



College Essay Workshop

Leader's Guide

Workshop Description

Students will learn how to turn everyday experiences into effective college essay topics that will help them catch the attention of admissions counselors. This workshop takes students through Steps 1-4 of the ten-step Wow Method.

Objectives

At the conclusion of the three-hour workshop, students will:

- Understand the concept of “knowing your audience”
- Understand the concept that “an application essay is a story about you”
- Understand that every writer has a unique writing voice, and that this voice is the one they should use for their college essays
- Explore experiences to write about in an application essay, and understand how to choose an effective topic
- Understand the importance of details
- Understand that a personal statement needs a theme, which has two parts: 1) What happened? and 2) Why does it matter?

Time Commitment

- 3 hours

Student Materials

- Students should come to the workshop prepared to write. They will need paper and a pen. A laptop or tablet is optional.

Instructor Preparation

- Review all instructions, handouts, and slides. Please note that instructions include suggested language. Make the key points using your own words.
- Decide ahead of time what will happen after they complete the workshop. This workshop takes students through Steps 1-4 of the ten-step Wow Method. Will you continue working with them one-on-one after that? Will you meet again as a group? Is the purpose of your workshop to get them started on the right foot or to get them to a polished draft?
- The purpose of this workshop is to teach young people to tell their own stories in their own voices, and to do so as clearly and effectively as possible.
- For this reason, the curriculum intentionally does not include sample essays. We discourage students from using samples as models for their own work. Everyone's voice is unique.
- There is no formula for writing the “right” type of essay. Models that rely on structures and types of topics only encourage students to try to imitate those examples.

- This workshop not only teaches students to write a personal statement; it introduces them to concepts that will help them write any type of application essay.

Bring These Items to the Workshop

- Enough copies of all handouts for your students
- Pens
- Paper
- Access to slides

Timing

Segment	Length	Sample Timing
Welcome	10 minutes	9:00 - 9:10
Introduction: Finding Your Voice	20 minutes	9:10 - 9:30
Your College Essay in 10 Simple Steps	20 minutes	9:30 - 9:50
Step 1: Understand the Prompt	20 minutes	9:50 - 10:10
Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas	30 minutes	10:10 - 10:40
Break	10 minutes	10:40 - 10:50
Step 3: Focus on Theme	20 minutes	10:50 - 11:10
Step 4: Free Write for Details	30 minutes	11:10 - 11:40
Steps 5-10: Drafts and Reviews	10 minutes	11:40 - 11:50
Conclusion/Next Steps	10 minutes	11:50 - 12:00

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 characteristic/s). 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.

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."

Welcome

10 minutes

Slide 2: Before We Start

Distribute Handout packet as students enter the room. For a virtual workshop, share the handouts in advance. Make sure every student has their own copy.

Ask them to complete page 1: I'm the Kind of Person Who... as they sit down.

Introduce yourself when everyone has arrived.

- Name (and what they should call you)
- Any relevant professional/personal experience
- What you like about teaching students to write college application essays

Allow 5 more minutes for students to complete handout after everyone arrives (if they are not done already).

Facilitate discussion

- Ask a few students to share one of their examples.
- Comment briefly on the responses.
- Make sure everyone can easily follow the fill-in-the-blank format. You will refer back to this when you discuss Step 3 (Focus on Theme) later in the workshop.

Introduce concept of "theme"

- In very general terms, introduce the idea that a personal statement needs a theme.
- A theme includes two important elements: 1) What happened? (the experience/story/example) and 2) Why does it matter? (the characteristics illustrated by the experience/story/example)
 - The words used to fill in the blank are most likely positive characteristics (e.g., I'm the kind of person who... likes a challenge, is always helpful, loves to keep active).
 - The stories/examples illustrate those characteristics.
- **Note to instructor:** This concept can be modified for other types of essays. Today you are focusing on personal statements. (e.g., a "Why College X" essay does not have the same type of theme as a personal statement, although the concept of theme is still relevant.)

Introduction: Finding Your Voice

20 minutes

Transition

- Before we talk about what makes an effective essay, we are going to complete a writing exercise that has nothing (and everything!) to do with personal statements.
- You have a unique voice, and a personal statement offers a valuable opportunity to showcase it.

Discuss the concept of voice

- Note that voice is one of the most important things you will discuss in this workshop.
- Talk about the elements of a speaking voice (tone, volume, word choice, etc.)
- Ask what makes a “writing voice.” Answers should include:
 - Word choice
 - Images
 - Details
 - Sentence structure

Slide 3: Morning Writing (Voice)

Voice exercise

- Ask students to take out something to write with. They will each need 1 or 2 blank sheets of paper or a laptop/tablet/phone.
- Explain the rules:
 - This is a journaling activity.
 - Think about your morning (THIS MORNING – not “mornings” in general.)
 - What happened to you from the moment you opened your eyes? What did you see, hear, smell, feel? (Not “breakfast,” but “vanilla Dannon yogurt that I ate in the car with a plastic spoon.”)
 - Write as fast as you can.
 - Don't try to be creative. Just write.
 - Don't worry about making sense.
 - No crossing out or correcting what you write. JUST WRITE!
 - Don't think about writing in full sentences. Just scribble down whatever comes to mind - images, fragments, sights, smells, tastes, sounds, textures, memories, associations.
 - Do not stop. If you get stuck, keep going. List whatever comes to mind when you recall that moment/experience.

- Allow 10 minutes for this activity. If students stop writing, gently encourage them to continue. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to not think too hard. Just write.
- At the 10-minute point, say STOP. Everyone should finish the thought they are on, then stop writing/typing.

Find the great details

- Say: Before we talk about what you've written, I want you to go back through it.
- Say: Mark 2-3 great details from your journaling. The idea is to find fresh images, ideas, or bits of language – each one could be one word or an entire chunk of text. It could be a fun description or something you always say. There are no right or wrong choices. These details should be things that differentiate you in some way (experience, word choice, etc.)
- Allow 5 minutes.
- Conclude by asking volunteers to share one great detail each.
 - Go around the room quickly.
 - After the first person, ask “Who has something completely different?” You are trying to point out that there are no right answers. Any detail is a good detail.
 - Praise their choices. This is the quality of detail you want to see in their writing for the rest of the workshop. You might comment on the details themselves (how the blanket felt against their cheek, the sound of a cat purring), sentence structure (simple, complex, full of adjectives, basic), the tone (serious, funny), or any other elements.
 - Emphasize that this is exactly the voice readers are looking for. They want to hear a 17-year-old voice, not a professional, adult voice. While their finished essays will be more polished than this brief morning writing, the tone should be the same.

Note to instructor: This concept will come up again in Step 4 (Free Write for Details)

The Wow Method: Your College Essay in 10 Simple Steps

20 minutes

Slide 4: Your College Essay in 10 Simple Steps

Handout page 2: The Wow Method: Your College Essay in 10 Simple Steps

- Say: There are ten steps to writing an effective college essay ... and you don't even get to the first draft till step #5.
- We will be following the 10-step Wow Method in this workshop, focusing on steps 1-4 today.
- Explain how they will complete their essays (e.g., You will have an opportunity to finish the remaining steps with me in the coming days and weeks. We'll talk more about that at the end of today's session. *or* You will be able to take your idea and continue on your own. *or* something else entirely.)
- Briefly review the handout.

Slide 5: Know Your Audience

Discuss what and why

- Write on board: WHAT WHY
- Ask: What is a college essay? And why are you writing one (or two or ten)?
- Record student responses on the board
- Be sure to cover the items below

Write on board next to **WHAT**: A STORY ABOUT YOU

- An essay is a story about you
- You are not writing about a topic.
 - Each person is writing about an experience and what that experience demonstrates about them.
 - The essay is not about the vacation, the job, the illness.
 - It is an opportunity to share an experience that demonstrates something positive about you. Those characteristics help readers understand why you would be a good student, what you learned from an experience, etc.

Write on board next to **WHY**:

- To illustrate at least one positive trait or characteristic
- To demonstrate your writing skills
- To demonstrate reflection
- To show that you will make a successful college student

Discuss who

- Write on board: WHO
- Emphasize the importance of knowing your audience
- Choose an experience one of the students shared from their “I’m the Kind of Person Who” handout to illustrate your point.
*Example: I’m the kind of person who thrives on new challenges.
During my trip to Belize, I learned that being afraid of dirt, bugs and the unknown didn’t have to limit my experiences.*
- Encourage students to identify three different audiences and purposes for this story. (e.g., If my audience was my parents, my purpose in telling them this story would be to convince them that they should let me go on another adventure next summer.)
- Write them on the board. *Examples:*
 - Audience= Parents
Purpose = Let me go on another adventure next summer
 - Audience= Best friend
Purpose = You should go on an adventure too
 - Audience = Admissions counselor
Purpose = I am an interesting person who takes life-enhancing risks and learns from my experiences
- Write on board next to **WHO**: COLLEGE ADMISSIONS COUNSELOR
- In this case, your audience is the college admissions counselor. Keep that audience in mind at all times.
- Briefly review what we know about a typical college admissions counselor:
 - They read college applications all day.
 - They read them quickly.

Slide 6: Try To Be

- Tie this discussion back to the previous segment on voice.
 - Point out that everything they write is for the admissions counselor.
 - With that in mind, try to be ...
 - Specific
 - Clear
 - Direct
 - Your topic need not be unique (YOU are unique. The experience does not have to be something that no one else has ever seen or done)

Slide 7: Your voice

- Your voice will differentiate you!

Step 1: Understand the Prompt

20 minutes

Transition: Before brainstorming ideas, it's important for students to understand the prompt

- Say: You all have different writing styles and different voices.
- Now we're going to move on to thinking about a real essay.
- That begins with understanding how to read a prompt so you can answer it effectively.

Slides 8-10: Step 1: Understand the Prompt

Handout pages 3-7: Step 1: Understand the Prompt

- Discuss what each Common App prompt is really about.
- Emphasize that the key in every case is for readers to understand something about the writer.
- Encourage students to underline, circle or highlight key words and phrases.

Slides 9-11: Understand the Prompt

Handout page 8: Step 1: Understand the Prompt

- Continue with this activity by reading the slide aloud (have students read parts aloud too).
- Explain the difference between characteristics and accomplishments. Readers already know if a student is captain of the tennis team or built the winning robot in a competition. That information shows up in other places on the application.
- However, readers do not know what KIND of person the student is. They do not know what kind of tennis captain they are. They do not know HOW the student solves robotics problems.
- In short, you want students to understand the difference between accomplishments (What I have DONE) and characteristics (Who I AM)
- Allow five minutes for students to fill in the worksheet.
- Ask for several volunteers to share their responses.

Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

30 minutes

Slide 12: Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

Handout page 9: Step 2: Brainstorm Ideas

- Note that you have moved on to Step 2 of the 10-step process.
- Now that they understand why they are writing these essays and what the prompts mean, they are ready to brainstorm ideas.
- Review the handout with the group.

Handout pages 10-11: Brainstorm Ideas

- Introduce the worksheet: On this page, you want students to start exploring their own ideas.
- Each “idea” should be the kernel of a story. These ideas should be as specific as possible and should focus on a particular experience or moment. This is the ANCHOR STORY.
- Some students will say that they already know what they want to write about. That’s fine. You still want them to brainstorm a range of ideas.
- Review the instructions and examples.
- You might want to ask a few students for possible topics. Help them focus as specifically as possible as examples to the others in the room.
- Point out that they are balancing three elements: (1) the prompt: (2) what happened (the anchor story); and (3) why does it matter (positive characteristic(s).) Some of them will start with a prompt, while others will begin with a story or a character trait. It doesn’t matter where they start, as long as all three elements are in balance.

Handout

- Allow 15 minutes for students to complete handout.
- Circulate during this time to answer questions and to direct students who are too general or who do not see the connection between the story idea and what they want readers to know about them.
- Encourage students to think creatively.
- It is okay if they don’t complete the handout. They should try to come up with as many specific ideas as possible.

Debrief/Encourage specificity

- After 15 minutes, ask a few students to share one of their ideas and the accompanying details.
- Remind students that they are preparing to tell a story.
- As they share their ideas and details, probe a bit further as necessary to move from the general (the summer I was a camp counselor) to the specific (the afternoon I helped my ten-year-old camper learn to sail).
- Emphasize the fact that one key question underlies the process of choosing a topic: “What do I want readers to know about me?”
- Try to demonstrate moving from the general (Being captain of the volleyball team shows that I’m a good leader) to the specific (The day I stayed after practice and helped our newest and least experienced player learn to spike a ball shows that I’m a caring leader).
- Also point out that this exercise is not intended to lay out a map to the entire essay. They are trying to identify an anchor story that they can use to illustrate at least one positive characteristic. Once they start writing, they will add necessary details, background, context, etc., depending on what the essay needs. They can’t know all of that before they start writing.

Break

10 minutes

Step 3: Focus on Theme

20 minutes

Transition: Note that every personal statement has a theme

Introduce the concept of the essay's theme.

- What happened? (your specific anchor story)
- Why does it matter? (the characteristic(s) your story illustrates)

Slide 13: Step 3: Focus on Theme

Handout page 12: Step 3: Focus on Theme

- Review the handout.
- Help students understand how this general concept applies to their specific topic.
- Review the idea they shared from the previous handout.
- Ask:
 - What does this item/experience/moment illustrate about you?
 - What makes your story unique?
- If answers are too general, guide students toward specific moments/details.
- Give them time to write a theme on the handout.
- Point out that this is the same type of statements you asked for when they arrived for today's session (Page 1: Reflect on Your Experiences).

Emphasize

- The reader should be able to tell why you shared this story. That is the second part of the theme: *Why does it matter?*
- The topic is important, but anything can make a good topic. The topic need not be unique or unusual to be effective. You are the subject of the essay; this is an opportunity for you to share something meaningful about yourself. The topic (anchor story) is the first part of the theme: *What happened?*
- It's ok to include lots of context to go along with the anchor story later, but it's easier (and generally more effective) to start with a clear, specific anchor story.
- The theme is NOT a summary of the essay. It is a concise statement that helps the writer stay on track.
- Like a boat anchor, the anchor story holds the essay in place, particularly as the student starts writing. Coupled with the related characteristics, it helps them stay focused. That's why the theme is so important.

Slide 14: Focus on Theme

Handout 13: Review Your Theme

Review the criteria for an effective theme.

- Ask students to review their theme and see if it meets the criteria.
- If time allows, you can also do this in pairs or small groups.

Step 4: Free Write for Details

30 minutes

Transition

- Before anyone writes a first draft, we need to get some details down on paper.
- We will do that with another free writing activity.

Slide 15: Free Write for Details

Step 4: Free Write for Details

- Ask student to take out their notebooks or computers/tablets/phones.
- Review the guidelines:
 - This is a journaling activity, like the voice exercise we did.
 - This time, start with the anchor story you chose. The “What happened?” aspect of your theme.
 - This is your opportunity to focus on a specific story and generate as many details as possible.
 - Again, remember that you are not writing an essay yet. Just capture as many details, sense memories and fragments as you can, just as you did with the “morning writing”/voice activity.
 - You will have plenty of time to write beautiful sentences later.
- Allow 10 minutes for this activity. If students stop writing, gently encourage them to continue. There are no right or wrong answers. The goal is to not think too hard. Just write.
- At the 10-minute point, say STOP. Everyone should finish the thought they are on, then put down their pens.

Find the great details

- Say: Before we talk about what you've written, I want you to go back through it.
- Say: Circle 2-3 great details from your journaling. These may or may not make it into the finished essay. The idea is to find fresh images or ideas – each one could be one word or an entire chunk of text.
- Allow 5 minutes. Assist students as necessary.
- Conclude by asking volunteers to share one great detail each. You do not need the context for the essay, just the detail.
 - Go around the room quickly.
 - If time and interest allow, go around a second time.
 - Praise their choices. Whether or not these particular details end up in the essays, this is the quality of detail you want to see in their writing.

Steps 5-10: Drafts and Reviews

10 minutes

Transition

- You have done a lot of the work that goes into writing a personal statement.
- Now it's time to write and revise drafts of your essay.

Slide 16: Your College Essay In Ten Simple Steps

Handout page 14: The Wow Method: Your College Essay In Ten Simple Steps

- As I told you back at the beginning, there are ten steps to writing an effective college essay.
- Those ten steps are divided into three stages: content, structure, and polish.
- We completed steps 1-4 today. These steps are all about content.
- Steps 5 through 10 take you through several drafts and reviews. *Note whether you are using the Wow Method or simply sharing the principles here. In your conclusion, you will explain any ongoing logistics or plans.*
 - Step 6 marks the conclusion of the content phase. During this phase you will probably write too much, but it doesn't matter. Your goal is to convey what happened and why it matters.
 - Steps 7 and 8 emphasize both content and structure. During this phase you can find that great first line or think about how you move through the essay.
 - Steps 9 and 10 focus on content, structure, and polish. This is the only point at which you should think about grammar, punctuation, etc. Why? Because you need the freedom to JUST WRITE through several drafts without worrying about perfection.

Conclusion/Next Steps

10 minutes

Wrap up

- Thank students for their attention and hard work.

Next Steps

- Explain how you will continue working with students.
- Provide deadlines and explain your process.

Conclude the workshop