

# Tackling the College Essay

Welcome to PCACAC's  
Virtual 18<sup>th</sup> Annual  
Summer Institute



Session C1

July 13, 2021

# FACULTY



---

Bruce Chamberlin  
Georgetown University (DC)

[abc43@georgetown.edu](mailto:abc43@georgetown.edu)

---

Liz Stello  
Cape Henry Collegiate (VA)

[elizabethstello@capehenry.org](mailto:elizabethstello@capehenry.org)

---

Alice Whitener Robertson  
Chantilly High School (VA)

[ALRobertson@fcps.edu](mailto:ALRobertson@fcps.edu)

---

# Learning Objectives



1

- Examine ways to support students throughout the essay writing process, including brainstorming and editing

2

- Discuss what can make an essay successful and areas where students may struggle

3

- Appraise the current landscape of college admissions and the potential role of a personal statement

# The College Essay in various settings



- Large public high school
  - Case load: 250-270 students; 60-70 seniors (11 gen ed counselors)
- Independent day school
  - Case load: 45-50 seniors
- Private university reading load
  - Varies by institution
  - 30-40 applications per day



## **Junior Year**

Collaborate with English teachers to offer lesson/assignment to draft a personal statement (not 100% 'buy in')

Junior Focus Night: 9-10 breakout sessions

## **Senior Year**

Collaborate with English teachers

'Writing Center' staffed by 11th and 12th grade students, recommended by English teachers

College Application Workshops after school

Counselors, English teachers, College Admission Counselors

Public High School

## **Junior year**

English class: First formal, full essay using Common App prompts

[www.collegeessayguy.com](http://www.collegeessayguy.com)

## **Senior year**

August: Application Boot Camp

Redos, shorts answers, other apps

All fall

One-on-one counselor/student revisions

Google Docs

Study hall, after school, before school meetings

Independent Day School

## Timeline

Georgetown application opens early June; Common Application opens August 1.

Recruitment/Outreach (in-person and virtual): September & October intensive.

Early Action review begins early November; Regular Decision in early January through mid-March.

# The Role/Significance of the Essay

- “Tell us a little more about yourself...” (personality, passions, values, etc.)
- Assessment:
  - Student's writing ability
  - Ability to follow directions
- *Usually* won't make or break an application
- Brings student's voice and personality into the application
- When appropriate, can fill in some holes /add more to student's personal story
- Shows us student's humanity: applicant becomes a person





The bane of every college applicant:  
the admissions essay.

# How to help: Where to start

What makes you YOU? What do you value?

Upbringing

Family or Friends

Experiences

Descriptors

Peer/Readers' Questions:

What are the writer's core values?

Writer: does that agree with your intentions?

Where are the opportunities that were missed?

<https://www.collegeessayguy.com/cwiab-student-15-values-exercise>

<https://www.collegeessayguy.com/cwiab-student-14-essence-objects-exercise> (for when values are too much to think about!)

Focus #1: Values

What story shares your value(s)?

Achieved through your reflections

How did you feel?

What did you need?

How did you respond?

Reflection/lessons

Peer/Readers' Questions:

Do I learn more about the writer?

Is it unique to the writer? (Writer's own story, reflections, thoughts)

What feelings do I have while reading?

Is it in the moment?

Can it be found anywhere else on the application?

## Focus #2: Reflection

Sharing your core value(s) through a story



The Takeaway = So What?

Important and interesting connection

Reflection should outshine the plot

INSIGHT- reveal something about yourself/outlook that cannot be found elsewhere

Peer/Reader's Question:

Why was this an important moment?

Are the moments predictable or original?

Writer: does this agree or conflict with your intentions?

The Craft = The process itself

Take your time, it's okay to step away

Reflection should outshine the story.

LIMITED SPACE: reason for every paragraph, sentence, word

Peer/Reader:

Point out three strengths of the essay and three suggestions for improvement

Focus #3: So what?

Focus #4: Craft



# Additional Resources

- College Essay Guy:  
<https://www.collegeessayguy.com/college-application-hub>
- College Admissions!
  - Essay Workshops
  - Application boot camps
    - Consider inviting multiple colleges to increase variety of feedback
- After-school mini workshops

# What Works, & What Doesn't

**“THE SCARIEST  
MOMENT  
IS ALWAYS  
JUST BEFORE  
YOU START.”**

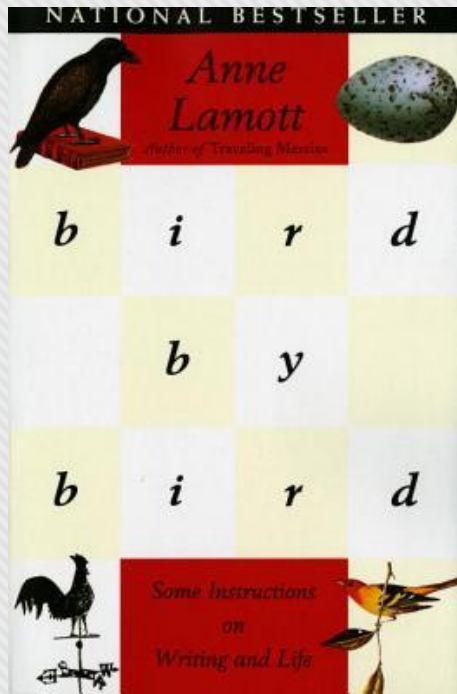
Stephen King, author

# What Works & What Doesn't

- Big picture focus
- Find a line & build/pull
- "This may not be your essay"
- Recognizing good enough
- (sometimes) Starting with supplemental essays
- Requiring them to name their essay in google docs
- Have them write about something that matters to them, not what they think will "sound impressive"
- Read it aloud
- Consult before disclosing



- Red penning everything
- Focusing on the question first
- Showing examples too early
- Starting the process too late
- Placing too much emphasis on the essay
- Fictional writing



## *Some Instructions on Writing and Life*

I know I set out to tell you every single thing I know about writing, but I am also going to tell you every single thing I know about school lunches, partly because the longings and dynamics and anxieties are so similar. I think this will also show how taking short assignments and then producing really s#&%y first drafts of these assignments can yield a bounty of detailed memory, raw material and intriguing characters lurking in the shadows. (pp.33)

Need a muse? Just for the fun of it, now in a 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary edition



## **Personal essay / personal statement:**

“Two large caramel iced lattes, please” With these words, my mom and I have begun every car trip I can remember in our silver Ford Escape. Savoring iced beverages and time spent together...

... What will keep our car trips forever engraved in my memory is the way they, and we, have changed over the years...

... I offered to drive the rest of the way, and for the first time ever, she accepted. We switched positions on the side of the highway, and as I listened to the steady, deep breathing of my sleeping mother, I realized she had placed complete and total trust in me...

...I have learned much from my parents, and now has come the time when I must drive: I must decide where I want to go, what I want to do, and with whom I want to travel...

Essay Examples that WORKED

The summer before my junior year I sat in the passenger seat of my sister's car. I remember the exact moment: we were going around the curve just before you merge into the Golden Gate Bridge. As we hit the turn and the car slowed down from 65 mph to 35 mph, her words jolted my body with the same inertia of the car: "Well you know mom is an alcoholic."...

Dinner at my house is a special time. The family is together and at any given moment at least three people are talking about different topics... With six humans, and seven pets, all very opinionated and vocal... Not being the center of my parents' attention made me even more resilient and independent. I learned to wait my turn, and that I cannot always get what I want....

... Through Cathy, a patient I met, I discovered firsthand my personal conviction to become a nurse. In a hospice where both patients and employees were over 40, Cathy was a rare case: a seventeen-year old diagnosed with stage 4 leukemia...

Essay Examples that WORKED

# But wait, there's more!

- Institution-Specific Supplements

- Short responses
- Quick reflections
- Additional essay

- Additional Information Section

- What else do you want to make sure we know?
- Only use when necessary

- Covid-19 question

*Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have deep and long-lasting impacts. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.*

*Do you wish to share anything on this topic? Y/N*

*Please use this space to describe how these events have impacted you.*



# Questions?





# YOUR FEEDBACK MATTERS!

Please complete a session evaluation  
at [www.pcacac.org/summer-institute](http://www.pcacac.org/summer-institute).

Thank you!

