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➤ **BEFORE YOU BEGIN:** This workshop requires minimal prep, however, it is strongly recommended that you read and review the program guide along with the handout before meeting with students.

ELEMENTS OF ESSAY WRITING OBJECTIVE & INCLUDED TOPICS

To provide high school students with information about the process of writing personal statements and writing at the college level, including what colleges look for, writing guidelines, rules, and tips; *Brainstorming, Selecting a Topic, Writing Structure, Editing, Submitting Admission Essays, Writing Academic Essays, Organizing Ideas, Researching, Drafting Steps, Composing the Paper*

BEFORE THE WORKSHOP/SESSION

This workshop is appropriate for 11th-12th grade students or any level of college student, as this workshop is at a more advanced level. You could bring sample essays for students to review or sample essay prompts to which students can respond. You could invite an undergraduate college admissions officer or a graduate college admissions officer to discuss the essay and personal statement review process as it pertains to acceptance and admission.

STEP ONE TIME: 10 MINUTES

Introduce the topic of essay writing. Begin the session by asking if anyone has begun writing college admission essays or personal statements, or if they've written a personal statement before. Solicit answers from those with experience writing college admission essays. Ask students how they felt the process went and if they have any tips to share.

Mention that, if not given a prompt, a few exercises might help determine a topic. Ask participants to find a partner for an introductory activity. Explain that the point of this exercise is to practice opening up to others. Instruct pairs to listen when it's not their turn to speak, rather than formulating a response or interrupting while someone else is speaking. Each person will have 2 minutes to speak and should do their best to fill the time, even if the response is a stream of consciousness. Read the prompt below and allow for 1 minute of silent "think time" so students can gather their thoughts.

State: *Answer the following prompt aloud: If you really knew me you'd know that...*

Students should be as candid as possible. Keep time for the activity; after both participants answer the prompt, pose the following questions: *How did it feel to be open about your life? Do you think being able to channel your feelings and emotions into a personal essay will be a challenge?*

If time allows, some other prompts to promote openness are:

Something/someone that I love is...because...

Something/someone that I'm grateful for is...because...

You wouldn't know it by looking at me, but...

I am unique because...

Ask how this exercise made them feel and think. Solicit answers as necessary. Explain that these and other exercises within the handout will help identify what to discuss in their personal statements.

STEP TWO TIME: 10 MINUTES

Distribute the *Elements* handout. Begin with the introduction and discuss each section, asking for volunteers to read. Discuss points made in each section if time allows. Make sure to ask: *How long do you think college admissions personnel spend reading each essay? How will you stand out from the thousands of other applicants' essays?* Mention that admissions personnel only spend an average of 10 minutes on an entire application (including transcripts, application, and supplemental essays), leaving only a few short minutes for the personal statement to leave an impression on the reader.

DreamCatcher Extra: Distribute *Write Just Right* from this program guide with words and phrases to avoid and common misuses of words. Direct students to websites such as www.grammarly.com for more info.

ESSAY WRITING Program Guide



STEP THREE TIME: 10 MINUTES

Take a break for a short activity. Read the essay prompts below and ask students to decide if the prompts are real or fake. Reveal the answers after all the prompts are read.

What does #YOLO mean to you?

How are apples and oranges supposed to be compared?

What do you hope to find over the rainbow?

To tweet or not to tweet?

What's your top ten list?

What do you see as the biggest threat to civility?

What is "square one" and can you actually go back to it?

Make a bold prediction about the year 2030.

Where is Waldo, really?

What invention would the world be better off with? Why?

Are we alone?

Does society require constant honesty?

What's so odd about odd numbers?

Tell us about spiders.

Inform participants that all of the prompts are **REAL** and that they may encounter some unique prompts while applying for college or graduate programs. The point of the prompts, weird or not, is to demonstrate that they can think and write about themselves and their experiences while incorporating unique prompts.

STEP FOUR TIME: 15 MINUTES

Move to the inside of the handout to cover *Before You Begin*. Students may already have topics in mind for an open-ended personal statement. Ask if anyone would like to share their planned topics and solicit answers as time allows. Ask if they feel stumped or can't think of a topic. It's okay if they don't have a topic in mind; the next few sections of the handout will hopefully inspire topic formulation.

Start with the *Brainstorming Tips* section and review each brainstorming idea. Mention a few exercises which can promote creativity, such as walking in nature, journaling, and being bored. Ask if anyone already incorporates these strategies into their everyday lives and how they've experienced creativity as a result. *Do you have any other strategies that help foster creativity?* Move on to the Ideals Inventory. Students should check 10-12 ideals they strongly identify with, then narrow down to 5-6, then 2-3, and finally pick their absolute top ideal. Ideals can be written-in if the chosen one isn't listed. Next, review the *All About You* section. If time allows, ask students to respond to the prompts on a separate piece of paper. Mention that there is no wrong way to answer, and responses can include writing or doodles, or a mix of both. Ask for interesting responses.

STEP FIVE TIME: 10 MINUTES

Move to *While You Write* on the next page. The first section covers structures of essays. Explain that if choosing to write about a challenge or struggle that has been overcome, a Storytelling Structure works best. Otherwise, a Snapshot Structure is a good approach. Each structure has a guide to assist with writing. Discuss opening sentences and phrases, highlighting each of the options for how to begin a personal statement with a "hook." Ask which hook(s) is/are most interesting.

Review the *Start Writing Section*. Discuss the section on *Editing Your Statement*, emphasizing taking a break from essays before editing. Essays should be printed so they can mark on it during editing. Students should also select someone (or two!) to edit their essay for grammar errors, typos, flow, and to gauge for reaction to their story. Lastly, discuss *Submitting Your Statement* section. Instruct students to follow the institution/scholarship's directions, being mindful of deadlines and submitting the statement either electronically or by mail.

DreamCatcher Extra (10-15 minutes): Before the workshop, photocopy the essays provided in this program guide and cut out. Divide students into groups of 4. Distribute one copy of each of the four essays to each group. Explain to students that for this activity they will need to play "Admissions Counselors" and select only one of the essays for admission acceptance. Team members should be prepared to justify and explain their decision. Follow-up by posing a few processing questions: *How did it feel to be the one making the decision as to admission? Will this activity (as the decision-maker) help you when writing your own statement?*

LAST STEP & ASSESSMENT TIME REMAINING

Move to the back of the handout, *College-Level Writing*. Discuss *Writing Academic Essays*. Discuss strategies for *Understanding the Prompt* and *Organizing Ideas*. Discuss *Research Tips* and *Drafting Steps*, and lastly, *Composing Your Paper*. Hand out the *Essay Writing Checklist* included in this program guide for students to use as a reference when writing. Distribute the included assessment to each student before the conclusion of the workshop and collect when complete.

LEARNING OUTCOME

Students will be able to determine if this workshop was helpful in choosing a topic for personal statements, identify the most effective sentences based on the writing tips, and be able to distinguish scholarly research from leisure reading.

Elements of Essay Writing Assessment

Was this workshop helpful in selecting a topic for your personal statement? YES NO Write your topic: _____

Place a check next to the most effective sentence based on the Writing Guidelines:

- The consequences of erudite vernacular is inconsequential and irrespective of necessity. I was raised by my grandparents in the Midwest.
 Even though I joined the team against my will, I was named All-State in cross country. I learned quickly the grass isn't always greener on the other side.
 The paper was written by me over the course of two weeks. It was super cool when I was accepted to the college of my dreams.

Determine which are scholarly sources and which are leisure/entertainment sources; write an **S** next to scholarly and **L** next to leisure.

___ Wikipedia ___ Journal Articles ___ Blogs ___ Celebrities ___ Professors ___ Peer Reviewed Articles ___ Pop Culture Magazines

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Use this guide to aid in the writing process by avoiding confusing terminology and commonly misused words that will detract from your paper.

Avoid This Word/Phrase	Why	Use This Instead
Today, today's world, the world, society, nowadays, currently	Vague and unclear terms can confuse the reader. These terms are also too broad.	Twenty-first century society, contemporary society, Western society
Kind of, sort of	Too informal	Slightly, somewhat, merely, simply
Y'all, ain't, can't, don't, won't	Avoid contractions and information language	Is not, cannot, do not, would not (Don't use y'all or you all either)
Really, totally	Too informal	Utterly, wholly, entirely, purely
I, me, mine, my	Using first-person is highly discouraged	Simply avoid <i>I</i> and it's verb. Word your sentences in the third-person.
Any type of slang/informal language (cool, awesome, dude, flaky, cheesy, etc.)	Use formal language in academic papers.	Find a more formal word with a dictionary or thesaurus.
For all intents and purposes	Overused	Because
Due to the fact, on account of, in order to	Wordy and unnecessary	Because, since, to

Common Misuses of Words and Phrases to Avoid:

Affect/Effect: *Affect* is a verb (*affect* begins with *a* and so does *action*). *Effect* is a noun (except when discussing "effecting change" use *effect*).

I hope the medicine positively affects my condition.
The medicine had a positive effect on my condition.

Its/It's: *Its* is possessive. *It's* is a contraction of *it is*.

The couch and its cover are severely ripped.
The couple decided it's time for a new couch.

There/Their/They're: *There* is a location. *Their* is a possessive noun. *They're* is a contraction of *they are*.

My dog is over there.
Their dog is very beautiful.
They're thinking about getting another dog.

Your/You're: *You're* is the contraction of *you are*. *Your* is a possessive noun.

You're the nicest person I know.
Your demeanor has changed.

Conscience/Conscious: *Conscience* is your inner voice. *Conscious* is your state of awareness.

My conscience got the best of me and I decided not to lie to her.
I was conscious of my actions.

Every Day/Everyday: *Every day* simply means each day. *Everyday* is an adjective. If you can put the word "single" in between *every* and *day* in a sentence, use *every day*. Use *everyday* when describing something.

I go to the gym every day.
These are my everyday workout clothes.

Farther/Further: *Farther* describes physical distance. *Further* means more.

I drove farther than I had planned.
I asked the mechanic to explain the repairs further.

Cite/Site/Sight: *Cite* means to give credit to a source. *Site* is a location. *Sight* is vision through one's eyes.

The professor said to cite sources when writing our reports.
We visited the site to gain experience for our action research.
The sight of the bus after the dig was a relief to all of us.

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We visited the site to gain experience for our action research.
The sight of the bus after the dig was a relief to all of us.

Essay A:

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In the US, adulthood comes at 18, but it is my understanding that adulthood comes through responsibility, tears, laughter, and most of all: parenthood. It is effortless to watch other people's children grow, but having my own was a terrifying new world for which I was ill-prepared. I was not ready for my first, Stanley, but now I cannot envision a world without him. Today, I am the proud parent of not one, but seven beautiful, boisterous, carnivorous plants. Within my small family I have four sundews, two Venus flytraps, and one tropical pitcher plant. Many might ask, "How does a person become the parent of seven carnivorous plants?" and I can only answer that with a story: my story.

It was an ordinary Wednesday afternoon when I came home from school only to find a charming plant that resembled a leafless, dew-splattered fern perched on the counter. With the eloquence that only a teenager could muster, I asked my mom, "What's that?" She carefully explained that he was our new carnivorous plant and he was going to be on fruit fly kitchen duty. Over the next couple of weeks my fascination with him grew, and eventually I adopted him as my own. In all sincerity, I did not begin as the ideal parent. I would give Stanley water to drink if he looked drier than usual and that was the extent of my nurturing efforts. However, my complacency did not last. Come winter, Stanley became afflicted with a mysterious ailment. His stems curled and his one delicate green frond dried up. After examining him, I concluded that not only was the lake water I had been using contaminated with some sort of root-eating larva, but my mother's African violets had given him aphids. It was then that I was faced with the harsh reality of the situation: I had a plant that I was absolutely obsessed with, but knew nothing about.

In my desperation to keep my sundew alive, I began to contact other plant enthusiasts in an increasingly desperate attempt to help my Stanley. To my great surprise, a close friend was also a carnivorous plant caregiver and was well versed in their care. His advice, coupled with some new dirt and the stocked shelves of the library's horticulture section, allowed me to nurse Stanley back to health. Stanley regained his strength and shortly after the winter incident, I adopted Simone, another sundew. Then came Diana, my first Venus flytrap. Consequently, the carnivorous plant aficionado was so impressed with Stanley's care that he entrusted me with the care of his carnivorous plants when he left for college. This brought my family's size to the current seven.

My true reward of having Stanley is that he opened the door to the world of botany. I would never have invested so much time learning about the molecular structure or chemical balance of plants if not for taking care of him. I have loved learning for his benefit, whether it be discovering the best fluoride-free water, finding the ideal amount of sunlight, or reading that he uses a form of electrical signaling to aid digestion. I also love the rarity of being Stanley's parent. I have also found that most people are genuinely curious and I am always open to questions. Ultimately, I love how Stanley has forced me to be adaptive. That first winter I did not have a "Gardener's Guide to Carnivorous Plants," I simply had my own observations. This was the most significant lesson that Stanley and friends taught me: the universe lacks a guide to the galaxy, and life is all about discovering your own way.

Essay B:

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Returning to Peru to visit my father's homeland, I was disturbed by the significant pollution, land degradation, unsustainable practices, and lack of clean water surrounding me. The memory of a destitute boy, surrounded by waste, consuming water from a filthy communal tap in a dilapidated shantytown of Lima, Peru still haunts me.

Exploration drives discovery. This pivotal experience formulated my passion and career objective: preserving the environment and protecting our resources. Since my discovery, I have never stopped preparing for a future in environmental engineering. I've immersed myself in rigorous classes of environmental science, chemistry, biology, math, physics, and geology. I have organized a "Walk for Water" to raise awareness of water conservation, worked extensively with the Chesapeake Bay Foundation and Youth Ocean Conservation Summit, and even received my first grant for a project designed to install a green roof, rain barrels, and a rain garden at my school. For billions of years, Earth's structure and composition has developed to maintain a balance of order for the prosperity of life. Unfortunately, humans have not returned the favor. Instead, we have created unprecedented amounts of habitat destruction, resource depletion, toxic waste, and water insecurity.

Environmental engineering is the integration of science and engineering principles to develop solutions to these eminent and future crises. I want to collaborate with the top school of public health to address the risks of contaminated water, and develop efficient ways to conserve and purify water resources globally while preserving major ecosystems. I want to end land degradation in endangered and vulnerable biomes such as my father's homeland. I want to create alternatives to produce clean energy. I want to reduce the ecological footprint left by our species.

The Overnight Multicultural Experience allowed me to appreciate the spirit of exploration and discovery that radiates from students and teachers, and still from my parents who met during their doctoral studies. Students don't submit themselves to demanding internships or research due to requirement; they yearn from a deeper understanding of what is at hand. That is who I am: self-driven and determined to go beyond what is necessary. I loved immersing myself in a culturally diverse environment, interacting with passionate individuals, and being constantly stimulated by new ideas. I want to be deeply connected with my original work, knowing that I will make a difference in the world yet still be able to absorb streaming information around me throughout my life.

Naturally, I will always continue my love for music, soccer, art, and the outdoors. My passion for the environment serves as my roots, connecting me to the very earth which "natured" me. My interests continue to anchor my identity, while branches grow of ambition and curiosity. Exploration and discovery flower as the fruit of my tree, as I strive to reveal as much as possible about not only myself, but the world we inhabit. I remain intrigued by the ongoing stream of what is already known, and what remains to be exposed.

Essay C:

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I had never broken into a car before.

We were in Laredo, having just finished our first day at a Habitat for Humanity work site. The Hotchkiss volunteers had already left, off to enjoy some Texas BBQ, leaving me behind with the college kids to clean up. Not until we were stranded did we realize we were locked out of the van. Someone picked a coat hanger out of the dumpster, handed it to me, and took a few steps back. “Can you do that thing with a coat hanger to unlock it?”

“Why me?” I thought. More out of amusement than optimism, I gave it a try. I slid the hanger into the window’s seal like I’d seen on crime shows, and spent a few minutes jiggling it around the inside of the frame. Suddenly, two things simultaneously clicked. One was the lock on the door. (I actually succeeded in springing it.) The other was the realization that I’d been in this type of situation before. In fact, I’d been born into this type of situation.

My upbringing has numbed me to unpredictability and chaos. With a family of 7, my home was loud, messy, and spottily supervised. My siblings arguing, the dog barking, the phone ringing—all meant my house was functioning normally. My Dad, a retired pilot, was away half the time. When he was home, he had a parenting style something like a drill sergeant. At the age of nine, I learned how to clear burning oil from the surface of water. My Dad considered this a critical life skill—you know, in case my aircraft carrier should ever get torpedoed. “The water’s on fire! Clear a hole!” he shouted, tossing me in the lake without warning. While I’m still unconvinced about that lesson’s practicality, my Dad’s overarching message is true: much of life is unexpected, and you have to deal with the twists and turns. Living in my family, days rarely unfolded as planned. A bit overlooked, I learned to roll with reality, negotiate a quick deal, and give the improbable a try. I don’t sweat the small stuff, and I definitely don’t expect perfect fairness. So what if our dining room table only has six chairs for seven people? Someone learns the importance of punctuality every night.

But more than punctuality and an affinity for musical chairs, my family life has taught me to thrive in situations over which I have no power. Growing up, I never controlled my older siblings, but I learned how to thwart their attempts to control me. Sometimes, I was the defenseless little brother; sometimes I was the omniscient elder. I learned to adapt. Back then, these techniques were merely reactions undertaken to ensure my survival. But one day this fall, Dr. Hicks, our principal, asked me a question that he hoped all seniors would reflect on throughout the year: “How can I participate in a thing I do not govern, in the company of people I did not choose?” The question caught me off guard, much like the question posed to me in Laredo. Then, I realized I knew the answer. I knew why the coat hanger had been handed to me.

As the middle child in my family, I was vital in a group I did not govern, in the company of people I did not choose. It’s family. It’s society. And it’s chaos. You participate by letting go of the small stuff, not expecting order, and facing the unexpected with optimism and preparedness. My family taught me to face a serendipitous world with confidence.

Essay D:

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“If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others.”

As an intern at a construction engineering firm this past summer, I learned first-hand about the challenges of building a twenty story apartment building: not just the structural or mechanical challenges, but also the intricate ways in which groups of people interact to complete a project properly. While I am primarily interested in core structural and civil engineering subjects, I have learned that engineering needs to be approached in a holistic manner that incorporates economic, environmental, and interpersonal systems. I want to be taught engineering in a way that encompasses all of these different frontiers. I hope to one day build technologically innovative and environmentally friendly skyscrapers designed for a rapidly urbanizing world.

The university professors are change agents whose research connects structural engineering challenges to economic and environmental considerations. I am fascinated by Professor James Guest’s work in modeling the ways in which production costs can be incorporated into designing the optimal structure of a building. This work illustrates the power of combining fundamental engineering concepts with economic considerations. Studying AP Physics, I can already see the practical utility of applying fundamental science concepts such as Archimedes’ principle of leverage to engineering, and I look forward to building my core knowledge through the college’s two-year sequence of math and science courses while putting it to work through research opportunities in labs such as the Center for Advanced Metallic and Ceramic Systems. Under the guidance of the engineering department’s professors, I will be able to develop both my theoretical knowledge and practical engineering skills to their full extent.

This university attracts students from across the world, creating a global forum. Every student brings a different perspective and unique insights that can enrich, challenge, and improve the academic community as a whole. As I traveled through Africa, I heard a proverb that has stayed with me: “If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go with others.” During my blood cancer research, I saw that our team was able to tackle more advanced issues than any individual would have been able to accomplish on his or her own. An essential component of engineering is complex problem-solving, and with a varied group this process becomes far more effective.

Student groups—such as Baja and Design, Build, Fly—provide powerful examples of teams coming together to make something bigger than themselves. These groups give me the opportunity to combine applied engineering with hands-on learning while helping me develop an international viewpoint. I hope to further extend this perspective through study abroad opportunities in Madrid, Santiago, or Rome, learning about the growing needs of an interconnected global community.

The world-class faculty, cutting-edge labs, global student community, and innumerable research opportunities provided by the university will help me achieve my goal of designing and building structures that meet the economic, technological, social, and environmental needs of the twenty-first century.

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Checklist

Follow this checklist to ensure your essay or paper has all the elements.

Introduction:

- The topic has been effectively introduced to the reader
- Thesis is clearly stated and written at the end of the introductory paragraph
- The thesis statement answers the research question or prompt

Body Paragraph 1:

- Main idea clearly stated
- Main idea fully discussed
- Expert info used and cited
- Evidence to support argument used effectively
- Effective paragraph flow and structure used effectively
- Transition to next idea included

Body Paragraph 2:

- Main idea clearly stated
- Main idea fully discussed
- Expert info used and cited
- Evidence to support argument used effectively
- Effective paragraph flow and structure used effectively
- Transition to next idea included

Body Paragraph 3:

- Main idea clearly stated
- Main idea fully discussed
- Expert info used and cited
- Evidence to support argument used effectively
- Effective paragraph flow and structure used effectively
- Transition to conclusion included

Conclusion:

- An effective transition from the body paragraphs is present
- Connections between ideas from body paragraphs have been made
- Thesis is restated (but not word-for-word)

Citations:

- All outside ideas and sources have a citation
- References and citations are properly formatted
- The appropriate amount of scholarly sources have been used
- Reference page is included

Editing & Style:

- Formal, third-person language is used with appropriate flow
- Sentences are concise and free from unnecessary wordiness and extra content
- Grammar and spelling is correct, including avoiding the use of contractions (“don’t,” “it’s,” “can’t,” etc.)
- Paper/essay has been proofread by you and by another person with corrections included.