

Ethan Sawyer College Essay Summary Part I BRAINSTORM AND OUTLINE

Knowing how to write a good college essay is similar to knowing how to sing or play an instrument. The teacher or coach tends to use examples, metaphors and gut feel in aiding the writer in getting a sense of what is effective. What might be a good essay for a school subject is not necessarily what will work in distinguishing one college applicant from another. I have used various processes and examples and years of experience as I work with students in their college writing, and I always welcome new ideas. We were really fortunate to have Ethan provide us with his Boot Camp which he was using as a pilot for his newest essay coaching process. Ethan has taken a rather mysterious process and broken it down into almost a formula. Those who were able to attend the Boot Camp the week of June 1 reported that they found it very helpful. The best part is that he provided everyone with a recording of the workshops, so you all can participate (or revisit) at your leisure. Additionally, he will have a follow-up session and will “pop in randomly.” Meanwhile, here are some highlights:

How to start

What we DO NOT recommend is looking at the Common App questions and trying to find a story to fit one of them. Once you find your story, it will be easy to find a question that fits.

Knowing that this is a process, and also a way to get to know about yourself as part of the decision-making process, the logical first step is simply to brainstorm.

What ARE your values, qualities, skills and interests? What do you want to enhance by going to college? What do you want colleges to know about you? I actually have asked that question as part of the Junior Questionnaire you complete ahead of our family meeting. I know that is one of the harder questions on the questionnaire, but one of the most important—for yourself as well as for me. One student after struggling for awhile with the questions reported to have found it “oddly therapeutic.” Bravo!

Ethan provided checklists and forms to help with the brainstorming: thinking about what you love, what you know, what you are good at, what are your values, what are some objects in your life that represent deep values, memories and interests. Doing these exercises can get you started, get your creativity going and help you see that there are a lot of directions you can go in this process.

What is the best way for you to tell your story? Ethan suggests you consider two directions in which to go or structures to follow—a Narrative or Montage Structure:

Have you had a **significant challenge** in your life that you have overcome/solved and learned from? Or not?

Narrative Structure

The narrative structure is a chronological story and generally includes a challenge that the student has faced, and which ends with the challenge met and a lesson learned. But the focus is always WHO YOU ARE, NOT WHAT YOU DID.

If you want to write about a challenge, would you be able to describe what you did and what you learned? **Is it significant or unusual enough to distinguish yourself from others?** Is it clear and compelling? Is it your challenge, not your parents’ or siblings’? You could brainstorm various challenges and consider whether they would be considered something “common” such as parents’ divorce, death of a grandparent, a move, shyness, anxiety; “small” as sports injuries or not making the team, a bad grade, heartbreak, or “vague” such as “growing up.” If you wrote about one of these challenges, you would need to **create a new or significant take on it.** He also discussed “stigmatizing” challenges, such as mental health, identity, addiction, paranormal, religion or politics—it is possible, but it is more difficult, as time and space would need to be spent “legitimizing” it and it helps to make

“uncommon” connections. **The key is to choose something that has an impact in the present, is significant and one that has been met, mastered, creating a learning experience.**

Perhaps think of a Screenwriting Structure

Moment; Flashback, raise the stakes; turning point, What you did, How it turned out, what you learned
Is the challenge clear, compelling, are the effects clear, Is what I did clear, “Effects, feelings, needs, what I did, what I learned.”

Montage Structure

With students for whom a challenge essay is not the best option, Ethan suggests a “Montage” structure. He assumes that most students will choose this route as it is the most “elastic” and allows students to demonstrate a lot of different aspects of themselves. It is even possible to include a paragraph that describes a challenge within the totality of the essay.

Within the Montage essay, generally there will be a theme or common thread that runs through the entire essay with the paragraphs each providing examples of that theme to connect to different sides of you—a value, skill, personal quality? An interest, possibly leading to a possible career path? “Super power? Home, Uncommon Extra C” Remember those are the qualities you want to demonstrate to the admissions committee. Again, it needs to be uncommon and compelling and yet universal and relatable.

As opposed to a chronological outline structure, he suggested creating a grid with columns led by the headings of Values/Examples/ and Insights; and under each heading brainstorming descriptions, experiences, extra-curriculars, ideas and specific details that fit into the headings and support the common theme. It could be parts of a single experience or a series of significant moments. Which topics let you demonstrate a lot of the details and values you listed in the brainstorming exercises? Be aware that some qualities such as “persistence” and “hard-working” will be redundant, assuming those are reflected in the transcript and recommendations. What values could be uncommon and compelling? How to make the common uncommon?

Cautions:

Focusing on a single moment can be compelling but challenging realization about your life; **MUST HAVE AN OUTSTANDING “SO WHAT” INSIGHT;**

If you want to use an Extra C in your essay make sure it is about you or use it as an Extra C essay

Legos are common; music is too—how to make it uncommon? Specific details help!

PRIVILEGE: Be aware of experiences that suggest privilege—exotic trips, experiences like skiing; Disney nail salon; life changing event on a service trip, horseback riding; sailing, travel, scuba diving **NOT DEALBREAKER BUT EXPECTATIONS FOR THE ESSAY GO UP. DID YOU MAKE THE MOST OF THE OPPORTUNITIES YOU HAVE BEEN GIVEN? Bottom line: What will this person contribute to our campus?**

Finally: Hold your topic lightly; be prepared to rewrite. Before writing your 2nd draft, write a new outline and write a new draft from scratch, don’t try to revise the 1st one (like Frankenstein, creating a new essay from the dead parts of the old one). (You can always go back and use wording or ideas later if you like) **(WRITE THE FIRST DRAFT TO MAKE THE NEW OUTLINE FOR THE SECOND DRAFT) “Don’t be married to your first draft.”**