

College Essay Writing

Day 1 - Intro to College Essays

So you need to write essays for your college applications, but you're not sure how to start?

Maybe you looked at the list of essay topics on the Common App, and you felt like your brain and soul evacuated your body. (Maybe you should see a doctor about that).

Or you read the supplemental essay questions for your dream school and wanted to weep.

Don't cry—this guide is here to help!

We'll take a tour through the land of college essays and get your ideas flowing. Don't worry—you'll be writing those essays in no time!

First, read some really good college essays.

Start by reading the sample essay below, "Breaking into Cars" by Stephen.

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 the apparatus 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 seven, 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 Navy 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 particular lesson's practicality, my Dad's overarching message is unequivocally 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, a little pushed around, 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 a special 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. I forged alliances, and realigned them as necessary. Sometimes, I was the poor, defenseless little brother; sometimes I was the omniscient elder. Different things to different people, as the situation demanded. I learned to adapt.

Back then, these techniques were merely reactions undertaken to ensure my survival. But one day this fall, Dr. Hicks, our Head of School, 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.

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

Now, jot down what you think makes the essay good. Circle the parts you like. What caught your attention? What made you want to keep reading? Take notes.

There are a few things that make "Breaking into Cars" a great essay.

1. An attention-grabbing opener.

"I had never broken into a car before." What a wild way to start off a college essay. It's unexpected, setting up immediate tension and a sense of danger. "Is Stephen about to *do crimes*?" you wonder, and that cliffhanger makes you want to read on.

Here's a caveat: The twist is that John's not *really* stealing a car. If you've got a real-life experience of grand theft auto (or some other crime), skip writing your college essay about it.

2. Specific details that bring the story to life.

Stephen sets the scene for us immediately. Little details like "Hotchkiss volunteers" going off for "enjoy some Texas BBQ" make the situation feel more real.

Even the dialogue feels true to life. "Can you do that thing with the coat hanger...?" is by no means poetry, but you can imagine exactly the tired teen volunteer who's asking after digging a coat hanger out of the dumpster. It feels genuine, and specific dialogue is more interesting than paraphrasing.

Stephen is specific. He talks about the "chaos" of his house, but then he supports it with specific descriptions, like how his dad tossed him in the lake without warning or how the family dinner table was always one chair short, and he had to fight for a seat every night. Even using a verb like "jiggling" to describe his lockpicking maneuvers reveals the tentative, haphazard nature of his attempts in a way that adds to the scene.

3. The Click.

"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."

The "click" is the secret sauce of your college essay. It's where the focus shifts from one specific incident to the larger or deeper meaning of the event in the context of your life. Stephen uses this shift to get to this thesis—that his chaotic upbringing has prepared him for a myriad of unpredictable situations.

4. A casual, humorous tone.

It's casual, it's funny, it's entertaining to read—while still keeping enough seriousness to be believable. But little things like the literary eye-roll of "in case my aircraft carrier gets torpedoed" give the reader a little something to smile about.

5. A future-forward ending.

At the end, Stephen realizes why he was tasked with unlocking the van: because his life has prepared him to take on anything, to be "a vital participant" even when he's not in control, and to "face a serendipitous world with confidence."

Colleges love that stuff! Stephen shows that he's mature and ready to tackle the next chapter of his life, no matter what happens, and that's exactly what colleges are looking for.

"So yeah, this Stephen guy wrote a really great essay. Now what?"

First, here are a few changes that would have made his essay even better.

1. More original language.

Cliches like "don't sweat the small stuff" are unoriginal and boring.

2. Another example that shows growth.

Stephen mentions learning to adapt, and taking on different roles with his siblings, but he doesn't give an example of how he's used those skills. Another example would be great—but in a 650-word essay, you'll always wish you could squeeze in one more example.

Homework:

Now that we've analyzed one great college essay, pick some essays on your own.

Start here. [145 College Essay Examples for 11 Schools + Expert Analysis](#)

This is where you'll find Stephen's essay, as well as many other great examples.

Tip: Look for essays that worked for the colleges you're applying to! Many schools post their own selection of great essays, so look for essays from your dream school!

For example, here's a link to "essays that worked" from Johns Hopkins:
<https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/>

Pick out 3 that you like and jot down why you liked those essays, what stood out about them, and how you think the author(s) could have improved them.

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Day 2 - Brainstorming

Now you're ready to brainstorm.

College essays are tricky because they're about *you*. It's hard to write about yourself. Somehow, having the knowledge of your whole life at your fingertips makes every thought leave your head.

Don't worry, you aren't alone. Whenever I sit down to write about myself, my mind goes blank. I think, *I have never done anything interesting in my life, ever—* and students I've worked with have hit that same mental wall.

To scale that wall, let's brainstorm some of your experiences that might yield good essays.

First off, your college essay should be about *you*. You're the hero! This is the most personal part of your college application. It's the only way to tell the admissions team who you are, other than an A+ student, Beta Club President, or a pretty decent soccer goalie. **So let's figure out what you want them to know about you!**

Start by answering the questions below:

What are your five best traits?

What are up to three traits you think you need improvement in?

Then brainstorm at least one (but more if you can think of them!) **specific personal experience that illustrates that trait.**

Before you panic, here are some examples.

My example:

Trait: I'm passionate and committed to improving myself.

Experience: I participated in National Novel Writing Month, a grueling 30-day challenge to write a novel of 150 pages or more. I spent long nights struggling to meet daily goals in addition to schoolwork and took time away from friends and other fun activities to focus on my goal. At the end, I didn't meet the goal of 50,000 words, but I wrote a lot, improved my writing, and found new ways to motivate myself. I learned that even though I didn't win, I still got a lot out of the experience.

I actually wrote my college essay about this experience many years ago. Experiences like this are great for college essays— personal, specific, and they make you the hero of the story. Your college essay can be about *anything* as long as you write well and show off who you are.

Here are some of my favorite topics that I've helped students write about:

Student A emigrated to the U.S. from Korea years ago, but he had never tried non-Korean food. His friend took him to Chipotle, and eating a burrito for the first time opened his eyes to a world of new experiences. He marks this as his transition from childhood to adulthood because it made him *excited* to try new things rather than afraid.

(Plus, it's a fresh twist on the much-maligned "moving to the U.S. essay"--which is a huge, foundational experience for many, but which tends to be overused as a college essay topic.)

Student B took on a dragon—and won. She struggled to put together a wooden model of a dragon, almost gave up, and finally thought about it in a different way and succeeded--but we wrote this in a fantastical way, which made it a fun read.

Student C *really* wanted to beat this video game. It was a racing game, so we wrote it as a race, which made the typical story of "I failed, I struggled to do better, and I finally got it" more exciting. It was also a great topic for him, as he planned to major in video game design.

After reading so many examples and essay topics, you should know one thing: You can write about *anything*. You don't need profound experiences to write a good essay. It's more about showing who you are and how you've become that person through personal experiences.

Now, let's get down to brainstorming.

What are your five best traits?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

And what are three traits you think you need improvement in?

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.

Next, brainstorm at least one (but more if you can think of them!) specific personal experience that illustrates each trait. Give some explanation as to how the trait and your experience are linked.

Trait:

Experience:

Trait:

Experience:

Trait:

Experience:

Homework:

Finally, take a look at the Common App's essay topics for this year.

<https://www.commonapp.org/whats-appening/application-updates/2018-2019-common-application-essay-prompts>

Try to think of how your personal experiences could answer some of those prompts. Brainstorm some connections here: