



## **College Essay Workshop**

### **Student Handouts**

## I'm the Kind of Person Who...

**What kind of person are you? How do you live your truth in the world? Fill in the blanks below.**

Example:

I'm the kind of person who never gives up in the face of a challenge.

Share a story or example from the last year that illustrates this.

*Last Saturday, I spent five hours helping my little sister build a treehouse. Neither one of us knew exactly what we were doing, but between YouTube videos and some basic carpentry skills, I figured it out, and also taught her how to measure, saw and hammer.*

I'm the kind of person who \_\_\_\_\_

Share a story or example from the last year that illustrates this.

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# The Wow Method

## Your College Essay In Ten Simple Steps

### CONTENT

1

#### Understand the Prompt

Before choosing a topic, you should understand what the prompt is asking and how the essay fits into the application. That means reflecting on what readers already know about you and thinking about what they can't find out from the rest of your application.

2

#### Brainstorm Ideas

In Step 2, we encourage students to consider several different topics. For each one, we discuss the story idea, the prompt, and what readers will learn about you. You might be surprised by what you choose to write about.

3

#### Focus on Theme

Every essay needs a theme to help the writer stay focused. The theme has two parts: 1) "What happened?" (What story are you sharing?) and 2) "Why does it matter?" (What will readers learn about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application?)

4

#### Free Write for Details

Once the theme is clear, it's time to get some words on the page. It doesn't matter what those words are or how many you write. This free write is a chance to capture details, focusing on the "What happened?" aspect of your theme.

5

#### Write Draft 1

Step 5 is a content draft. We suggest writing more than the word limit so you don't overthink this first draft or try to make it perfect. You'll have plenty of time to focus on structure and polish later.

6

#### Review Prompt and Theme

In Step 6, we read the first draft with the prompt and theme in mind, then give students writing exercises to help focus the essay and add details where needed. This review is for content only. We don't comment yet on structure or polish.

### CONTENT + STRUCTURE

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#### Write Draft 2

In Step 7, students take a step back and review the work they've completed so far, including theme, free writes, draft 1 and Step 6 writing exercises. Then it's time to write draft 2, this time paying attention to both content and structure.

8

#### Review Content and Structure

In Step 8, we review the essay for content and structure. We add notes in the margin, pointing out what works and where the essay could be improved, based on the student's willingness and ability to take the essay further.

### CONTENT + STRUCTURE + POLISH

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#### Write Draft 3

The polish draft gives the student an opportunity to step back once again and read the essay with fresh eyes. The goal is to tie up any loose ends and make sure the essay is clean, but not to rewrite it beyond recognition.

10

#### Final Review and Proofread

The final review is for clarity and consistency only. We focus on grammar, spelling and punctuation. Perfection is not the goal. You are a high school student and should sound like one.

## Step 1: Understand the Prompt

### *Common Application*

#### **Instructions**

The essay demonstrates your ability to write clearly and concisely on a selected topic and helps you distinguish yourself in your own voice. What do you want the readers of your application to know about you apart from courses, grades, and test scores? Choose the option that best helps you answer that question and write an essay of no more than 650 words, using the prompt to inspire and structure your response. Remember: 650 words is your limit, not your goal. Use the full range if you need it, but don't feel obligated to do so. (The application won't accept a response shorter than 250 words.)

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

## Step 1: Understand the Prompt (Prompts Parsed by Wow)

**#1 Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

The key word in this prompt is “meaningful.”

To answer this prompt effectively, consider why your background, identity, interest or talent is significant to you. Colleges are more concerned with who you are than your background, identity, interest or talent. What does your talent illustrate about you? What have you learned about yourself because of your background?

At its core, the college essay is all about reflection. What do you want readers to know about you after reading your essay? Why does it matter to you? In your response, you will need to focus on why something is meaningful to you, and also make sure it answers the prompt.

Admissions officers read these essays to find out something they don’t already know about you. They can tell from your application that you are on the lacrosse team or in the school orchestra. They know you worked as a researcher or a hospital aide or a bagger in a grocery store. And if your transcript says you took American Literature, they can assume you read books like *A Raisin in the Sun*, *The Crucible* or *The Bluest Eye*.

They don’t know how those experiences affected you, whom you met along the way or why a particular piece of music is so important to you. They have no idea how you have changed and why you might be a good fit for their school. You can share these reflections in your essay.

You could respond to this prompt by sharing insight gained from any **background, identity, interest, or talent**— a significant conversation, or a moment when you realized something important about yourself – anything that truly and vividly demonstrates who you are and answers the prompt in a thoughtful manner. Your experience does not have to be particularly impressive; you do not have to write about what you learned while climbing a mountain or how you got over your fear of fires after rescuing three children from a burning building. You could write about how you developed compassion for older people while making meatballs with your grandma, or how you became more confident after navigating a car on an icy highway. Your challenge is to find an idea that illustrates something meaningful. Choose a single moment, or focus on an idea, and then explore it in detail.

**#2 The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?**

Prompt #2 is more specific than #1. In this case, the key sentence is at the end of this prompt: “How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?” Your readers are not going to judge you because you had a setback or failed at something. Everyone faces obstacles. The intent of the prompt is to help you reflect on how you deal with unexpected complications and disappointments; that insight can be incredibly revealing.

Answering this prompt requires you to think more broadly about challengers and setbacks, reflect on the experience and demonstrate how you grew or changed as a result. It’s best to focus on the solution, not the problem. Keep the story positive.

What do you want readers to know about you? Have you faced a challenge, setback or failure that shows you are resilient, or demonstrates that you learned to be a leader? Are you the kind of person who can turn every difficult experience into something positive? If this sounds like you, this may be a good prompt to choose.

**#3 Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?**

Prompt #3 also asks for reflection. It is one of the most specific prompts, and requires you to share how you think in a deeper way than some of the other prompts. In this case, the central story should showcase a time when you challenged a belief or idea. Maybe you raised your hand in class at your religious school and said you did not believe in God. Why did you do that? What happened? What did you learn about yourself? Perhaps you challenged a family rule or a school dress code. Did you challenge something you had always believed in, or question something you had long felt uncomfortable with?

When has your opinion been unpopular? Why do you stand up for what you believe in? What is so important to you that you feel the need to challenge authority? Why? What inspires you to take action?

During high school, you are constantly asked to look toward the future: Where are you going? What do you want to do with your life? Where will you attend college? What career will you pursue? Your college application essay offers an opportunity to look back, and this prompt is a prime example.

If you are a deep thinker who asks a lot of questions, loves to play the devil's advocate, challenges authority, or questions religious and other dogma, this might be a good prompt for you.

**#4 Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?**

Prompt #4 is more complex than some of the others. On the surface, it seems to be asking about a time you felt gratitude. But it's not quite so simple. This prompt is both reflective and very specific. The key words here are *reflect*, *surprising*, *gratitude*, *affected* and *motivated*.

This prompt invites you to reflect on someone else's kindness, but the story you tell should not be primarily about the other person's act. It should be about how this experience affected you. What changed for you, or what did you do differently as a result?

And the prompt doesn't ask you to share just any act of kindness. Readers want to know about something someone did for you that made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. Maybe the other person surprised you with their kindness, or maybe you were surprised that you felt so grateful or happy. Or maybe the surprise came through in some other way.

If you can identify a specific story that focuses on you, showcases a characteristic or trait that demonstrates who you are, fits these criteria, and also explains how your gratitude affected or motivated you to do something, this prompt might be for you.

**#5 Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.**

Prompt #5 is more specific, but still leaves room for reflection and interpretation. This prompt asks you to discuss something you accomplished, an experience or something that sparked growth and understanding. Remember, you do not have to show that you mastered something challenging to answer this prompt effectively. Rather, you are being asked to demonstrate how you have grown from your accomplishment, personal growth or insight. What do you know or understand now that you didn't know before?

Colleges want to know about you, not the experience. What did you learn from your accomplishment, event, or realization? Why was it significant? What do you want readers to know about you? Think traits and characteristics, not accomplishments, not events, and not realizations.

The best answer will illustrate the traits and characteristic you want to share with colleges, show insight into your character, and answer the prompt.

**#6 Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?**

The key word in prompt #6 is "engaging." This prompt asks about your intellectual curiosity. What motivates you? How and where do you get information? What do you do with it? Why?

The college essay is as much a thinking task as it is a writing task; readers want to know how you think in this and any prompt. What gets you excited? What energizes you? What makes you tick?

Think about who you are. Maybe you care about social justice. Perhaps you're captivated by humor or technology. Is it football? Do you get lost in a good book? A family dinner discussion about world events? Do you scream at the TV during a political debate? How do you learn? The Internet? Your favorite teacher?

Try asking yourself questions like these: Why is this topic, idea or concept so engaging? How does it make me feel? Who do I talk to about these ideas? Where do I go to research new concepts?

How resourceful are you when your curiosity is piqued to the fullest? The answer to this prompt should also reveal something to admissions about the breadth or depth of your interests.

You can explore the big-picture concept overall or share an example of that concept in action. Whether you collected clothes and toiletries for a local family who lost their home in a fire or attracted ten thousand followers by tweeting a daily joke, the real story will come to life if you can explain why you did it.

**#7 Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.**

The key word in this prompt #7 is "choice." And while this prompt appears to be different from the others, the purpose is the same. Yes, applicants can submit any essay they want, but as the overall instructions clearly state, even an A+ paper must still illustrate something meaningful about you and show reflection.

Suppose you want to submit a critical analysis you wrote for Honors English about a character in *Jayne Eyre*. Could it work? Maybe. Ask yourself what the essay demonstrates about you. Do you yearn for more than what traditional society allows, like Jane? Does the paper demonstrate how the book propelled you toward political activism? Does it show how the book changed you? After admissions officers read the paper, will they learn something new about you? If not, it won't work as a college essay, no matter how well-written.

Write about yourself—about what you love, where you come from, what you aspire to, how you spend your time, what bugs you, what inspires you. In any case, consider what you want admissions to know about you that can round out your application package. What do they know? What do you want them to know?

Again, they are interested in the traits that make you who you are, more than the experiences or activities that are highlighted elsewhere on your application.

Remember, as with all prompts for any type of personal statement, the college essay is all about reflection. If you choose this prompt, make sure you tell a focused story about you that shows insight into your character and provides information that colleges wouldn't know about you from the rest of the application package.



## **Step 1: Understand the Prompt**

Before you respond to the prompt, think about what readers already know and what you want them to know about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application.

### **Accomplishments**

What do they already know? (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.)

### **Characteristics**

What do you want readers to know about you? (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!

## Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

What could you write about to answer your prompt? Write down several ideas. Be very specific, and include a few details for each idea. You might want to consider several different options from the choices the Common App offers (e.g., a background story, a time when you experienced a setback, a time when you challenged a belief, etc.), or you might have several ideas in one area (e.g., several background stories, several concepts you find engaging.)

**Here are two examples to help you.**

Prompt: Common App 1 (A background story)

Anchor story: Teaching Ellie to swim. The day she finally put her face in the water.

Key details: Worked with her all summer, she was scared, wouldn't put her face in the water, last day she finally tried it. I kept trying new things, and didn't feel frustrated, really wanted to help her. Pool was quiet that day, a little overcast, she was playful and trusted me.

What characteristics does this story illustrate? I am patient and diligent. I am a creative problem-solver.

### **Example 2**

Prompt: Common App 2 (A time I faced an obstacle)

Anchor story: The robotics competition where I had to think on my feet.

Key details: This year we almost won at State level. 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 characteristics does this story illustrate? I know how to focus and lead others. I apply the lessons I learn.

## Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

### IDEA #1

Prompt:

Anchor story:

Key details:

What characteristic(s) does this story illustrate?



### IDEA #2

Prompt:

Anchor story:

Key details:

What characteristic(s) does this story illustrate?



## Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

### IDEA #3

Prompt:

Anchor story:

Key details:

What characteristic(s) does this story illustrate?



### IDEA #4

Prompt:

Anchor story:

Key details:

What characteristic(s) does this story illustrate?



### Choose an Idea

Which of these story ideas show readers something real and meaningful about you? Which one would you enjoy writing the most? That is the one you should use for your essay. The event or setting is not as important as what that experience teaches readers about you. You might decide to use one or more of your other ideas for a different essay.

## Step 3: Focus on Theme

### 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.

### Sample Theme

What happened? After a summer of trying, I finally got Ellie to put her face in the water during swimming lessons.

Why does it matter? I am patient and diligent. I am a creative problem-solver.

### My Theme

A traditional personal statement is built around a theme, which has two parts:

1) What happened? 2) Why does it matter?

**1. What happened?** What will you write about in your essay? Choose one anchor story from the ideas you came up with in Step 2.

**2. Why does it matter?** Think characteristics. What does this story illustrate about you that the reader wouldn't know from the rest of your application?

## Review Your Theme

Before writing a draft of your essay, clarify the essay's theme. Use this rubric alone or with a partner to determine if the theme is clear.

The theme includes two parts: 1) What happened? and 2) Why does it matter?	Yes	No
Part 1 (What happened) focuses on a specific incident, story, or example	Yes	No
This incident/story/example occurred in the relatively recent past; not when the writer was in middle school	Yes	No
Part 2 (Why does it matter) focuses on a characteristic or characteristics that the writer wants to share with readers	Yes	No
The theme adds something to the application, and does not simply repeat information that readers will already know	Yes	No
The theme addresses the essay prompt	Yes	No
(If you're working with a partner)  If you answered No to any of these questions, note whether you think you should make an exception or the writer needs to make changes before moving forward		
(If you're working with a partner)  What other questions or suggestions do you have for the writer?		



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Every essay needs a theme to help the writer stay focused. The theme has two parts: 1) "What happened?" (What story are you sharing?) and 2) "Why does it matter?" (What will readers learn about you that they can't find out from the rest of your application?)

**4 Free Write for Details**  
Once the theme is clear, it's time to get some words on the page. It doesn't matter what those words are or how many you write. This free write is a chance to capture details, focusing on the "What happened?" aspect of your theme.

**5 Write Draft 1**  
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#### CONTENT + STRUCTURE

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