do that does not involve technology?
- What will you save for your child someday?
- What's the most memorable meal you've ever eaten or made?
- What's in your bag right now? Anything that's always there?
- What do you like to collect?
- What have you kept from a trip?
- What's something that people associate with you?

#3 Random Questions

Spend 3–5 minutes answering some of these questions. Pick whichever ones you want. Feel free to skip around.

- **What is / are your actual superpower(s)?** (This is a great one to answer.)
- What's your favorite story to tell?
- What traditions have been passed down in your family?
- What's perfect about your life?
- When is a time you forgave someone or were forgiven for something?
- What's a class you'd love to take, even if no such class exists?
- How do you make people laugh?
- When in life have you felt most alone?
- What's your biggest secret?
- What would you tell your younger self?
- If the zombie apocalypse came tomorrow, what particular skill(s) would you use to survive?
- What does your inner voice tell you?
- What's missing from your life?
- What thing could you never give up?
- What's one thing you wake up to in the middle of the night worrying about?
- What are you hiding?
- Who or what makes you laugh?
- What are you ready to let go of?

My answers...

#4 Career

Name a career, or several careers, you're interested in. Name 4–7 qualities/values you possess that will make you great in that career. Or name 4–7 qualities of "the ideal person" in that career.

Example: Entrepreneur

Creativity · Productivity / Effectiveness · Inclusion · Fun · Autonomy · Helping others · Adaptability

Career(s) I'm interested in	Qualities / values that will make me great
Write your career(s) here...	List qualities here...

THE VALUES EXERCISE

Instructions: Highlight and **bold** the 10 values you connect with most. Of those 10, underline your top 5. Finally, italicize your top 3. ([Download a printable copy here.](#))

personal development	cooperation	meaningful work	wonder
safety	vulnerability	strength	success
courage	efficiency	second chances	collaboration
recognition	growth	trust	health and fitness
creativity	global awareness	flexibility	independence
self-love	stability	listening	spirituality
accountability	authenticity	self-expression	love
knowledge	hunger	financial stability	variety
ritual	humor	family	social change
inspiration	practicality	fun	close relationships
inclusion	my country	empathy	community
purpose	truth	excitement	honesty
music	nature	rationality	humility
curiosity	sleep	belonging	patience
privacy	order	travel	mindfulness
helping others	objectivity	democracy	art
gratitude	productivity	equity	challenges
freedom	excellence	adventure	grace
peace	leadership	self-control	responsibility
faith	intuition	resourcefulness	autonomy
quiet	religion	laughter	wealth
diversity	wisdom	balance	loyalty
communication	culture	decisiveness	_____
compassion	beauty	entrepreneurship	_____
expertise	respect	adaptability	_____
interdependence	healthy boundaries	competence	_____

ROLES AND IDENTITIES EXERCISE

Bold the 10 roles you identify with most.

Activist	Adventurer	Advocate	Aficionado	Ally	Ambassador
Amplifier	Analyzer	Anticipator	Architect	Artist	Assembler
Attuner	Author	Big picture thinker	Bookworm	Builder	Catalyst
Challenger	Champion	Change-maker	Cheerleader	Climate protector	Collaborator
Collector	Comedian	Composer	Connector	Consensus builder	Contrarian
Coordinator	Creator	Co-creator	Critical thinker	Culture-creator	Curator
Dabbler	Decision-maker	Delegator	Details person	Diplomat	Doer
Dreamer	Empathizer	Energizer	Engager	Engine	Enthusiast
Environmentalist	Executor	Expert	Experimenter	Explorer	Facilitator
Fighter	Fixer	Founder	Geek	Giver	Guide
Harmonizer	Human calculator	Idea generator	Idealist	Improviser	Innovator
Instigator	Integrator	Interest hopper	Interpreter	Intuitive	Inventor
Investigator	Leader	Liaison	Learner	Listener	Maker
Mediator	Memory keeper	Mess-maker	Nature-lover	Nurturer	Observer
Organizer	Party-bringer	Pattern-finder	Peacemaker	Pessimist	Philosopher
Planner	Problem-solver	Protector	Question-asker	Reader	Realist
Recommender	Refiner	Researcher	Risk-taker	Scientist	Seeker
Seer	Self-starter	Shape-shifter	Storyteller	Strategist	Survivor
Synthesizer	Systems-maker	Teacher	Team player	Thinker	Tinkerer
Troubleshooter	Truth-teller	Unifier	Validator	Visionary	Wanderer
Weaver	World Builder	Writer	_____	_____	_____

My Roles: How I Show Up

Choose 3–4 of the roles you bolded above. For each one, write 2–3 specific ways you embody that role in your life.

Role 1:	Write your role here...
How I show up in this role:	
Role 2:	Write your role here...

How I show up in this role:	
Role 3:	Write your role here...
How I show up in this role:	
Role 4:	Write your role here...
How I show up in this role:	

THE "TEN+ THINGS I WANT COLLEGES TO KNOW ABOUT ME" LIST

The point of this list is to provide yourself (and your counselor) with a solid list of qualities, values, and cool stuff that will help get you into college. Plus, it generates possible topics for your personal statement, supplements, activities list, and additional info section.

ME

Things that have shaped the person I am and how I know and understand myself

1	Family (Genetics, homelife, parenting, siblings, extended family, responsibilities)
2	Culture (Heritage, language(s), religion, basic cultural and family truths/values. Remember that mainstream culture is still a culture)
3	Identity (How am I different from others my age? What groups am I a part of that could potentially be one of my identities?)
4	School History (What types of schools, classmates, teachers, and teaching styles have influenced who I am?)
5	Opportunities, Experiences, Communities (What have I done, experienced, or been a part of that influenced who I am?)

6

Talent

(What do I believe are my "gifts"? What am I great at? What is my "superpower"?)

MY WORLD

How I see, understand, and influence the world: near and far, present and future

7

Interests

(What attracts my attention? What do I choose to learn on my own?)

8

Involvement

(What kinds of things have I gotten involved with? What roles do I play?)

9

Initiative

(Where have I taken initiative on my own? How have I been a creator, design thinker, entrepreneur, spark plug, risk-taker?)

10

Impact

(Where have others been influenced by me? Where has my involvement made a difference? ...on individuals, community, and beyond)

11

Ambition

(What next? What am I hoping to do once I leave high school? How do I hope to influence my college, community, and the larger world?)

What else do I want colleges to know about me?

I COME FROM...

Instructions: Finish the following sentence stem as many times as you can:

I come from...

Below are some optional guiding categories that might feel relevant:

- community, neighborhood (rural, suburban, urban)
- national origin; birthplace; places lived
- religion, spirituality, faith, ideology
- first language, language use
- heritage, racial, ethnic, cultural background
- class, economic background
- sex, gender, gender expression
- physical appearance + body type
- ability / disability status (physical, developmental, etc.)
- neurodiversity, thinking style (ADHD, autism spectrum, highly sensitive person)
- hobbies and interests

Finally, spend a couple of minutes finishing the same sentence stem using any of the prompts below:

I come from...

- a dinner table where...
- a family that taught me...
- a father who...
- a mother who...
- a grandparent who...
- the sounds of...
- the smells of...
- the tastes of...
- the feel of...
- long afternoons / evenings spent learning about ____
- rituals like...
- questions like...
- places like...
- a name that means...
- the pressure to...
- the freedom to...
- languages that...
- the knowledge that... / books / movies / plays / works of art like...
- the intersection of ____ and ____