

## Resources: Listening 201

Review these resources and think about how you can apply them with your students. You are welcome to save, print and share everything, as long as you note that these materials were created by Wow Writing Workshop. We welcome your feedback as you use our tools.

This packet contains the following: items

- Writing Exercise: Morning Writing (Finding Your Voice)
- Writing Exercise: I'm the Kind of Person Who... (Moving from Cliché to Story)
- Handout: Tips from the College Admissions Office
- Handout: Parents, How to Help Without Taking Over
- Worksheet - My Essay Process



## Morning Writing: Finding Your Voice

From *Wow Online – College Essay*

Morning writing is the first activity we do in any new workshop, whether we are working with parents, students or teachers. It is also the first writing exercise in our online tutorial. Because it has nothing to do with college essays, this activity frees writers to listen to their writing voices without judgment or expectations. Later in the process, we use a similar exercise to help students capture details to include in their essays.

### **Materials**

Students will need paper and pens or computers.

**INTRODUCE THE CONCEPT OF VOICE:** *Explain why you are doing this.*

- Readers want to know more about you: Your audience is not your mother, father, teacher, tutor or guidance counselor. You are writing a story about yourself for someone who will probably never meet you. Be yourself. The essay offers an opportunity to share something meaningful and real.
- You have a unique voice: You are a teenager, and you should sound like one – a bright, articulate teenager, but a teen all the same. Write your story in your voice, in your own words.

**INTRODUCE THE ACTIVITY:** *Provide an overview to set the tone.*

- We are going to write fast and messy.
- I will not collect what you write. You can keep it, throw it away ... whatever you want. Just follow my instructions.
- Don't write yet. Just think about this prompt: "What did you do this morning from the moment you woke up until you left your home?"

**ACTIVITY:** *Give participants very specific instructions.*

- On your computer or a sheet of paper, quickly record as much as you can recall, using all of your senses.
- Be specific, but don't worry about making sense or sounding clever. You can write fragments, sentences, lists or run-ons. It doesn't matter, because you are not writing an essay; you are simply capturing details.
- Write fast, and do not judge what you write. Don't even read it as you go along. Just keep moving forward.

**ALLOW 10 MINUTES, THEN CALL TIME**



**CONTINUE:** *Help participants identify elements of their writing voices.*

- Your writing voice is unique, and often shines through when you relax and write freely.
- Look back at what you wrote about your morning, and find three segments that truly sound like you.
- Each one can be anything from a short phrase to a multi-sentence description. They don't have to be exciting or clever; they just have to sound like YOU.
- For example:
  - Something you always say, do or think.
  - A description of something that screams "my house!" or "my room!" or "my mom!"
  - A phrase you like, a detailed description or something clear and specific that sounds just like you.
- When you find your segments, highlight, bold or underline them.
- These are examples of your writing voice.
- This is what you sound like when you are not trying too hard to be clever or creative. This is the voice you should write in when you begin to compose your application essay. Keep it in mind as you work on the essay.

**ALLOW 5 MINUTES, THEN CALL TIME**

**SHARE:** *Ask participants to share one example each. There are no right or wrong words, phrases or sentences. Praise students and point out unique aspects of their writing voices.*

**CONCLUDE:** *Re-emphasize the importance of honoring and sharing our unique voices.*



## I'm the Kind of Person Who... (Moving from Cliché to Story)

### Materials

Students will need paper and pens or computers.

**INTRODUCE THE ACTIVITY:** *Provide an overview to set the tone.*

- Before you start thinking of potential essay topics, determine what you want readers to know about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application.
- One way to get there is to begin with a cliché. While "cliché" may have a negative connotation, these are the phrases that often define us in the most basic ways.
- With this writing exercise, we will move from cliché to personal story.

**ACTIVITY:** *Give participants very specific instructions.*

- On your computer or a sheet of paper, finish this statement: *I'm the Kind of Person Who...* (some examples: I'm the kind of person who never disappoints a friend; I'm the kind of person whom you can count on in a crisis; I'm the kind of person who always finishes my work; I'm the kind of person who has a million great ideas.)
- Include positive statements only. Remember, you are thinking about what you want admissions officers to know about you.

### ALLOW 5 MINUTES, THEN CALL TIME

**CONTINUE:** *Move from cliché to story.*

- Look back at your list of general statements about yourself.
- For each one, jot down at least one story idea that illustrates that characteristic or quality.
- The stories should be relatively recent. Remember your audience: Admissions officers are interested in who you are today. They want to know about 16- or 17-year-old you; not 12-year-old you.
- For example:
  - Cliché: I'm the kind of person who you can count on in a crisis. Story: The time I stayed up late with my younger sister when the power went out and she was studying for her very first final exams.
  - Cliché: I'm the kind of person who has a million great ideas. Story: The day in AP Bio when no one in my lab group could figure out a creative project idea. I had five ideas, and my lab-mates just had to pick one, which we executed beautifully.

### ALLOW 5 MINUTES, THEN CALL TIME

**DISCUSS:** *Ask participants to share one example each. There are no right or ideas. Praise students and point out the strengths of each idea. As necessary, help students make their ideas more specific.*

**CONCLUDE:** *Re-emphasize the importance of telling specific stories that illustrate who we are.*

## **Tips from the College Admissions Office**

By Kim Lifton, President

I had a brief chat with Duke University's Dean of Admissions Christoph Guttentag about the college application essay during the National Association of College Admission Annual Meeting last fall in Salt Lake City.

We chatted about all the misinformation on the Internet, inside the schools and elsewhere regarding the college essay. He shared that he has an ongoing disagreement with his wife about the college essay; a journalist who likes prose and beautiful writing - and thinks admissions essays should resemble gorgeous prose. He just wants some insight.

"Students are often so focused on writing beautiful pieces of prose that they fail to answer the question and do not write authentic, meaningful personal statements," Guttentag said. "The hook gets in the way; the writing gets in the way."

At Wow, we talk to college admissions officers all the time. Whether they work at large, small, public, private or Ivy schools, admissions representatives tell us time and again they want reflective stories written by the student, in the voice of a 17-year-old student.

Colleges use essays to find out if the student is compatible with the educational environment on their campus. They want to know how a student thinks, what they've learned, how they've grown. Will they add value to the campus? Will they fit in? The essay provides admissions with additional insight to help them make admissions decision.

Here are some more tips direct from the college admissions offices throughout the U.S.

### **Heath Einstein, Dean of Admission, Texas Christian University**

"Don't get hung up on the right topic. Look, most 17-year-olds haven't scaled Kilimanjaro, so don't worry about finding an angle that hasn't been tried before. Write about what you know. If the most meaningful experience to you has been serving as a camp counselor, it doesn't matter that other students have addressed it. People will try to talk you out of certain ideas, but trust your gut. Ultimately, be yourself, and that will be good enough."

### **Tamara Siler, Senior Associate Director of Admission & Coordinator of Minority Recruitment, Rice University**

"Sometimes an essay can be the conduit for a student to reveal something to the admission committee that we would never have thought to ask. In terms of selective admission, personal statements are very important in adding needed texture to an application file. Quantitative factors such as transcripts and test scores only tell part of the story; a personal statement can provide context and truly show why a certain student is a better match than other clearly capable applicants."

**Chandra Mitchell, Interim Director of Freshman and International Admissions, University of Florida**

"Admissions is competitive. Having a strong essay that stands out is important. Tell a story from your life, and demonstrate your character. It is your story, and we want you to speak in your own voice. Make it unique to you. If you want to impress us with content, you don't have to use big words. Just be simple in presenting yourself."

**Shawn Felton, Director of Undergraduate Admissions, Cornell University**

"What are we looking for? We are creating a class. We look at numbers, grades and test scores. But there's more to it. We are trying to put a face with all of this information."

**Gregory Sneed, Vice President for Enrollment Management, Denison University**

"Even after reviewing a mediocre transcript or seeing a limited activities list, I can be swayed to admit a student who writes an essay who really blows me away. The topic of the essay doesn't need to be mind-blowing (in fact, the most mundane topics are often the most relatable and enjoyable), but if it reveals a someone who would be highly valued in our campus community, that could tip the scales."

**Leonard Satterwhite, Senior Associate Dean of Admissions, Washington & Lee University**

"How authentic is the voice in the writing? What issues does the student tackle in the essay? Is the writing memorable, and does it illuminate vividly the student's personality, perspective and/ or background? Does the writing reveal deep intellect and the potential to be an academic leader at W&L?"

**Robert Springal, Vice President for Enrollment Management, Muhlenberg**

"At Muhlenberg, we use the essay to get a better sense of the person behind the application. For strong students, it helps us gauge potential fit with one of our honors programs and eligibility for scholarships. For candidates in the middle of the applicant pool, the essay can help us form better impressions of an applicant's potential to excel at Muhlenberg."

**Jan Deike, Vanderbilt University, Assistant Director of Admissions**

“Sometimes students feel that because they haven’t found the cure for cancer, they have nothing to share. Life is truly lived in the smaller moments, and that can be a powerful essay.”

**Kim Bryant, University of Michigan, Assistant Director of Admissions**

“This is your interview. Let me know who you really are.” **Click here for a short video featuring Bryant.**



## Parents: How To Help Without Taking Over

We all want our children to succeed; college is critically important. But the truth is, you should not heavily edit your child's application essays, and you most definitely should not write them yourself. You should even step back when it comes to choosing a topic.

So how can you be most helpful and give your child a better chance of getting admitted to a selective college?

- **Offer encouragement.** In this case, you are more cheerleader than coach. No one knows your child better than you. Encourage her to express herself in her own voice, in her own words. Yes, she really can do this. And she can do it well.
- **Be realistic.** An essay should be well-written, but it should sound like it was composed by a high school student. Admissions officers can tell the difference between a heartfelt, well-crafted essay and a submission that is so highly-polished it sounds flat.
- **Get a head start.** For many students, the essay is the hardest part of the college application process. Don't wait till September. Senior year is a stressful, exciting time, not necessarily the best environment for students to sit quietly and write about themselves. Start early.
- **Read, but don't criticize.** Read drafts and offer your opinion, but don't go too far. Ask clarifying questions. Engage in a conversation with your child to figure out what he is trying to say about himself. Save the editor's pencil for misspelled words and grammatical errors.

No matter what the prompt, a college essay is not about the job, the vacation, the illness, the book or the influential person; it is about the student – what he or she learned, gained or realized as a result of the experience. As a parent, you can help the most by keeping your child focused on the essay's purpose.

It can be hard to write about oneself, especially when it really matters. We get that. That's why we teach students how to write their essays, using a straightforward, 10-step process. We help kids find their voices. They finish writing their essays feeling empowered, confident in their own abilities, certain of their words. And best of all, they get into their top choice schools!





## My Essay Process: A Worksheet for Professionals

When working with students and parents, it is crucial that we set expectations up front. In the space below, make some notes about the process you currently follow. Most of us continually clarify and define this process as each season unfolds.

### **To Share With Parents:**

- What do I expect from my students?
- What do I expect from their parents?
- What do I want students and parents to know before we start working on essays?
- How much time will it take to finish the first essay?
- How much time will it take to finish the remaining essays?
- How many drafts should a student expect to write?
- Do students work on essays in my office or on their own?
- Are there any deadlines? What happens if a student doesn't meet a deadline?
- Will we generate topics for many essays all at once or will we work on them one at a time?

### **To Consider On Your Own:**

- Where do I get stuck?
- Where do my students get stuck?
- In what situations do I face challenges with parents?
- How do I currently communicate my essay process with families? When do I share this information? Is it working?
- When they come to me, what do students and parents already know about the essay process? What misconceptions do they have?
- If I could pick one area to improve my skills and process, what would it be?
- What other improvements would I like to make over the long term?