The College Essay Workshop

***Developed by Bryzgel, P. and Martin, J. 2007.**

A guide to help you construct an authentic writing piece that captivates your audience

Essential guidelines, prompts, sample essays, and steps to carefully craft your college essay. for AP/ECE English 12 Language and Composition with Ms. Kirkpatrick

***You should print out the college essay prompt for a school you are applying to or use the common application prompt.**

***Do NOT delay…Your rough draft of your college essay is due AUGUST 15, 2016 emailed to Ms. Kirkpatrick mkirkpatrick@cpsctg.org**

NAME_____

The Common Application Announces 2016-2017 Essay Prompts

The Common Application has announced that the 2016-2017 personal statement essay prompts. These prompts are designed to elicit information that will strengthen the other components of the application. "We want to make sure that every applicant can find a home within the essay prompts, and that they can use the prompts as a starting point to write an essay that is authentic and distinguishing," said Scott Anderson, former school counselor and current Senior Director for Programs and Partnerships for The Common Application.

Among the more than 800,000 unique applicants who have submitted a Common App so far during the 2015-2016 application cycle, 47 percent have chosen to write about their background, identity, interest, or talent - making it the most frequently selected prompt; 22 percent have chosen to write about an accomplishment, 17 percent about a lesson or failure, 10 percent about a problem solved, and four percent about an idea challenged.

2016-2017 Essay Prompts

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 failure can be fundamental to later success. Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3. Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?

4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

5. Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

The following is a series of workshops that helps guide you to crafting a thoughtful, reflective, and mature college essay.

College Essay Workshop 1

Part One – The Clichéd First Line
Write down a one-sentence response to the following question:

> What is the most significant experience in your life and how has it made you the person you are today?

_____

_____

_____

Part Two – The Clichéd Topic
Avoid the clichéd essay. There are a few standard essays that everyone uses! College admissions officers see them over and over and over again. These are the **avoid-at-all-cost** essays:

- The trip to Disney World taught me about life and happiness (sure it did!)
- The trip to France taught me fluency and other cultures (no kidding! yawn yawn!)
- My favorite things are puppies, Saturday mornings in bed, and chocolate (whose aren't)
- I hate nuclear war, bullies, and Brussels sprouts (who doesn't?)
- My biggest problem is the Miss America pageant (girls!)… the Red Sox or some other losing team (boys!)
- The most important thing that's ever happened to me was the _____win against_____(fill-in the sport, fill-in the big, bad opponent!)
- The worst thing that ever happened was when my pet _____ died (fill-in the animal)
- Anything that begins "Hello, my name is _____and I'm a student at _____ " (they already noticed that!)
- The best way to describe myself is to describe my room (you can't be serious!)

Part Three – Your Essay Topic
This series of workshops provides you the opportunity to write a general college admissions essay. The following is our essay topic:

Evaluate a significant experience, person, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you or the direction of your future (i.e. career or college choice).

Brainstorm Activity

Before you begin writing your essay, you must brainstorm first.

Start with a personal inventory. The key word is personal – for your eyes only. Think of how you are and how you got that way. Begin simply by making a list of adjectives that describe what you like about yourself. Then make another list of what you dislike. Don't worry if the second list is longer than the first – most people are pretty hard on themselves. Study these lists for patterns, inconsistencies, and unusual combinations. Are you contradicting yourself (i.e. I like that I am generous to others and I dislike that I am self-centered)?

What I like about myself	What I dislike about myself

Once you complete a list, rank the qualities in order of importance. Give your strongest quality a 1, your second strongest quality a 2, etc. Then look at numbers 1 - 3 and identify a concrete event in your life that would show proof of this quality. This process is how you can find your essay. Evaluate how this experience has promoted and/or showcased this strength. Also, evaluate how this experience and/or strength has influenced the direction of your future.

Sample Essays

Sample Essay #1 is an example of an essay that may be similar to a rough draft. Notice the vagueness, lack of focus on one particular experience and/or characteristic, and lack of support of statements. The essay is more like a listing of accomplishments, something akin to a resume. This is what you **DO NOT** want to do. If you find that the same weaknesses in your own writing, go back through the brainstorming process and find one experience you can focus on. The result of actually doing this will be Sample Essay #2, a much more specific, detailed, and well- supported essay.

Sample Essay # 1
First attempt at a college essay

I like to think that I'm a well-rounded person. But my strongest suit is that I am dedicated and hardworking, that I want to see a project through to its completion, not halfway. This attribute is present not only in my academics, but also in my clubs and sports in school and in my out-of-school activities. This characteristic creates the balance in my diverse personality.

As a freshman, I didn't realize the importance of good grades, but as I grew, so did my desire to do better. My sophomore year started an upward trend that grew to the high point it is at now. Reaching the honor roll in the fourth quarter to my junior year proved to everyone, especially myself, that I was willing to go that extra distance to achieve. My SAT and English, American history, and Math I achievement test scores verified my abilities. That trend has not waned in the hectic senior year. At the close of the first quarter, I held an A average and was ready for another berth on the honor roll. Unfortunately, the class rank that has resulted is not at all an indication of the ability I possess. A strong finish will never make up for a late start.

As a participant in many clubs and sports, I have also been a standout. Notably, I have been an active member of the drama club for all my four years at Somers High School, contributing to the fall and spring productions as a member of the technical crew and as a stagehand. I have also been a contributor to the school's newspaper and literary magazine. In the latter I am currently the photography editor. I am also currently the editor of the photo and sports sections of the yearbook. Being an editor takes up much of my time after school, but the responsibilities are welcomed. In between meetings, I make time to enjoy the History and French Clubs. Another focus is my role on the varsity swimming team of which I have been a part since my freshman year. There have been many highlights in my swimming career, including making the state championships and breaking the school's record in the 100 butterfly as a freshman and being selected the team's Most Valuable as a sophomore. Junior year include a school record in the 200 individual medley and a fifth place finish in the Class M championships. It's a good

thing practices were at five-thirty in the morning or else I wouldn't have enough time to meet my responsibilities. In the spring, I have been a member of the baseball and track teams in which I have also made significant contributions.

My activities away from school are no less important. Three to five times a week, I swim with a local swim club, and on Sundays I am an active participant in my church's youth group. Spare time is spent reading books on WWII, collecting baseball cards, or my favorite pastime, photography. I consider myself an accomplished photographer after winning the Best of Show award for my work at the Four Town Fair the past three years. The last two I have been entered in the adult category. Some of my best works accompany this application.

With play comes an equal amount of work. In the summer I am a lifeguard at Sun Valley, a private beach club in Stafford, CT, where this year I earned my pay by saving a panicking boy from drowning. I hope to be teaching children how to swim this year. I have also been an assistant teacher of the Red Cross's "Reaching Adolescents and Parents" program. Community work has included working at the Connecticut Chili Festival, a fundraiser for the Hospice program, and babysitting in my neighborhood. I have also been blessed in being able to visit the Grand Canyon, Washington, D.C., Eastern and Western Canada, Switzerland, France, and West Germany with my family, for these experiences have shaped the way I look at the world around me.

I want to continue my upward growth and also want to teach others and tell others what I've experienced. I want to do something about the future of man and our country, such as changing the illiteracy rate and helping others to learn, to keep the youth away from drugs to build for a better future. I hope to go into your college with the idea of being a writer, teacher, and photographer, and come out with the knowledge and expertise to make those dreams a reality. I want to finish what I started.

Sample Essay #2
Next attempt

As a nine-year-old Little Leaguer, I struck out more times than I care to remember. I was not one of those child prodigies whose parents sit in the stands and beam with delight that this is "their son." My parents just sat in the stands, not amazed at my abilities, but astounded that I kept going up to the plate over and over, knowing that the same fate was waiting at the end. Still, I kept at it saying, "This time I'll hit it." "This time" took awhile to come. It was not until I reached junior high that my determination paid off, earning me a spot on the school's baseball team. Two years later as a town All-Star, "this time" came often as my batting average became the second highest on the team. Opposing pitchers wished they had been around in my younger days.

This dedication and persistence have played major roles in the shaping of my character. To give up is to fail. I don't give up, and because of this, my life has found paths to success that through resignation I never would have discovered.

My avid interest in photography began, not with a success, but with a failure. As a fourteen-year-old entrant in the youth section of our local Four Town Fair, I had produced, what I thought, were great pictures of the Grand Canyon. However, to my

dismay, I failed to win the desired blue ribbon. I was devastated by the loss, but I was determined to try harder. The next year, using a more sophisticated camera, I had again produced a fine display of work. That year, however, I succeeded, not only winning the blue ribbon, but also the prized "best of show." Unfortunately, the next year I had to move up to the adult section and compete with much more experienced photographers. Even then I was determined to give it my best. Needless to say, I was elated when one of my photos was selected from hundreds of other entries to become the "best of show."

Determination has also shaped my success in swimming. As a freshman swimmer specializing in long-distance freestyle, I was reluctant to swim one lap of butterfly, much less the racing distance of four laps. At the last meet of the season, I half-jokingly asked my coach to enter me in the fly event. There was not one person in the pool area, including me, who could believe that I had qualified for the state championship meet on that first swim. After discovering my talent in the event by dropping my time by five seconds at the championships for the school record, I vowed to my coach that I would be in the top six by my junior year. My climb was slow, but I persisted and began practicing twice a day to reach that goal. Last year I finished fifth in the championships. My coach just smiled.

In junior year it finally dawned on me that this same principle could apply to my academics. Up to that year I had not produced the quality work of which I was capable. I could have easily given up, thinking that it was too late to do anything. However, I was determined to give it my all. By the end of junior year, I had made the honor roll for the first time in high school. As a senior, I hope my high grades and top-level courses will offset my slow start and lead to another success—college acceptance.

College Essay Workshop 2

Today, you should have your strongest draft that responds to the following prompt:

> **Evaluate a significant experience, person, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you or the direction of your future (i.e. career or college choice).**
>
> Note: The length of the essay should be at least 250 words, but no more than 750 words.

If you have a draft, you should engage in the revising and editing processes (Part A). If you do not have a draft, please go to the brainstorming section of this packet and begin the writing process (Part B).

Part A – Revising and Editing

<u>Revising</u>

Revising an essay includes reviewing the content of your work and allowing others to do the same. This part of the process does not focus on the mechanics of writing

(spelling/grammar/formatting) rather it focuses on such things as content, voice, rhythm, and tone.

You should begin with revising, and when you are confident that you have done all that you can, you can move on to the editing process. Use the following guidelines to assist you in your revision process. You can do this alone or with a peer or a teacher.

Revision Guidelines:
(Quoted and adapted from *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps*)

Content
The first part of revising is asking yourself if you have truly responded to the prompt. Look at the prompt again and then read through your paper to discover if you stayed focused or veered off on a tangent. It is vital to stay focused and respond to the prompt, for if you do not, the rest does not matter. The college application committee member will notice that your essay is off topic and will be unimpressed immediately. So, do not move on in the process if you have not established that your content fits the purpose of the essay.

Most likely, you should have a conflict and a resolution in this kind of an essay. If you do not, then ask yourself what it is you are trying to prove about yourself. Your essay should revolve around some kind of conflict – obvious, subtle, comic, or whatever feels right to you based on why you're choosing to tell your story.

Proportion and Rhythm
Cast a critical eye on the proportions of your narrative and see whether things are as they should be. Read through your essay and ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your opening occupy a disproportionate amount of space?
- Do you find yourself rushing to finish your story?
- Do you have a skimpy opening, a tacked-on ending, and a big, potbellied middle section that feels like it's taking forever to get through?
- Are your sentence lengths varied?
- When you read your essay aloud, do you sense your essay is choppy or too drawn out?

Tone
Be sure that your tone is appropriate for a college essay. Remember, you are trying to make yourself sound good, but truthful, and not overly or under-confident. Here are examples of the tones you do not want to emulate.

- **Overly Intense**: "It was the most unbelievable, incredible, outrageous night of my life."

- **Smarmy and Self-serving**: "In all modesty, few people have achieved as much in the position of student government leader as I have."
- **Lackluster and Depressed**: "I kind of think that my trip to New Orleans was, in a way, sort of a breakthrough in the quest for what you might call my real identity."
- **Breezy and Chatty**: "I don't know why but trouble, with a capital "T," sticks to me like cat hair to velour pants."

You want your tone to be somewhere between formal and informal. Find the middle ground.

Authentic Voice

Let's remember that we're striving here to capture your authentic voice. You have one – you use it all the time – but you may not be getting a hold of it in your writing. There are two things to avoid when trying to find your own voice:

1. Don't use language you would never feel comfortable using when you speak out loud.
2. Don't use the slang language you use when talking to your friends.

It comes back to what was stated previously about tone: your tone and voice must fall somewhere in the middle between formal and informal.

When you think you have found your authentic voice, ask someone who knows you well to read your essay. Ask him/her if he/she hears your voice as he/she reads through the essay. If not, ask him/her to tell you if it sounds too formal or informal?

Finding the right tone and voice is not simple. It takes time and patience to revise a paper, so allow for plenty of time during this part of the process.

<u>Editing</u>

When all of the above is completed, then it is time to edit for mechanical mistakes. Use the following checklist yourself or with a peer or teacher. (Quoted from www.Grammar.about.com)

1. Is each sentence clear and complete?
2. Can any short, choppy sentences be improved by combining them?
3. Can any long, awkward sentences be improved by breaking them down into shorter units and recombining them?
4. Can any wordy sentences be made more concise?
5. Can any run-on sentences be more effectively coordinated or subordinated?
6. Does each verb agree with its subject?
7. Are all verb forms correct and consistent?
8. Do pronouns refer clearly to the appropriate nouns?
9. Do all modifying words and phrases refer clearly to the words they are intended to modify?
10. Is each word in the essay appropriate and effective?

11. Is each word spelled correctly?
12. Is the punctuation correct?

Part B – Brainstorming
If you have not begun the writing process yet and/or are still having difficulty in coming up with a topic, try one or both of the following exercises.

Asking Questions
(Quoted and adapted from *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps*)

A good way to start things off is to ask yourself questions. Hopefully, in doing so, you'll make some discoveries that can lead you toward a suitable writing topic.

- What has been the hardest thing in my life?
- What has been difficult for me to accomplish?
- At what points have I felt inadequate and how did I deal with those feelings?
- If I had to quickly replay my life, which two or three moments would jump out ahead of all the others?
- What do I regard as my greatest victory?
- What in the world utterly fascinates me?
- Which of my relationships have I worked at the hardest?
- Have I ever made a discovery that thrilled me?
- Have I ever felt betrayed?
- What has held me back from realizing my ambitions?
- What is the funniest thing that ever happened to me?
- What fills me with pride?
- When did my mind and body feel utterly out of sync?
- When did my mind and body feel in perfect harmony?
- What have I done that "they" said couldn't be done?
- What object or possession holds the most meaning for me?
- If I can't sleep at night, what's keeping me up?

The goal in asking these questions is simply to find out which topics really move you. Go over the list of questions and identify the ones you keep coming back to. Then, find your story, but make sure it is not a cliché. Some of these questions can lead you towards a clichéd story, so revisit the clichéd topics presented in the first workshop handout and stay away from them.

Activities to Engage in to Inspire an Idea
(Quoted and adapted from *The College Application Essay)*

If asking yourself questions and creating lists of strengths and weaknesses do not do the trick, here are a few strategies:

- Look around your room. Pick three things you plan to take to college with you (or wish you could). Write three sentences that explain why that poster, that chunk of rock, that photograph matter to you. Then see if one of these things might be the beginning of an essay about an event or a person that has had significance in your life.
- Find a family picture album. Spend an hour looking through it. What images stand out in your mind? What events were depicted? Wait…don't write about learning to ride a bike or graduating from kindergarten. Try to find a thread of interest – a renewed friendship, a magic place, a person who keeps showing up at the important moments. Then see what you have to say about the influence of that person or place.
- Go find a parent. Ask them what they think are your strengths and talents. Ask what "kind" of person they think you are. What characteristics and talents do they think you should mention? Don't fail to exploit the knowledge of a person who's spent seventeen years with you.
- Go find your favorite teacher or coach. Ask him/her where he/she thinks you should go to college and then why he/she chose that place. Ask him/her to help you remember exactly what it is you contribute to a group; then think about a specific time when that was evident in his/her class or on his/her team.
- Go back to any journal or portfolio assignment you've done for school. How have you changed since you did this work? Does it still interest you? If yes, consider talking about the assignment. If not, that might be even more interesting – a change of heart, an experience of growth and reflection.
- Think of something you used to believe and don't believe anymore, something you thought was true but turned out to be false – write a few sentences about before and after and what caused that change. Does this seem to reflect your thoughtfulness and curiosity?

College Essay Workshop 3

Today, you should have your strongest/polished draft that responds to the following prompt:

> **Evaluate a significant experience, person, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you or the direction of your future (i.e. career or college choice).**
>
> Note: The length of the essay should be at least 250 words, but no more than 750 words.

If you have a draft, you should engage in the revising and editing processes (Part A). If you do not have a draft, please go to the brainstorming section of this packet and begin the writing process (Part B).

Part A – Revising and Editing

Revising

Revising an essay includes reviewing the content of your work and allowing others to do the same. This part of the process does not focus on the mechanics of writing (spelling/grammar/formatting) rather it focuses on such things as content, voice, rhythm, and tone.

You should begin with revising, and when you are confident that you have done all that you can, you can move on to the editing process. Use the following guidelines to assist you in your revision process. You can do this alone or with a peer or a teacher.

Revision Guidelines:

(Quoted and adapted from *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps*)

Content

The first part of revising is asking yourself if you have truly responded to the prompt. Look at the prompt again and then read through your paper to discover if you stayed focused or veered off on a tangent. It is vital to stay focused and respond to the prompt, for if you do not, the rest does not matter. The college application committee member will notice that your essay is off topic and will be unimpressed immediately. So, do not move on in the process if you have not established that your content fits the purpose of the essay.

Most likely, you should have a conflict and a resolution in this kind of an essay. If you do not, then ask yourself what it is you are trying to prove about yourself. Your essay should revolve around some kind of conflict – obvious, subtle, comic, or whatever feels right to you based on why you're choosing to tell your story.

Proportion and Rhythm

Cast a critical eye on the proportions of your narrative and see whether things are as they should be. Read through your essay and ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your opening occupy a disproportionate amount of space?
- Do you find yourself rushing to finish your story?
- Do you have a skimpy opening, a tacked-on ending, and a big, potbellied middle section that feels like it's taking forever to get through?
- Are your sentence lengths varied?

- When you read your essay aloud, do you sense your essay is choppy or too drawn out?

Tone
Be sure that your tone is appropriate for a college essay. Remember, you are trying to make yourself sound good, but truthful, and not overly or under-confident. Here are examples of the tones you do not want to emulate.

- **Overly Intense**: "It was the most unbelievable, incredible, outrageous night of my life."
- **Smarmy and Self-serving**: "In all modesty, few people have achieved as much in the position of student government leader as I have."
- **Lackluster and Depressed**: "I kind of think that my trip to New Orleans was, in a way, sort of a breakthrough in the quest for what you might call my real identity."
- **Breezy and Chatty**: "I don't know why but trouble, with a capital "T," sticks to me like cat hair to velour pants."

You want your tone to be somewhere between formal and informal. Find the middle ground.

Authentic Voice
Let's remember that we're striving here to capture your authentic voice. You have one – you use it all the time – but you may not be getting a hold of it in your writing. There are two things to avoid when trying to find your own voice:

3. Don't use language you would never feel comfortable using when you speak out loud.
4. Don't use the slang language you use when talking to your friends.

It comes back to what was stated previously about tone: your tone and voice must fall somewhere in the middle between formal and informal.

When you think you have found your authentic voice, ask someone who knows you well to read your essay. Ask him/her if he/she hears your voice as he/she reads through the essay. If not, ask him/her to tell you if it sounds too formal or informal?

Finding the right tone and voice is not simple. It takes time and patience to revise a paper, so allow for plenty of time during this part of the process.

<u>Editing</u>
When all of the above is completed, then it is time to edit for mechanical mistakes. Use the following checklist yourself or with a peer or teacher. (Quoted from www.Grammar.about.com)

1. Is each sentence clear and complete?
2. Can any short, choppy sentences be improved by combining them?
3. Can any long, awkward sentences be improved by breaking them down into shorter units and recombining them?
4. Can any wordy sentences be made more concise?
5. Can any run-on sentences be more effectively coordinated or subordinated?
6. Does each verb agree with its subject?
7. Are all verb forms correct and consistent?
8. Do pronouns refer clearly to the appropriate nouns?
9. Do all modifying words and phrases refer clearly to the words they are intended to modify?
10. Is each word in the essay appropriate and effective?
11. Is each word spelled correctly?
12. Is the punctuation correct?

Part B – Brainstorming

If you have not begun the writing process yet and/or are still having difficulty in coming up with a topic, try one or both of the following exercises.

Asking Questions

(Quoted and adapted from *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps*)

A good way to start things off is to ask yourself questions. Hopefully, in doing so, you'll make some discoveries that can lead you toward a suitable writing topic.

- What has been the hardest thing in my life?
- What has been difficult for me to accomplish?
- At what points have I felt inadequate and how did I deal with those feelings?
- If I had to quickly replay my life, which two or three moments would jump out ahead of all the others?
- What do I regard as my greatest victory?
- What in the world utterly fascinates me?
- Which of my relationships have I worked at the hardest?
- Have I ever made a discovery that thrilled me?
- Have I ever felt betrayed?
- What has held me back from realizing my ambitions?
- What is the funniest thing that ever happened to me?
- What fills me with pride?
- When did my mind and body feel utterly out of sync?
- When did my mind and body feel in perfect harmony?
- What have I done that "they" said couldn't be done?
- What object or possession holds the most meaning for me?
- If I can't sleep at night, what's keeping me up?

The goal in asking these questions is simply to find out which topics really move you. Go over the list of questions and identify the ones you keep coming back to. Then, find your story, but make sure it is not a cliché. Some of these questions can lead you towards a clichéd story, so revisit the clichéd topics presented in the first workshop handout and stay away from them.

Activities to Engage in to Inspire an Idea
(Quoted and adapted from *The College Application Essay)*

If asking yourself questions and creating lists of strengths and weaknesses do not do the trick, here are a few strategies:

- Look around your room. Pick three things you plan to take to college with you (or wish you could). Write three sentences that explain why that poster, that chunk of rock, that photograph matter to you. Then see if one of these things might be the beginning of an essay about an event or a person that has had significance in your life.
- Find a family picture album. Spend an hour looking through it. What images stand out in your mind? What events were depicted? Wait…don't write about learning to ride a bike or graduating from kindergarten. Try to find a thread of interest – a renewed friendship, a magic place, a person who keeps showing up at the important moments. Then see what you have to say about the influence of that person or place.
- Go find a parent. Ask them what they think are your strengths and talents. Ask what "kind" of person they think you are. What characteristics and talents do they think you should mention? Don't fail to exploit the knowledge of a person who's spent seventeen years with you.
- Go find your favorite teacher or coach. Ask him/her where he/she thinks you should go to college and then why he/she chose that place. Ask him/her to help you remember exactly what it is you contribute to a group; then think about a specific time when that was evident in his/her class or on his/her team.
- Go back to any journal or portfolio assignment you've done for school. How have you changed since you did this work? Does it still interest you? If yes, consider talking about the assignment. If not, that might be even more interesting – a change of heart, an experience of growth and reflection.
- Think of something you used to believe and don't believe anymore, something you thought was true but turned out to be false – write a few sentences about before and after and what caused that change. Does this seem to reflect your thoughtfulness and curiosity?