



YOUR COLLEGE
ESSAY EXPERTS

THE COLLEGE ESSAY EXPERIENCE | Resources (2022-23 Application Season)



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Overview

Putting Learning into Action

This packet includes the writing exercises, review guidelines and email templates you and your coach used together. They should help you apply what you've learned. As you review the materials and reflect on your experience, remember that CEE was designed to give you two types of insight:

A student perspective: Whether you felt confident or nervous, confused or clear, you now have a little more insight into what students experience while writing their personal statements.

A process perspective: This experience showed you how we manage the essay coaching process. Our writing exercises are unfussy; our instructions and explanations are straightforward. The real work for a Wow coach happens behind the scenes, managing time and expectations and dealing with uncommon situations. We have learned that by planning out our process and knowing exactly what we are trying to accomplish every step of the way, essay coaching does not have to be stressful.

Contents of this Packet

This packet includes a wide variety of materials to reinforce what you learned during CEE.

Purpose of Each Step: A brief reminder of what happens during the ten steps and how a coach can determine if a student is ready to move on to the next step in the writing process.

Writing Exercises and Review Guidelines: The Try It exercises included in Wow Online, along with review guidelines to help you through the process. When you wrote your essay, your Try It activities were integrated into Wow Online. This packet includes an offline version of those exercises. If you would like to use Wow Online with your students, we invite you to join the Partners program.

Email Templates: Templated versions of the emails you received while writing your essay, plus additional emails that take the place of some of the integrated, online Try It activities. These are the same messages we send our students. You may use them as emails or as guidelines for discussions, depending on your coaching process.

Additional Resources: Guidelines for brainstorming and reviewing early drafts.

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Wow Task List: The checklist our coaches use for each student. It refers to our internal documents and processes, some of which are included in this packet. We have shared this task list so you can see how having a consistent framework leaves time and space for challenges and surprises.

Next Steps

Keep in mind that you are one person who wrote one essay with one theme. Writing an essay and reviewing our templates will not transform you into a star essay coach overnight. Use what you learned during CEE, along with everything else that makes you a strong counselor or consultant, to make slow but meaningful improvements to your process.

If you are continuing with the Partners Program...

- You and your students will have access to all of the videos, web pages and Try It activities within Wow Online for one application season, with you as their coach. During the season, you can use Wow Online to encourage independent work, as we did during the College Essay Experience, or as a roadmap for in-person meetings.
- Before the application season begins in earnest, you will participate in two master classes – one on brainstorming and another on essay reviews. We will be digging into the materials in this packet during those master classes, exploring a variety of scenarios, and practicing applying what you learned during CEE.
- A Wow coach will also guide you through one essay with your first student. They will be available to troubleshoot and answer questions as you work with that student on a Common Application personal statement.
- You will be invited to participate in private office hours with Kim and Susan to address challenges, ask questions and reflect with other members of the Partners Program.
- You will get a special first-year discount because you just finished CEE.

If you are joining the College Essay Community or continuing on your own...

- Everything in this packet is yours to use with appropriate credit. See the note about Copyright/Intellectual Property below.
- During CEE, the Try It activities were introduced after you had watched a 30- to 90-second video and read a web page on the topic. The additional exercises were assigned via email. Since you and your students will not have access to those videos and web pages, take some time to create your own explanations and context.
- The email templates in this packet refer explicitly to Wow Online. You will need to modify them to fit your process.
- Remember that while we have included a tremendous amount of information and guidance in this packet, these are not magic materials. Our writing exercises, emails and review guidelines only work in context! Take some time to clarify that context for your students.



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Copyright/Intellectual Property

You are welcome to use the materials in this packet as you see fit, as long as you credit the exercises to Wow. We are more than happy to share, but please respect our intellectual property; we have spent many years developing and refining these materials.

You may either use the writing exercises with the copyright in the footer or add language that credits the method and our company name: ***These materials were developed using elements of the Wow Method, Wow Writing Workshop's ten-step process for writing college application essays.*** If you're not sure if you are giving proper credit, please ask!

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Key Terms

Characteristics: What we learn about who the student is (not what they've done) by reading the essay (e.g., I'm a compassionate problem-solver; I never give up; I used to be meek, but I've learned to speak up for what I believe in.)

Accomplishments: Things the student has done. While these may be impressive, there are many places in an application to share accomplishments. A college essay does not have to focus on an impressive accomplishment or experience.

Theme: The core of the essay - 1) What happened? (the anchor story) and 2) Why does it matter? (the characteristics). A theme should be short and concise. Here are some examples from Wow students:

Example 1:

What happened? I started the first ever African society in my school. I did this because I was bullied in my previous school. So I decided to change schools and begin something new.

Why does it matter? I am a problem solver and I care about the well-being of other people.

Example 2:

What happened? While canvassing for SNAP, I was concerned that I would unfairly judge someone or offend them by giving them information about food stamps. This caused me to freeze up, but when I stopped worrying, I was able to hand out information.

Why does it matter? When I encounter moments that challenge and confuse me, I am able to understand why I am uncomfortable, come up with and execute a solution, and learn from it.

Example 3:

What happened? We took our time planning as a group once the prompt for the game design competition came out: "sacrifices must be made."

Why does it matter? I like to take on intellectual challenges with other people. I am a creative thinker and I love to solve problems.

Anchor story: A central story that helps hold the essay in place. The entire essay does not have to be about the anchor story, but having an anchor helps students stay focused. E.g., If a student wants readers to learn that they know how to solve problems with compassion, they might write about their experience as a camp counselor. The anchor story could be about an afternoon they sat with a homesick camper during free time and shared their own story of feeling homesick years earlier.

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Context: The camp counselor story might include additional details about how the student learned to be so kind, or how they applied what they learned to support friends at school, or what it felt like for them to be a homesick camper. It's not necessary to plan out the context. Context generally develops as the student writes and revises the essay. It can be helpful to keep the student focused on the essay's theme by saying, "That would make great context. Now let's focus on the anchor story."

Purpose of Each Step

Step	Purpose	How do I know the student is ready to continue?
Intro - Finding Your Voice	Engage the student in the process, make sure they can follow instructions and complete prework. Recognize what their writing sounds like when they are not trying to impress anyone.	Writing exercise completed and returned on time, before brainstorm appointment. Do not judge this exercise in any way.
10 Steps to a Great College Essay	Provide an overview of the ten steps.	N/A
Step 1: Understand the Prompt	Make sure student can work independently and meet deadlines. Confirm that student: 1) understands the purpose of the essay; 2) can distinguish between accomplishments and characteristics; and 3) has begun to consider positive characteristics to share in the essay.	Writing exercise completed and returned on time, before brainstorm appointment. If they answered any of the questions incorrectly, coach can correct misconceptions during the brainstorm appointment.
Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas	Make sure student can work independently and meet deadlines. Put student in the driver's seat. They are the expert on themselves; coach is the expert on the process.	Writing exercise completed and returned on time, before brainstorm appointment. These are conversation-starters, not a menu of choices. Coach and student will explore these ideas (and possibly others) during brainstorm appointment.
Step 3: Focus on Theme	Confirm that student knows why they chose a particular topic.	The theme should be relatively short and should be close to the theme coach and student discussed at the conclusion of the brainstorm appointment. It doesn't have to be perfect, but it should include 1) What happened? (the anchor story/topic) and 2) Why does it matter? (the characteristic(s) illustrated by this story).
Step 4: Free Write for Details	Focus on the "What happened" part of the essay. Get details on the page.	They just need to get words on the page. It doesn't matter what those words are or how many they wrote. Do not judge this exercise.
Step 5: Write Draft 1 (Content)	Focus on content.	The student has written a draft. Regardless of quality, continue with content-related exercises.
Step 6: Review Prompt and Theme	Review the draft for content and theme. Coach assign interim exercises, based on: 1) the content draft (Step 5), 2) the student's theme (Step 3), and 3) the essay prompt.	Content is solid, either inside or outside the essay. Student has spent some time considering the essay beyond the draft on the page.



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Step 7: Write Draft 2 (Content + Structure)	Encourage student to consider which details are essential to clearly communicate their theme, then allow time for revision.	Student has answered pre-revision questions. After receiving additional instructions, they have revised the essay.
Step 8: Review Content & Structure	<p>Review the draft for content and structure. Note if anything important is missing. Make notes in the margin, not directly on the essay.</p> <p>Consider what you asked the student to do in Step 6. How much effort did they put in? Did the exercises generate the type of content you expected? What else do you need? During Step 8, go back to the theme, the Step 4 free write, the Step 5 draft and the Step 6 exercises. Most of what they need will be there on the page.</p>	Content and structure are strong. The essay is getting closer to its finished form.
Step 9: Write Draft 3 (Content + Structure + Polish)	Complete final revisions.	Student has spent some time polishing the essay and responding to coach's suggestions.
Step 10: Edit and Proofread	Review for grammar, spelling, punctuation, etc.	The essay has been proofed and is free of significant errors, while maintaining student voice.

Writing Exercises and Review Guidelines

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Introduction: Finding Your Voice

Writing Exercise

Part 1

What did you do this morning from the moment you woke up until you left your home?

In a moment, you will open a new document or a clean sheet of paper, and quickly write down 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.

1. Open a new document, or use a notebook and pen.
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes.
3. Write about your morning.
4. When the timer stops, stop writing, and read the instructions for Part 2.

Part 2

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.

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Step 1: Understand the Prompt
Writing Exercise

Which prompt are you responding to?

- Common Application
- University of California (type the prompt below)
- ApplyTexas (type the prompt below)
- Coalition for Access & Affordability (type the prompt below)
- Other (type the prompt below)

In general terms, what is the prompt trying to find out about you?

If you are writing a Common Application essay, think about the Common App in general (not the 7 essay choices specifically.) What is the purpose of a Common App essay? If you are writing a different essay, read the prompt carefully. In your own words, what is it trying to find out?

What do readers already know?

Before you decide on an essay topic, think about what readers already know about you. Remember that an application contains a great deal of information. In the space below, make a list of some of the things readers can find out about you from the rest of your application (e.g., I play drums; I babysit; I have a 3.7; I got 24 on my ACT; I volunteered at a soup kitchen last summer.)

What do I want readers to know?

Now think about what you want readers to know about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application. In the space below, list some of your best characteristics (e.g., I am confident; I don't give up; I used to be a follower, but I have become more of a leader; I have always been a leader, but I have become more humble and able to follow others; I am creative; I love a challenge; I have overcome my fears and feel strong.) Think about how others might describe you. What kind of person are you? Stay positive!

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Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

Writing Exercise

Consider Several Ideas

Before you decide what to write about, you'll want to explore several ideas. Depending on which essay you are writing, you could approach this task in different ways:

- If you are working on your Common Application essay, you might want to consider several different options from the choices they offer (a background story, a time when you experienced failure, a time when you challenged a belief, etc.), or you might have several ideas in one area (e.g., several background stories, several places where you are content.)
- If you are responding to a prompt other than the Common Application, keep an open mind and consider various stories that could effectively show readers something meaningful about you.

Here are two examples to help you.

Example #1

Prompt	Common App (A background story)
Story Idea	Teaching Ellie to swim
Notes	I worked with her all summer, she was scared, wouldn't put her face in the water, last day she finally tried it. I didn't feel frustrated, really wanted to help her. Pool was quiet that day, a little overcast, she was playful and trusted me.
What do I want readers to know about me?	I am patient and diligent. This was the first time I felt like I taught someone something. I want to do that again, whether as a swim instructor or in other aspects of my life.

Example #2

Prompt	Common App (A time I experienced failure)
Story Idea	Robotics competition
Notes	This year we almost won the State championship. Our coach always told us to focus on one important thing at a time. Under pressure, I remembered that advice, and encouraged my teammates to follow it. We worked so well together. Even though we didn't win, it was our best year yet.
What do I want readers to know about me?	I know how to focus and lead others. I apply the lessons I learn.

Now write your ideas in the space below.



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Idea #1

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #2

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #3

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	

Idea #4

Prompt	
Story Idea	
Notes	
What do I want readers to know about me?	



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Step 3: Focus on Theme
Writing Exercise

My Prompt

In the space below, copy your prompt word for word. Even if your prompt is available elsewhere, record it here. You will refer back to it frequently as you write and revise your essay.

My Theme

A traditional personal statement is built around a theme, which has two parts: 1) What happened?
2) Why does it matter?

What happened?

What will you write about in your essay? Choose one scene/experience/moment from the ideas you came up with in Step 2. This is sometimes called your anchor story. You can add context later, but this is the central focus of your essay. Be brief. This is a snapshot, not an outline of your essay.

Why does it matter?

What does this story illustrate about you that the reader wouldn't know from the rest of your application? Focus on characteristics, not accomplishments. Be brief.

Step 3: Review Prompt and Theme
Review Guidelines

We always make sure the student is clear about the essay's theme before they start a draft. Confirm the following before assigning Step 5.

1. The theme includes two parts: 1) What happened? and 2) Why does it matter?
2. The theme is relatively short and is very close to what coach and student discussed during the brainstorm discussion. The theme is a capsule, not an outline of the essay.
3. Part 1 (What happened) focuses on a specific incident, story or example (the anchor story).
4. This incident/anchor story/example occurred in the relatively recent past; not when the writer was in middle school.
5. Part 2 (Why does it matter) focuses on a characteristic or characteristics that the writer wants to share with readers.
6. The theme adds something to the application and does not simply repeat information that readers will already know.
7. The theme addresses the essay prompt.
8. If you answered *No* to any of these questions, help the writer focus the theme before moving forward. The theme does not have to be perfect. In our experience, most students get this right (or close enough) the first time.



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Step 4: Free Write for Details
Writing Exercise

Write Freely

In a moment, you will open a new document or a clean sheet of paper, and quickly write down as much as you can recall about the scene or story at the center of your essay. Use 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. You want to write freely about your essay topic, just as you did in the Morning Writing/Voice activity in the introduction to Wow Online.

1. Open a new document, or use a notebook and pen.
2. Set a timer for 10 minutes.
3. Write about your topic.
4. When the timer stops, either stop writing or keep going. Don't write less than ten minutes; feel free to continue as long as you have something to write.

Step 5: Write Draft 1

Writing Exercise

Draft 1 is a Content Draft

Now that you have chosen a topic and identified your theme, it's time to start writing! Don't worry about perfection, word limits or structure. Just get it all down on paper. Remember – the details will help you tell your story. At the same time, keep your theme and your prompt in mind at all times. This will be the first of several drafts, which will gradually develop into a strong and polished essay. Do not try to shortcut the process by focusing on structure and polish too early.

Create a New Document

1. Open a new document.
2. At the top of the page, write the following:
 - Your Name
 - Prompt Identifier (e.g., Common App, UC question 2, Stanford Roommate Letter)
 - Prompt (write it here word for word)
 - Word count

Include Both What Happened and Why It Matters

As you write, focus on both what happened and why it matters. You can even use your free writing from Step 4. Some people find that their free writing becomes the basis for the first draft, while others use that exercise as a jumping off point. Still others put it aside as a warm-up and approach the draft from a different direction. Do what makes the most sense to you.

Write Too Much

This draft should be too long. If your word count is 650, aim for at least 750 or 800 words. Content is most important at this point. This is not the type of draft you would turn in for a grade in English class. It is a content draft, and it should be full of details.

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Step 6: Review for Content – Write Outside the Essay

Review Guidelines and Writing Exercise

Because we have read so many essays, we often convince ourselves that we immediately know what the student needs to do next. In truth, we owe it to the student and to ourselves to take a deep breath and absorb what we see on the page in front of us before jumping to conclusions.

As you move through the content phase of the essay and into the structure phase, it can be helpful to explore the essay’s topic from a few different angles. This exercise and the one that follows (New Openings) help students do that. Completing these activities does not mean a student does not have the right content, or the essay doesn’t have a strong opening. We’re just trying to help students see the essay from a new perspective.

Before giving the student the Writing Outside the Essay assignment below, answer these questions:

1. Does the theme match the draft? In other words, is the essay beginning to achieve what the writer intended?
2. Does the essay address the prompt? In other words, have they answered the question?
3. If the essay does not address the prompt, would you suggest adjusting the prompt to match the draft or revising the draft to fit the prompt?

Assign the Exercise: Write Outside the Essay

Do not make a mark on the essay yet. Instead, identify three spots where the writer could elaborate and free write outside the essay.

Some possibilities:

- Identify places where more detail might make the essay more interesting.
- Find general statements. Ask the student to expand on what the generality means.
- Find spots that might benefit from more detail. Even if the essay “works” encourage the student to fill out some of the detail for the sake of exploring the essay.
- Ask for more reflection. If the student focused primarily on “What happened?” and “Why does it matter?” is not clear, ask the student to connect the dots.

For examples, see **Step 6 Exercises – Examples for Reference** at the end of this resource packet.

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*Step 6: Review for Content and Move Toward Structure – New Openings***Review Guidelines**

This exercise helps students see their familiar essay from a new perspective. They will assume that you are asking them to explore new openings because the current one doesn't work. That is not necessarily the case, and as you move from Step 6 to Step 7, that will become clearer and clearer.

Assign the Exercise: New Openings (worksheet on following page)

Note three spots in the essay or the Writing Outside the Essay free writes that the writer could explore as potential new openings. Keep in mind that the purpose of this exercise is to help the writer enter the essay from new perspectives, so they can consider alternatives and see the essay with fresh eyes. Don't feel pressure to identify the perfect new openings. This is not a formal editing exercise; it is all about revision/re-seeing.

Some possibilities:

- Choose a spot from the middle or end of the essay.
- Choose something from one of the Writing Outside the Essay free writes.
- Choose something that wouldn't be an obvious choice.
- Make a general suggestion (e.g., What if you started with the meeting on the pool deck? Try starting with the final tennis match.)

For examples, see **Step 6 Exercises – Examples for Reference** at the end of this resource packet.

Use the worksheet on the next page to help your student complete this exercise.



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Step 6: New Openings

Writing Exercise

In the email I just sent you, I identified 3 potential new openings for your essay. Using those or others (your choice), please complete the exercise below.

Opening 1

Copy the potential new opening from my email (or choose your own). Paste it here.

If you started here, where would you go next? Write the new first paragraph below.

In the space below, make some notes about how the essay might develop if you started with that paragraph. Include a few sentences or bullet points of explanation; don't write the potential new essay.

Opening 2

Copy the potential new opening from my email (or choose your own). Paste it here.

If you started here, where would you go next? Write the new first paragraph below.



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In the space below, make some notes about how the essay might develop if you started with that paragraph. Include a few sentences or bullet points of explanation; don't write the potential new essay.

Opening 3

Copy the potential new opening from my email (or choose your own). Paste it here.

If you started here, where would you go next? Write the new first paragraph below.

In the space below, make some notes about how the essay might develop if you started with that paragraph. Include a few sentences or bullet points of explanation; don't write the potential new essay.

Step 7: Write Draft 2 – Make More Notes

Writing Exercise

Draft 2 is a Content and Structure Draft

Before you revise, review your reader’s comments and suggestions. You may decide to use them to strengthen your essay, but that is your choice. This is your story. You get to make the important decisions. You are beginning to move from simply sharing important details to crafting an essay.

Make More Notes

Read your essay again. On paper or electronically, do the following:

- Highlight sentences, phrases and sections that truly shine – great details, examples of your writing voice, and elements that help you answer the prompt and express your theme.
- In another color, highlight items that are redundant. You have limited space for your essay, so say something once and move on. You can probably cut the other references without losing anything important.
- Before you write your next draft, make some notes about what you want to work on to improve your essay. Pay particular attention to both content and structure. If you are working with a Wow writing coach or another professional, you may have addressed some of these issues together already. If you are working on your own, consider these questions before you revise, then make some notes about your answers:
 - What did your reader have to say about your essay, both positive and negative?
 - Was your reader able to state your theme? If not, how can you make sure your theme is clear? You might consider free writing on the subject. Ask yourself, “Why does this story matter?” then write for 10 or 15 minutes.
 - Did your reader confirm that this sounds like a story about you? If not, focus more on yourself; not the event/book/person you wrote about.
 - Do you include enough detail? If not, brainstorm for 10 minutes about the topic that needs more detail.
 - What did your reader suggest that you found most useful? How will you use that feedback?
 - How might you begin your essay? Consider at least two different openings before settling on a final choice.
 - How will you conclude the essay? Consider at least two different conclusions before settling on a final choice.

Step 7: Write Draft 2 (Content + Structure)

Writing Exercise

Create a New Document

1. Open a new document.
2. At the top of the page, write the following:
 - Your Name
 - Prompt Identifier (e.g., Common App, UC question 2, Stanford Roommate Letter)
 - Prompt (write it here word for word)
 - Word count

Revise Carefully – This is a Content + Structure Draft

Give yourself at least an hour to write the next draft. To start, open a new document and write each word from scratch. This does not mean you have to write from memory or create an all new essay. It just means that you need to type a new draft from beginning to end. Cutting and pasting might seem easier, but it won't help you with real revision. Let yourself see the essay from a new perspective. Keep what works and get rid of what doesn't. Add details where necessary. Of course, you should use the best of your first draft – keep it nearby for reference. At the same time, stay open to new ideas.

Experiment with different opening lines. That winning introduction might be buried in the fourth paragraph of your current draft. Move it up and give it the attention it deserves. While you're at it, make sure you end on a strong note as well. Make every word count.



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Step 8: Review Draft 2 (Content + Structure)

Review Guidelines

The middle review focuses on content and structure. At this point it should be within the word count and moving toward its ultimate structure, though it might not be there quite yet.

Review Rubric

What did the student change/improve from the prior draft?

Where does the essay work well?

What could be improved? What could be done to improve clarity?

In the essay's margin, make comments and suggestions. Provide specific questions and recommendations, but do not edit the essay. Look back at the theme, the first draft and the Step 6 writing exercises (Writing Outside the Essay and New Openings). If you think some of the original content could be used more effectively, point out how and where. Be very specific. If you find a lot of areas that need improvement, focus on a handful for the first review, give the student a day or two to revise, then repeat this step with additional suggestions.

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Provide positive feedback whenever possible.

If your student's essay is veering into negative territory, try using this MadLib-type format to get them back on track:

- I know you're trying to convey _____ (I'm a committed volunteer) but it's coming across as _____ (I'm the only one who REALLY cares in my school.)
- I believe you. You sound like _____ (a really committed volunteer), but let's refocus on your audience and the purpose of this essay.
- If your audience was _____ (school administration) and you were trying to convince them to _____ (revamp the volunteer program), you might use this essay to _____ (demonstrate the strengths and weaknesses of the program).
- But your purpose is _____ (to demonstrate that you will be a great addition to the campus community) so you need to focus on _____ (yourself, not you in comparison to others.)

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Step 9: Write Draft 3 (Content + Structure + Polish)

Writing Exercise

It's Time to Polish Your Essay

Before you revise, review your reader's comments and suggestions. You may decide to use them to strengthen your essay, but that is your choice. This is your story. You get to make the important decisions. You are beginning to move from simply sharing important details to crafting an essay.

Revise Carefully

Give yourself at least an hour to write the next draft. Keep what works and get rid of what doesn't. Make sure everything flows from beginning to end. Of course, you should use the best of your earlier drafts – keep them nearby for reference. At the same time, stay open to new ideas. Make every word count. Keep asking: Why am I telling this story? What do I want admissions counselors to learn about me that they wouldn't know from the rest of my application?

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Step 10: Final Review

Review Guidelines

It's easy to be critical when reading late drafts. We often want essays to be perfect, but perfection should not be the goal. Instead, strive for student growth and development. Does the voice shine through? Has the student made progress? When reviewing student work during the polish phase, after they have revised, we recommend the following:

1. Step away from the computer and put down your pen. Read the draft once without comment or judgment.
2. Read it again, still without comments.
3. What do you like about this draft? Make some notes about what the student did well.
4. What do you remember after reading it? What do you think admissions officers will remember? Note that as well.
5. Think about how much better the essay could be in four years, when the student graduates from college. Think about how much better it could be if polished by a professional. Then think about your 17-year-old student. It should sound like it was written by a high school senior. Don't let the vision of perfection cloud your ability to live in the present.
6. Focus on the essay's growth, not its potential. How did the piece develop? What did the student learn to do while writing it? Write that down.
7. As much as possible, make comments, not edits. Ask questions and focus on reflection. See yourself as a reviewer, not an editor.
8. Stay positive. At this point, the student is nearly done. Let go of the imperfect essay!

Review Rubric

The final review is primarily for polish. Consider how the essay has developed and what the student has accomplished along the way. The essay may not be perfect, but it should demonstrate some growth and change. Make any minor edits directly on the essay. Keep final edits to a bare minimum.

Editing/Proofreading Question	Notes If this area is problematic, mark a few examples on the essay
Uses consistent verb tense throughout	
Avoids sentence fragments and run-on sentences	
Has correct and consistent punctuation	
Spelling is correct	
Words are used accurately	
Primarily uses active voice	
Stays within word count guidelines	

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Step 10: Final Review (Guidelines for an Outside Proofreader)

If you are working with an outside proofreader, be sure to provide context so they know what to look for. These are the messages and guidelines we suggest sharing before they begin proofreading your students' essays.

During proofreading, we are reviewing for consistency and clarity only. The writer is a high school student and should sound like one. For our purposes, a proofreader is strictly a reviewer, not an editor.

Given the amount of time and effort that the student has put into the essay, please accept that the coach has taken the student as far as they are able and willing to go as a writer and thinker. A college essay should be effective. It does not have to be a piece of literary art.

We follow the ten-step Wow Method, which means that the essay has already gone through three phases:

Phase 1 - Content: We agreed on a topic, established a theme for the essay and considered how it fits into the larger application package.

Phase 2 - Structure: We discussed how the writer moves through the essay, including how to begin, how to end, how to balance the central story/moment/message with other context, and how much detail to share.

Phase 3 - Polish: We reviewed the essay for clarity and consistency, just as you are doing now. As the proofreader, you are double-checking the polish phase. That's it!

Here's what a proofreader should look for:

Consistent punctuation. If the writer likes the Oxford comma, great. If not, that's fine too. Just make sure they use it the same way throughout. Watch for semicolons, dashes, etc. Student writers are famous for inconsistent punctuation.

Accurate spelling. All words should be spelled correctly and consistently.

Consistent use of numbers or numerals. If you think one through nine should be spelled out and numbers over 10 written in numerals, that's fine. If you have a different standard, that's fine too. If a number is the first word of a sentence, it should be spelled out.

Clarity. If a sentence is incomprehensible, mark it; if you can think of a better way to say the same thing, keep your suggestion to yourself.

Malapropisms and homonyms. If the writer uses *collaborate* instead of *corroborate*, mark it and note the correct word. If they use bear/bare incorrectly, do the same.



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Email Templates

Email A1: Kickoff (student)

Subject: College Essay - Getting Started

[Friendly introduction]. Here's what happens next:

- Schedule an appointment for our brainstorming session [Insert instructions for scheduling appointment.]
 - Our appointment will last about an hour.
 - Choose a meeting time that will allow you to 1) Complete the pre-work (described below) and send it to me 2 days in advance, and 2) spend another hour after our call completing some post-meeting tasks.
 - Please have your completed writing exercises available during our appointment.
- Go through the Introduction through Step 2 of Wow Online - College Essay before our appointment.
 - All the links are on your dashboard when you log in.
 - Watch all the videos, read the Read Its and complete the Try Its.
 - This should take you 1-2 hours.
- Send me the completed Try It activities for the Introduction (morning writing) and Steps 1 and 2 at least 24 hours before our brainstorm appointment.

When we meet to brainstorm essay topics, I'll tell you more about the rest of the process. Be sure to have your writing exercises (the Try Its for the Intro through Step 2) available during our meeting too.

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Email A2: Kickoff (parent)

Subject: College Essay - Getting Started

[Friendly Introduction]

[Include any sample timelines or instructions about expectations about due dates and how/when you will respond.]

I try to guide my students through the first essay within 2-3 weeks. That requires a lot of focus and quick turnaround (and paying attention to email!) Please help keep your child on track if you think they will need it. If you have any concerns about our progress, just let me know.

We will have a brainstorming discussion soon, which will help generate potential topics. I just sent an email with detailed instructions for scheduling an appointment and completing some pre-brainstorm assignments.

[Insert anything you'd like parents to know about their role. We include an article. You might have a tip sheet, a link to an article or book, or other resources.]

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Email B: After Student Schedules Appointment

Subject: Writing Your Essay - Intro - Step 2

I'm glad to see that you scheduled your brainstorm appointment.

Please log in and complete the Introduction through Step 2 before we meet. Watch all the videos, read the web pages and complete the Try It writing exercises, then send me the Try Its by [Set deadline two days before appointment - e.g., for a Tuesday appointment, ask for pre-work by Sunday] night. That will give me time to prepare for our conversation.

[Provide instructions for how/where you'll meet – virtually or in person.]

Be sure to have your Try Its available during our meeting, and remember that you'll need another hour to complete some post-brainstorm activities by the end of that day.

I look forward to getting started!



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Email C: After Brainstorm

Subject: Steps 3 and 4 - Clarify Theme and Free Write for Details

[Something personal about brainstorm. E.g., That was a lot of fun. / You're so creative. Even though that was challenging, I'm so pleased with your idea.]

As we discussed, Steps 3 and 4 are due by tonight. Watch the videos, read the web pages and complete the Try It activities.

Keep your Step 3 theme tight and focused. That's why we spent time at the end of our brainstorm appointment clarifying it.

For Step 4, you just need to free write about the "What happened?" part of your theme. Read the instructions online to keep on track.

As soon as you send me the Step 3 and 4 Try Its, I'll respond with instructions for writing your first draft.



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Email D: After Student Completes Steps 3 and 4 (student)

Subject: Step 5 - Content Draft

Beautiful work. You are right on track. [something personal – challenge/ strength, etc.]. Please continue with Step 5. Watch the video, read the Read It segment and complete the Try It activity (a content draft.) As we discussed, please send me your draft by [weekday night]. After you write the first draft of your essay, I will give you some interim exercises to complete before you move on to the structure draft of Step 7. Through the writing exercises, we will complete Step 6 together.

I look forward to reading the first draft of your essay. And don't forget - it can be too long or disorganized. Just tell your story and get all of your ideas down. Think content!

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Email D1: After Student Completes Steps 3 and 4 (parent)

Subject: We're off to a great start!

I wanted to check in and let you know how pleased I am with the direction [your child]'s essay is headed. The topic illustrates [insert characteristics], and I am confident admissions officers will find the story compelling and engaging. Highlighting these positive traits will help round out the application.

We encourage our students to write a first draft that's messy and too long, so they feel free to explore their topic in depth without worrying about word count, first lines or other structure and polish concerns. With that in mind, I encourage you to wait till the final draft to take a peek!

If you have any questions, please feel free to get in touch.

Email E: Step 6 – Write Outside the Essay Exercise

Subject: Step 6 Content Exercise (Write Outside the Essay)

This is a great first draft! [Say something specific about the content – a clear description, a telling detail, etc.] The theme is clear as well:

- What happened? [Paraphrase the What Happened aspect of the theme in your own words.]
- Why does it matter? [Paraphrase the Why Does It Matter? aspect of the theme in your own words.]

While this is not word-for-word what you wrote, it is close, and it is my interpretation based on what you sent me for Step 3.

Before we go much further, I want you to complete a writing exercise so we can continue focusing on content before moving to structure. The exercise is called Writing Outside the Essay, and it's very simple.

For each of the questions/prompts below, set a timer for 5 minutes and write freely in response. You can keep going beyond 5 minutes, but don't write less than that.

1. Write more about this: [Insert a suggestion, plus open-ended questions.]
2. Write more about this: [Insert a suggestion, plus open-ended questions.]
3. Write more about this: [Insert a suggestion, plus open-ended questions.]

Please complete these short writing exercises, then send the free writes back to me by [due date]. Once I receive them, I'll tell you what to do next.



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Email F: Step 6 – New Openings Exercise

Subject: Step 6 - New Openings Exercise

Your free writes are just right. Thank you for sending them. These details will help illuminate the story, and you are likely to use some of them in your next full draft (but not yet!) Your next task is a bit different. Before you revise, I want you to consider different openings. Here's how to do that: Choose 2-3 spots that could be intriguing entry points into the essay, then write a potential first paragraph, beginning with that excerpt.

Some possibilities:

1. Start here: [Choose something from the first draft or the free writes]
2. Begin with this: [Choose something from the first draft or the free writes]
3. Start here: [Choose something from the first draft or the free writes]

If you started in one of these spots (or somewhere else - your choice), where would you go next? Write each new "first paragraph," then make some notes about how the essay might develop from that point (just a few sentences of explanation - don't write the potential new essay.)

Send me 3 new first paragraphs and let me know which one you like best (either one of your new ones or the original from your first draft). Once I receive those, I'll let you know what to do next.

I look forward to seeing your potential openings. They are due by [due date.]

Email G: Step 7 – Plan Your Next Draft Exercise

Subject: Step 7 - Plan Your Next Draft Exercise

I like the way you developed the possible new paragraphs. [Comment on the exercise and the student's favorite opening. E.g., I am partial to the first one, but I agree with you that number two could work well also. / Any of them could work well, including your original. / You have so many good choices.]

Please log in and watch/read Step 7. Before you write the new draft for Step 7, I'd like you to send me two things:

1. Answers to the Step 7 Try It questions under the heading Make More Notes. You might be thinking, "Why do I need to answer these questions? You already know the answers." I want you to reflect on what we've done together so far. These questions encourage that reflection.
2. A marked-up copy of the work you've done so far, including the first draft of your essay, the free writes and the new openings. You have probably not done anything like this before. I want you to read your draft and free writes like a writer. Think about what works and doesn't. You might want to add something from your new openings and/or your free writes. What would enrich the next draft? You are going to have to cut something for word count. What might it be? There is no right way to do this exercise. Some people make handwritten notes. Others highlight different items in a variety of colors. Others cross out or highlight items for various purposes.

It can be very useful to make these types of notes before diving in with revision. Please send me your answers to the questions and the marked-up essay by [due date]. Once I review them, I will give you instructions to write your Step 7 Content/Structure draft.

I look forward to seeing your work.



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Email H: Step 7 – Assigning Step 7 Draft 2 (Content + Structure)

Subject: Step 7 - Content + Structure Draft

This is good work! I think you will be pleased with the differences between your Step 5 (content) draft and the Step 7 (content + structure) draft. You'll notice that I'm not commenting on your comments. By stepping back from the essay and looking at different aspects of it, you're behaving like a writer.

Please revise the essay, using your notes as a guide. This is your structure draft. You should still pay attention to content, as you did in Steps 1-6, but at this point, you should also think carefully about how you move through the essay. This draft should also be within the required word count.

Please send me a revision by [due date], and I'll tell you what to do next. I look forward to seeing the new draft.

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Email 11: Step 8 – After Step 7 Revision (ready to move on to polish)

Subject: Steps 7-8 (Content + Structure Review)

Nice work. I like the changes you've made, and the balance between connections/interpretation and description. The essay holds together well. You've managed to focus tightly on the central idea of the essay ([Say something about the essay's overt topic/anchor story]), while still providing important context ([Comment on the various elements that create context]) This balance makes the essay work.

The comments in the attached document are my Step 8 feedback. I've attached both a Word doc and a pdf of the marked-up draft. They are the same. Please take a look at the Step 8 (video, Read It and Try It) before or after you read my comments, so you understand them in context.

You'll note that I did not edit your essay. I made comments. You get to choose how to use my suggestions. If any of them contradict your vision for the essay, let me know.

Steps 8-10 are rather fluid. You did a great job with structure by experimenting with the new openings. The most important part of that exercise is that it forces the writer to look at the essay from a different perspective. You'll notice that until this point, I've commented very little. Instead, I've offered guidance and questions to help you make strong editorial choices.

Next step ... Step 9/write the content/structure/polish draft. Read the web page for context, then complete the Try It activity (a final draft). Please send me your revision by [due date].

Let me know if you have any questions about my comments on the attachment.

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Email 12: After Step 7 Revision (not ready to move on to polish)

Subject: Steps 7-8 (Content + Structure Review)

Nice work. I like the changes you've made, and the balance between connections/interpretation and description. The essay holds together well. You've managed to focus tightly on the central idea of the essay ([Say something about the essay's overt topic/anchor story]), while still providing important context ([Comment on the various elements that create context]) This balance makes the essay work.

[Say something to put your comments into context. E.g., I've added some suggestions for things I'd like you to put back in, as well as questions and things to cut. Adding material might seem counter intuitive, since you are within the word count, but it will not be hard to pare back in the next revision. If you are not below the word limit, I will help you get there in my next round of comments.]

The comments in the attached document are my Step 8 feedback. I've attached both a Word doc and a pdf of the marked-up draft. They are the same.

You'll note that I did not edit your essay. I made comments. You get to choose how to use my suggestions. If any of them contradict your vision for the essay, let me know.

Steps 8-10 are rather fluid. You did a great job with structure by experimenting with the new openings. The most important part of that exercise is that it forces you to look at the essay from a different perspective. You'll notice that until this point, I've commented very little. Instead, I've offered guidance and questions to help you make strong editorial choices.

We're going to stay in the content+structure phase for another draft, and then we'll move on to polish.

Let me know if you have any questions about my comments on the attachment. Please send me your revision by [due date].



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Email 13: After Second Round of Step 7-8 Revisions (if you sent 12)

Subject: Step 8 - Final Content + Structure Review

You're getting closer. This is a terrific essay, and you are nearly done. I've made one last round of structure suggestions, which you can incorporate into your next draft.

Next step ... Step 9/write the content/structure/polish draft. This should be a draft that reflects everything we've worked on so far, plus a bit of final polish. Use my comments in the attached document as a guide for that draft.

Please send that draft by [due date].

Let me know if you have any questions about my comments on the attachment.



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Email J: Completed Essay (student)

Subject: Step 10 - Polish Review

Nice work! The scene you paint is clear and vivid: [Say something about the content/description.] Best of all, your theme shines through. Any reader would know that you are [Say something about the characteristics illustrated in this essay]. There are only a few tiny comments on the attached draft. Review the marks, accept/reject according to your preference, and delete the notes in the margin. Set the essay aside for a day, read it once more and make any final changes, then send it back to me.

Once I receive your final draft, I'll send it to our proofreader for one last review.



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Email J1: Completed Essay (parent)

Subject: Completed essay!

[Friendly introduction.] It's been a pleasure working with your child. [Say something positive about the student. E.g., She stays on track, follows instructions and is a terrific communicator - all plusses from my perspective!] I just returned the final, proofed draft of the essay.

Your child did a wonderful job. The essay is clear and focused; it demonstrates [Describe the characteristics illustrated in the essay.] I am certain that it will enhance the application.



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Additional Resources

How to Facilitate a Student-Centered Brainstorm

Brainstorming ideas with a student can be challenging. If you carefully consider what you are trying to accomplish and what you can say and do to get there, the process will go more smoothly. The following pages outline a suggested brainstorming process, including pre-brainstorm activities. Help your students feel good about their ideas – the ones they bring to your discussion and the ones they ultimately choose to write about.

Before the Brainstorm Discussion

- Schedule your brainstorm meeting. Explain what you expect the student to do ahead of time, how long the work will take and when you want them to submit it. Use our sample pre-brainstorm meeting email as a template.
- Assign pre-work. Make sure you have either shared the written explanations or spoken to your student about what a college essay is and who is reading it ahead of time. Ask them to complete these writing assignments ahead of time:
 - Voice/Morning writing
 - Step 1/Understand the Prompt
 - Step 2/Brainstorm Ideas
- Receive the pre-work at least 24 hours in advance. If the student doesn't turn it in on time, find out why, then get it quickly or reschedule. Most students will get the work done when you remind them that writing is not a group activity.
- Review the pre-work, but don't obsess over it. Familiarize yourself with the student's responses so you can:
 - Say something positive about the Voice/Morning writing activity
 - Confirm understanding of Step 1. Prepare by checking to see if they understand the general purpose of the essay prompt (e.g., What does a personal statement do? Or What does a Why College X essay do? Or What is this community prompt really getting at?) and whether they can distinguish between accomplishments (what do they already know about you) and characteristics (what would you like them to know).
 - Review Step 2 together. Don't spend a lot of time trying to figure out which of their Step 2 topic ideas has the most potential. Assume that many (if not all) of their potential ideas will be too broad, too cliché, too long ago or otherwise ineffective. That doesn't matter. You are looking for conversation-starters.

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During the Brainstorm Discussion

Review Voice/Morning Writing (2-3 minutes): Praise the student for completing the exercise. Point out that this is what their natural, authentic voice sounds like when they are not trying to impress anyone. It doesn't matter if they included descriptive details or simply provided a play-by-play report of their morning routine. Do not focus on what or how you wish they could write. This writing demonstrates what they sound like at their most natural. This is what you should expect from their essays, with a little more polish. Set your expectations accordingly.

Review Step 1/Understand the Prompt (5 minutes): The goal here is to confirm understanding. Do they understand the overall purpose of a personal statement? Do they know the difference between accomplishments (what readers already know from the rest of application) and characteristics (what they wish readers knew)? Even if their list of characteristics is short or cliché, that's fine. It does not need to be comprehensive. Unless their responses are terribly off base, keep this quick.

Discuss Step 2/Brainstorm Ideas (30 minutes): Let the student walk you through their ideas. Be curious and willing to be surprised. Listen and ask questions. Use phrases like "Tell me about a time when ..." or "That's interesting... Can you say more about that?" After you review and discuss the student's ideas, help them choose a topic by doing the following:

- During your discussion, point out which stories have potential. Stories with potential meet these criteria:
 - They are relatively recent (i.e., they did not happen in middle school)
 - They demonstrate at least one positive characteristic.
 - They include an anchor story around which the student can build the essay (e.g., the first day I took the bus across town to physical therapy by myself).
 - The student likes the story. (For example, maybe they proposed writing about their ACL surgery, but upon further discussion, you discovered that during the recovery period, they had to figure out how to get to physical therapy across town while their parents were working. This story demonstrates their problem-solving skills and determination to make the most of a difficult situation.)
 - Quickly summarize the topics that have potential and skip the ones that don't.
- Once you are done reviewing and discussing the student's ideas, repeat back the ones that have potential so they can hear the ideas out loud. Be enthusiastic. Explain why each of these topics could work.

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- When you finish repeating the ideas, ask this question, “Imagine the deadline was moved up to next week. If you had to sit down and write the essay tomorrow, with almost no time for revision, which one could you write most easily.” The words *most easily* are the key here. You are trying to find out which story or stories they are most comfortable with. When you repeated the stories back to the student, you only included those that could work. Now the student gets to choose how to proceed.
- Most students will quickly choose a topic. If they ask which one you prefer, remind them that you only offered ideas that could work. You already eliminated the ones that couldn’t become effective essays.
- Praise their choice. Reinforce that they have good ideas and know how to choose what to write about. Even if you like another idea better, keep that to yourself!!!

STEP 3 Establish the Essay’s Theme (5-10 minutes):

- Explain the concept of theme, which has two parts: 1) What happened? 2) Why does it matter? (In other words, *Why are you sharing this particular story? What does it demonstrate about you?*)
- Also explain that while you are clarifying the essay’s theme together right now, the student will also review and write out the theme on their own after your meeting, to ensure that it sticks with them. The theme will become the touchstone of your reviews.
- Briefly state the theme as you see it (e.g., What happened? *You found a way to get to PT even though your parents weren’t around to drive you back and forth. You’ve never had to arrange transportation before, and even though it was complicated, you made it work and never missed an appointment. Why does it matter? This shows that you are resourceful. You are a problem-solver. You take initiative.*) Keep your remarks informal and light. Your proposed theme does not have to be perfect.
- Ask the student to state the theme in their own words. They are unlikely to say exactly what you said, and that is just fine. They might nail it the first time or launch into a long story. Some students will state the theme in two concise sentences; others will recite an outline of the entire essay. If that happens, ask them to try again, keeping it simple this time and sticking to the anchor story and the characteristics the topic illustrates.
- Keep going until they get it right.

Set Expectations and Discuss Next Steps (5 minutes)

- Remind the student that Steps 3 and 4 are due today. They need to complete that work on their own and return it to you by your agreed upon deadline. By doing this, you are confirming that they own the topic and are clear about why they chose a particular topic. Step 3 is an opportunity to focus on the theme; Step 4 is a free write for details, not a full essay draft.

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- Set a deadline for the first draft of the essay as well, even though they won't start writing it until after they submit Steps 3 and 4. Say something like, *If you send me your writing activities for Steps 3 and 4 today, I'll respond by noon tomorrow. With that in mind, when should I expect to receive your first draft?*
- Unless it's impossible, that draft should be done within three days. It is a content draft and should only take an hour or two to write.
- By doing this, you are establishing another norm: They will work on their own, help set their own deadlines (within reason) and then meet those deadlines, so the process stays on track.

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Step 6 Exercises – Examples for Reference

When you know what you are looking for, you can assign the Step 6 exercises with more focus and intention. Keep in mind that when we talk about the “messy middle” we don’t mean that the essay will get messy and then we’ll find clarity. Instead, we mean that the process might feel messy while you and the student explore content. When you start with a clear theme, you can send the student on excursions (with the Step 6 exercises) to develop additional content and look at the essay from different perspectives.

In these charts, we recorded the Step 6 exercises we assigned to several students. You will notice that our choices reflect a variety of factors: how well the draft conveyed the theme, items discussed during brainstorm but not shared on the page, and curiosity, among others.

Step 6 (Part 1): Examples of Writing Outside the Essay

Assignment	Purpose
<p>Write more about this: “The hours of chopping, mixing, kneading, and baking all suddenly became worth the hard work, because, for me, the generosity of baking is my validation.” Who taught you how to bake? Where did the recipe come from? How did you know that giving delicious home baked treats would make your friend feel good? Did someone bake for you and make you feel good? Be specific.</p>	<p>This student’s first draft lacked the insight that was clear during our brainstorm, when she talked about baking with her grandma, making her aunt’s recipes, how good she felt when they baked for her, and what she learned about compassion, kindness and more. I wanted to know more about the baking, and why she felt validated by doing it. I wanted her to explore the “why” part of her theme, to give us more.</p>
<p>Write more about this: “I have been able to undergo a journey of accepting my hair, and in turn been able to uplift my friends, family, and community with a selflessness that I never had previously.” This line directly speaks to the “Why It Matters” part of your theme, and I’d love to hear more about it. Why did accepting your hair make you more selfless? Now that you do accept your hair, how has your behavior changed?</p>	<p>This excerpt spoke directly to the Why It Matters part of her theme, which needed to be elaborated on.</p>
<p>Write more about this: “She bit in and she smiled really big, telling me that it was really good and she really appreciated me making it. That made me feel really happy. Not only did I help someone else’s day get a little bit brighter, but my hard work in the kitchen was acknowledged as being worthwhile.” How did you react when your friend told you how much she appreciated your gift? Do you remember what she said, and how you responded? What was going through your mind as you watched her bite into the banana bread?</p>	<p>Beyond this line, this student provided no details exploring why she felt so happy. She just said she felt happy. I wanted to know why, why, why. I wanted to see and feel what she felt and saw. I could not from what she wrote in her essay, and we had discussed how she felt during our brainstorm. When I got off the brainstorm call, I could taste the banana bread she baked for her friend. I could not feel any of that in the draft, or taste the delicious bread, so I selected this moment to try and get her to reflect more and bring the reader into her story.</p>

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Assignment	Purpose
Write more about this: "Being Chinese, despite the plentiful Asian population in my community, there was never anyone around me that "looked like me" who truly, actually looked like me." How did this make you feel? Did you want straight hair?	The story is largely about self-acceptance. It's an emotional story, so I wanted to bring out the emotion. In the first draft, the student had many lines that implied emotion but rarely explicitly state how she felt.
Write more about this: "...what I looked forward to the most was when she would walk in with an unbridled confidence that shone so brightly it enveloped me as well." I love the way that you phrased this. Can you help me see what this looked like? If I was to walk into your homeroom, what would I see? What would I hear? What did your friend do that made you feel enveloped in her confidence?	This is the anchor moment of the essay, and I wanted the student to gather more details that will help readers feel like they are in that moment.
Write more about this: "...That epilogue was stuck in my head for days after I read it. Katniss is a passionate but deeply flawed person and makes plenty of mistakes." How else do you relate to Katniss? How have you reckoned with your own flaws or mistakes throughout high school? Have you faced any situations where the "right" or "good" thing to do was unclear?	This student needed to write more about herself, as she was trying to highlight her thoughtfulness, both about the book and how she had grown. Her draft was more about the book than she intended.
"I remember sitting on my couch, hunched over trying to read the last pages of the book before dinner was ready." Try to describe your surroundings using the five senses. What were you thinking and feeling as you finished the book?	She meant this to be her anchor scene but did not describe the moment in much detail.
Reading your essay, I'm curious to learn more about why you love reading. How do books help you to think about ideas, the world, and who you are? How else do you display your thoughtfulness?	I was trying to encourage the student to reflect on the characteristic that she was attempting to illustrate (thoughtfulness).
Write more about this: "I was confident in my prior navigational planning to land our group on the trail." How were you able to remain confident in such a stressful situation? Were you used to being a leader?	This student did a good job describing the action of "what happened" in his draft, but rarely put the reader in his head to show what he was thinking and feeling.
Write more about this: "Hiking without a head lamp at night was not easy but it was a challenge I was willing on accepting because I pushed so hard for the further campsite." Why is it important to help out your team as a leader? Why do you like taking on challenges?	This was a brief anecdote that may be worth elaborating more on, especially because it connects to the characteristics he's trying to show, his ability to lead and make the most of challenging situations.
Write more about this: "This day made me so proud because I proved myself wrong in what I could achieve in one day." What specifically are you most proud of thinking about that day? What else did you learn about yourself and your abilities?	This was the last sentence of his essay, which ended abruptly. As with my previous prompt, I was trying to get him to reflect deeper on "why it matters."

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Assignment	Purpose
<p>Write more about this: "As the cluster of runners becomes a steady stream ... I look for a running companion. At around the halfway mark, I find who I am looking for." Help us see that this is something you always do. What types of conversations have you had with other runners? What types of people have you run and talked with? How do you identify a good companion?</p>	<p>This story revolved around something the student always does – finding a running companion during a race (much to her coach's chagrin). I wanted her to describe what it means to "always" do this.</p>
<p>Write more about this: "Together, we take it so slow that at least twenty runners pass us, eager to get to the finish line; I, on the other hand, am eager to finish our conversation." What were you talking about? How did the rest of the race/conversation go? Was she still chatty? Did you do most of the talking? Did she thank you a hundred times or were you able to get back into your running/talking rhythm?</p>	<p>She vividly described everything up to the point where her new friend had an asthma attack, but then the story got more generic. I wanted her to keep up the lively story through the end.</p>
<p>Write more about this: "My measure of personal success comes not from how quickly I can move my legs for five kilometers, but rather from the relationships I build and the things I learn along the way." What was your time in this race? (approximate is ok). What did you learn along the way (beyond your ability to help someone in crisis)? Have you ever stayed in touch with any of your running companions? If so, how/why did you stay connected?</p>	<p>This felt like wrapping up the story with a bow (and here's why it matters....) I wanted to try to get her to show us what this means to her.</p>
<p>Write more about this: "In classic fashion, the conversation transitions quickly to politics as it has countless times before." What are some of the other issues you've discussed and disagreed about? What is his position? What is yours?</p>	<p>This student had a very hard time focusing. She wanted her essay to be perfect (topic, structure, everything) before we even finished brainstorming. She refused to choose a single incident with her grandfather – no anchor story, despite extra brainstorming and two email exchanges – so I thought I'd try to find one through a back door.</p>
<p>Write more about this: "listening has provided me with incredible insight into the people around me...My efforts to understand others has made it such that I often find myself mediating disputes between my friends, explaining to one why the other is hurt or frustrated, and vice versa." If I were standing in the background, what would I see? Describe a time when you mediated a dispute. If you can't think of anything specific, write about this experience in general terms. Were you able to get friends to make up? Able to get people who disagree strongly to not hate each other?</p>	<p>She wanted to connect her open-minded disagreements with her grandfather with her ability to listen to friends. This section became very generic, so I wanted to see if she could pinpoint an incident or at least describe a general experience.</p>
<p>You obviously care a lot about your grandfather. What do you think is wonderful and admirable about him?</p>	<p>In our conversation, she talked about the value of relationships and how that makes it possible and necessary to engage in complex and challenging discussions. I wanted to highlight more of the positive side of her grandfather, so he doesn't just come across as a cranky old man.</p>

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Assignment	Purpose
“Looking down at my lap at the various images printed before me, as well as looking at my friends’ reactions I was not sure what to think.” Was this the first time you thought about your privilege? How did you feel? What was going on inside of your head?	This student talked about privilege a lot – without anything specific. I wanted to know what privilege meant to her. So I asked these questions to see what might transpire.
“It was about ten in the morning and we were deep into our daily <i>peulah</i> , which is the Hebrew word for activity; we have one every day at camp.” What was the theme of the daily activity on this day? Were you excited? Did you like these activities at camp more than swimming or playing tennis or other more physical activities? What made this one so special?	This girl had attended a progressive, Jewish camp for many years. While this is the place that helped mold her views, that was not clear in her essay. I specifically selected this spot because I wanted to know what they did during this activity. It was not always swimming. It involved deep discussions about what they could do to help make the world a better place. The story was missing specifics.

Step 6 (Part 2): Examples of New Openings

Assignment	Purpose
Start here: “We were hours into the hike and still had not intercepted the Appalachian Trail.”	This student started his draft with a lot of background info, so I wanted to point out a way to start right at the beginning of the action.
Begin by describing how you sacrificed your head lamp.	I also wanted to show how he could start in the middle of the action.
Start here: “It was near midnight when our group decided to take a break on the trail.”	I picked a moment near the end of his story so that he could consider how his essay would look if he started here, before describing the earlier scene. Reading his draft and Writing Outside the Essay, he didn’t have that many strong potential opening lines, so I focused on choosing different parts of his story for him to consider starting with.
Start here: “I was frantically reading, trying to finish the book as fast as possible.”	This student described her anchor scene well in the Writing Outside the Essay exercise, so I suggested starting her essay with that description.
Begin by describing a scene from <i>Mockingjay</i> that illustrates the darkness and complexity that surprised you at 16.	Her original draft started by describing the book but in a much less focused way. This would get her to her theme more efficiently.

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Assignment	Purpose
<p>Start here: “Looking down at four laminated printouts of black and white maps of Chicago I felt overwhelmed.”</p>	<p>By selecting this line for a potential open, I had hoped this student might focus more on learning how to become an advocate. This story was specific. The maps showed racial disparities, food inequalities, gentrification. This was the first time this girl noticed her privilege. This moment was her aha moment. I picked this because it was a specific moment that would easily work as an anchor story. Her writing was not clear in her first draft, so I looked for short lines that could help her get quickly and simply to a story that would support her theme.</p>
<p>Start here: “Books can sometimes describe my own feelings better than I can.”</p>	<p>This would get her into her anchor story, while also providing a bit of background on the type of person she is.</p>
<p>Start here: “My grandfather is always the one convincing us to go on amusement park rides with him, not the other way around.”</p>	<p>This sets the stage from a sensitive, positive POV rather than the conservative old man.</p>
<p>Begin with this: “Over the years, I can unequivocally state that I have had wrenches thrown in my evolving opinions simply as a result of listening to my grandfather.”</p>	<p>If she opens this way, we immediately want to know: What opinions? What wrenches?</p>
<p>Start here: “My grandfather owns multiple guns and ardently believes in his right to do so.”</p>	<p>This opening makes us want to know more about the grandfather. Why is the writer telling us about him? Why guns?</p>
<p>Try starting with the moment Georgia suggested having a picnic, and you decided to blend your grandma's baking techniques with your Aunt Sue's recipe for banana bread.</p>	<p>I selected this moment as a potential new open because it seemed like a natural spot to bring taste and smell to the reader very early in the story. It would support her theme and allow her to reflect.</p>
<p>Begin with this: “I set out my various Tupperware, filled with sweet snickerdoodles, toasted turkey sandwiches, and the special surprise I had baked freshly that morning: my family's recipe of banana bread.”</p>	<p>I knew this would work as a potential new opener. This line had great details and seemed to be a good set up for the reflective part of the story: how that family recipe. helps her showcase her compassionate and kind side of her personality. It seemed like a fairly easy way to begin the story and would immediately interest the reader.</p>
<p>Start here: “My friend would come in with her curls bouncing around because she always had a little skip in her step.”</p>	<p>I suggested this because it would start at the anchor moment, and this sentence is already hinting at the student's emotional journey toward self-acceptance. Also, it's an image. I often suggest that they start with an image—engage readers' imagination right from the start.</p>



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Assignment	Purpose
Or begin with this: "I saw people with this smooth, shiny hair type everywhere I turned."	I chose this line because it's a clear image that directly speaks to the anxiety that the author used to have about her hair. It's the "before" in this "before and after" story. I don't actually think she'll choose this opening, but it seemed like a good meditation. Also, I often like to suggest one starting point that's outside of the anchor moment, so students can see what a big difference starting at the anchor moment makes. (This student's step 5 opening did start with the anchor moment. I felt freer to assign this type of starting point because she doesn't need help focusing.)

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Step 8 Sample Reviews

The following pages demonstrate the type of comments we make during Step 8 (Review for Content and Structure). These are not the only types of comments we give our students, but they reflect a range of observations and suggestions. During Step 8, we are reading for content and flow. Some students move directly to their Step 9 (polish) draft, and others continue to work on content and structure for another draft or two.

Just like every day for the past couple of years of my life I was eating pasta for dinner. This time though, the pasta was the last thing I was thinking about.

Coach's reflection: In general, this student did a good job of addressing her theme though her essay didn't have much specificity. I knew that there was more to the scene from her writing exercise, so I knew she could make her opening a little more vivid without much trouble.

Commented [SK1]: I really like your opening line and how you use it to set up your main story, but a couple more details would help set the stage even better.

For example, in Step 6 Part 2, you wrote, "Forks clanking on bowls, cups hitting the table, and my parent's drilling my brother and I about our days was a daily dinner occurrence. My brother always went first monosyllabically answering our parent's questions about school, sports, friends, and his other various activities..."

When I returned home that night, I was ecstatic to tell my parents that I was finally becoming more comfortable at school and felt like I belonged.

Coach's reflection: She was answering the Common App's "gratitude" prompt, so I tried to get her to write toward that a little more directly. She only needed another sentence or so to fully answer the prompt.

Commented [SK2]: To fully answer the prompt, try reflecting a little more on why you were so grateful for the conversation.

To get started, consider this line from draft 1: "She made me realize that I wasn't just a nameless person lost in the crowd, but instead someone that people want to know."

I couldn't get past the confusion as to why she was speaking to me, but at the same time I felt relieved because I felt seen and important for the first time since transferring schools.

Coach's reflection: Throughout the essay, I made a point to make a couple of simple, positive comments, since she was a little nervous about the writing. Even though I pointed out a bunch of places to possibly expand, I wanted to her to also recognize that her hard work was paying off and her revision was strong.

Commented [SK3]: Nice job capturing your thoughts during this key moment.

It is hard to truly understand what someone has done for you until later in life. One action may have numerous lasting impacts. The single action of my mother helping me prepare for my entrance exam has helped me develop into the person I am today.

Coach's reflection: Even after Steps 6 and 7, this student still had a hard time getting past a pretty basic summary of her story and how she was grateful for her mom. In this case, I encouraged her to start as close to her anchor story as possible. If she was a stronger writer, I may have prompted her with some questions or suggested another opening.

Commented [SK4]: Consider starting here. This more specific sentence will help pull readers into your story right away, compared to starting with more general statements.

For the first time in my life, I was alone. Swallowed by the oppressing Japanese night, I stumbled across the loose volcanic rock as a combination of rain and hail assaulted my body.

Coach's reflection: This student came to us after already writing multiple drafts of a couple different ideas. He ended up sticking with his favorite. Though he went through all of the exercises, except for Step 4, his essay hadn't change much by this draft. He now started in the middle of his story though, which helped him a lot since he really wanted to describe different parts of this long hike. I wanted him to feel good about his choice, especially since I'd also

Commented [SK5]: I really like this opening line, and your streamlined opening paragraphs work well. Your story still feels vivid and dramatic, without any major structural issues. Well done!

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have to point out places to cut/condense. (He was a little over the word count, parts of the narrative dragged a little, and he ended abruptly, without much reflection.)

Despair and anxiety threatened to consume me.

Coach's reflection: The opening description of his feelings worked okay, though readers don't really find out why for a couple paragraphs. Adding a little more of that why would help readers stay engaged until then.

Commented [SK6]: In order for this to mean more to readers, consider briefly mentioning why you felt this - that you were exhausted, scared, hungry, etc. The larger context can wait until paragraph 3, which works well as is.

Each movement had a distinct purpose to fuel my pursuit of the summit. I fixated on the smooth execution of every motion, each maneuver as automatic as a breath.

Coach's reflection: In my email, I included our "cutting words" explanation. To paraphrase: When deciding what to cut and what to keep, it's not about whether a passage is "good" or "bad" writing but rather whether it's necessary or unnecessary to conveying your theme. In my comments, I also pointed out a couple of the most obvious redundancies, in part because I could tell that he loved his sometimes overwrought writing style.

Commented [SK7]: Consider cutting one of these sentences since they both describe your focus and swiftness.

Reluctantly, I let my family sample the botched batch of cookies in case I was being too critical of them. Their reactions after the first bite confirmed my failure, so I was more than happy to throw the rest of them into the garbage.

Coach's reflection: Anyone who knows me, knows that I hate using the term "hook." I even wrote an article about why encouraging students to use essay hooks is counter-productive. That being said, sometimes a student gets to draft two and their opening lines still feel lackluster. In this case, I selected a sentence from the middle of draft one for the student to use as a starting point for a new opening because I wanted her to explore how that train of thought could fit into the beginning of the essay. I did not want her to keep the exact words of the beginning of the opening line of draft two, which is what she did. That's okay, it happens sometimes. Challenging the student to be more creatively expressive added flavor to the first lines while still keeping her focused on the story and moment she was opening with. Notice that my instructions focus on using creative descriptions to elaborate on the story. Even though I'm aware that the new lines will make the essay more interesting, I'm not asking her to "get the reader's attention because I want the student to stay focused on communicating her story, not go down a rabbit hole of trying to guess what readers want.

Commented [SK8]: The first lines of an essay are a great place to be extra creative / descriptive. Try adding a sentence or two to the beginning of your draft that gives a creative description of the first time you tried the Levain bakery cookies. How would you describe the sensory experience? What was going through your mind on that first bite?

"Go check the kitchen and make sure nothing was left on." This was a phrase I had heard countless times, the person I was hearing it from was none other than myself.

Coach's reflection: When asking students to make cuts or rewrites to reduce word count, I like to phrase my suggestions as "opportunities." I think it helps the comment feel more productive and less critical. In this case, asking the student to be more concise will also get him to restructure a sentence that is awkward and grammatically incorrect. By citing the need to trim words (the draft was over the word limit), I am able to achieve my desired end without needing a more complicated explanation of why the sentence was awkward. (Depending on the essay's needs, I might not address lowering the word count until draft three.)

Commented [SK9]: This seems like a good opportunity to reduce the word count. I think you can be more concise here. Try expressing this idea using as few words as possible.

I wanted to voice my opinion. I wanted to question the church's beliefs out loud and have a conversation about them. Deciding to speak up was really out of character for me. I've never been that kid who challenges the teacher's, let alone the church's, beliefs.

Coach's reflection: It's common that the second drafts of essays still have details or parts of stories that require elaboration. In this case, as a reader, I was left with an unanswered question that would affect how I might view the rest of the story. When asking students to elaborate, I often like to point out what they did write that captured my interest. I express enthusiasm and curiosity. Instead of saying that they left something out, I say that I want to hear more. It helps the student feel positive about the ideas that they already have on the page, while still insisting that they elaborate.

Commented [SK10]: This is a thoughtful thing to want. I'd love to hear a little more about why you decided to speak up at this moment. Why not wait to discuss it with friends after school? What thoughts and/or feelings inspired you to raise your voice in class?

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Wow Task List

This is the checklist our coaches use with their students. It refers to our internal documents, some of which are included in this packet. You may work remotely like us or primarily in person. Whatever you do, do it intentionally, and identify places in your process that could work with standard responses and places that require professional judgement and creativity.

Intake

1. Send welcome email to student (Email A1: Kickoff (student)).
2. Send welcome email to parent (Email A2: Kickoff (parent)).
3. Coach create reminder that student needs to schedule an appointment.

Intro-Step 2

1. Student schedule brainstorm
2. Send email reminding student that pre-work is due two days before brainstorm (Email B: After student schedules appointment, reminder to do pre-work).
3. Create reminder that pre-work was due yesterday for tomorrow's meeting (e.g., if pre-work is due Tuesday night for a Thursday brainstorm, create your task for Wednesday morning. If the pre-work isn't waiting for you Wed. AM, send a reminder.)
4. Student send in Try Its for Intro-Step 2. Coach save these documents in student's folder.
5. Coach and student meet for brainstorm session, choose a topic, discuss theme.

Steps 3-4 (Prep for first draft)

1. At the end of brainstorm meeting, coach remind student to complete Steps 3 and 4 right away. Also discuss deadline for draft 1.
2. Send email recap of brainstorm with reminder to complete Steps 3 and 4 (Email template C: After brainstorm, reminder of next steps).
3. Create reminder that Steps 3 and 4 are due tonight.
4. Create reminder for the day after Draft 1 will be due.
5. Student send in Try Its for Steps 3 and 4. Coach save these documents in student's folder.
6. Send email with next steps (Email D: After student complete Steps 3 and 4).
7. Send parent email (Email D1: After student competes Steps 3 and 4 (parent)).

Steps 5-6 (Content)

1. Student complete Try It for Step 5 (Draft 1). Coach save this document in student's folder.
2. Send student email with next steps - writing outside the essay (Email template E: Responding to Step 5).
3. Create task for the day after writing exercise will be due: reminder that Writing Outside the Essay exercise was due last night.
4. Student complete Writing Outside the Essay exercise. Coach save this document in student's folder.
5. Send student email with next steps – New openings (Email template F: New Openings exercise).

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6. Create task for the day after writing exercise will be due: reminder that New Openings exercise was due last night.
7. Student complete New Openings exercise. Save this document in student's folder.

Steps 7-8 (Content + Structure)

1. Send student email with next steps - Make More Notes (Email template G: Steps 7 – Plan Your Next Draft).
2. Create reminder for the day after writing exercise will be due: Step 7 notes exercise was due last night.
3. Student complete Step 7 Notes. Coach save documents in student's folder.
4. Send student email with next steps (Email template H: Response to Plan Your Next Draft Exercise).
5. Create reminder for the day after writing exercise will be due: Step 7 – Content + Structure Draft was due last night.
6. Student complete Step 7/Content + Structure draft. Coach save document in student's folder.
7. Coach review essay. At this point, you are likely to go back and forth 2-3 times. Review all of the student's writing to this point - Step 3/Theme, Step 4/Free Write, Step 5/Draft 1, Step 6/writing exercises, Step 7 notes and revised draft. Make comments to help the student shape the essay so that it responds to the prompt, reflects the theme and is as well written as possible (within the student's capacity.)
8. Send student email with next steps. Use these templates as appropriate: Email template I1: Email after Step 7 revision, ready to move on to polish; Email template I2: Email after Step 7 revision, not ready to move on to polish yet; Email template I3: After second round of Step 7-8 revisions.
9. Each time you send an email to the student, create a reminder for the morning after the work was due.
10. Each time the student responds, save documents in the student's folder.
11. Each time you make a round of comments, save a new copy of the document and make your comments on the new document. Attach the new document (or refer to the Google doc) in the email you send the student. If you use Google docs, download a copy as well, and save that in the student's folder.

Steps 9-10 (Content + Structure + Polish)

1. Student complete Step 9/Polish draft. Coach save document in student's folder.
2. Coach review essay. You might be done, or the student might need a couple of polish rounds. Use your best judgement, but at this point you're focusing primarily on the writing itself - clarity, grammar (but don't go crazy over it), spelling, etc.
3. Each time you send an email to the student, create a reminder for the morning after the work was due.
4. Each time the student responds, save documents in the student's folder.
5. Each time you make a round of comments, save a new copy of the document. Attach the new document (or refer to the Google doc) in the email you send the student. If you use Google docs, download a copy and save that in the student's folder.
6. When you've made your final comments, send student email with final instructions (Email template J: Completed Essay (student)).



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Proofreading

1. After student responds with any final, final comments (or says *This is perfect, thanks!*), send the final draft to the proofreader.
2. After proofreader reviews (looking for glaring errors only), send a final email to the student with the proofed essay attached.
3. Send a final email to the parent, but do not attach the essay. It is up to the student to share or not share their work. (Email template J1: Completed Essay (parent)).