



College Essay Boot Camp

a tutor guide for personal statements.



Dear 826 Boston Volunteer,

Thank you for your commitment to support College Essay Boot Camp. In this virtual program, you'll be working with students as they brainstorm, draft, and polish either college or scholarship essays. We couldn't do this work without your help.

Thank you,

The 826 Boston Team

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The College Essay: The Basics

LENGTH: 650 words, which is a little over a page, single spaced. Basically, it's short!

TOPIC: The Common Application provides seven essay prompts that students can respond to (but one of them is to write about whatever they want, so it doesn't really matter if the essay fits any one prompt). The prompts are useful, however, to generate ideas.

PURPOSE: To convince a college or university that the author has what it takes to succeed and contribute to their school.

AUDIENCE: College admissions officers. They read thousands of essays every year and will spend no more than a couple of minutes reading any given essay. Therefore, it must be easy to follow and to the point.

Best Practices When Tutoring Writing

1. Spend time building rapport.

Sharing any piece of writing with a stranger is a leap of faith. Getting to know the student's interests and background is time well spent. Keep in mind that, for many students, applying to college can be a source of real stress – and not all students may be planning to apply to college!

2. Set an achievable goal.

Being explicit about what can be accomplished in your time together is an important part of managing expectations. If a student comes in with no idea what to write about, it is unlikely they will leave with a finished, or even a complete, rough draft. However, if your goal is to come away with a detailed outline and solid first paragraph, that is much more achievable.

3. Use the Socratic method.

Encourage students to talk through their ideas by asking them open-ended questions to draw out more details. Try to avoid yes or no questions. Be curious and enthusiastic about their ideas and ask follow-up questions.

4. Write down what they're saying.

As the student talks through their ideas, take vigorous notes. Often, students are better able to communicate their work verbally and will often say things aloud that they can type up verbatim and use in their papers or presentations.

5. Be gracious and empathetic.

Unique, revealing, and impactful stories do not need to be about a sad, dramatic, or big moment in their lives, but many students do choose to write about personal challenges and triumphs. Make sure to offer plenty of breaks and allow students to set their own boundaries for what to share and write about. See [additional tips](#) in this guide for supporting students who have experienced trauma.

6. Always leave them with next steps.

As the final 10 minutes of your time together approaches, be sure to outline next steps in their student guide. That way, they can continue to work towards a final draft independently.

A Tutoring Road Map

A good place to start is to ask the student what they would like to focus on and accomplish during the tutoring session. Depending on where the student is at, we have some examples of how you might approach the tutoring session.

“I don’t know what I want to write about yet...”

It’s okay if a student isn’t sure what they want to write about! Start with the basics and ask the student about some of the [qualities they want their essay to reveal](#). Then review the [Common App Personal Essay Prompts](#) and brainstorm a potential story for each.

Ask the student if there is a story they are most excited about, but also highlight which stories you think showcase the qualities the student wants to reveal and that you would be interested in learning more about.

“I know what I want to write about, but don’t know how to start...”

If a student has picked a topic but hasn’t started writing, you can use the [Evaluating a Topic](#) guidelines to make sure their essay is unique, impactful, and revealing.

Then you can work with them to write a [Kernel Essay](#) to help outline the main beats of their story to be turned into a first draft.

“I have a draft of my essay...”

If the student has a first draft of their essay, start by reading it out loud (either you or the student), and then use the [Trail Guide](#) to help tailor your questions and feedback based on where the student is in the writing process.

You may also want to use the [Scenes vs. Summaries guidelines](#) to map out the parts of their story where they can add in extra details or utilize summaries.

“I think my essay is done...”

If the student is in the final stages of their essay, ask them to read the essay out loud or if they would prefer for you to do so. Hearing the work out loud will help them catch any last conventional errors. They may also then have a clearer idea of what they want to accomplish during the session.

You can review some of the [additional areas for revisions](#) as well as some of the prompts from the [Trail Guide](#), particularly in the Word Choice and Conventions section.

Common App Personal 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 obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
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, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

What to Write About: Evaluating a Topic

What makes a good college essay topic? When deciding whether or not a particular topic will work for a college essay, consider the following criteria:

Is it UNIQUE?

College admissions departments read thousands of essays every year. The story needs to be unique enough to stand out. One way to do this is to write with close attention to detail and to avoid clichés. What makes a story unique may not necessarily be WHAT it is about, but rather how it is told.

Is it IMPACTFUL?

At their core, narratives are about transformation and change. Whether they choose to write about overcoming an obstacle, challenging an idea or a belief, or coming to terms with their identity, the essay should focus on how it changed them for the better.

Is it REVEALING?

Regardless of the topic, don't forget that the goal of their essay is to convince the reader that they have what it takes to succeed in college. Therefore, it must leave the reader with a very concrete impression of what kind of person they are.

- It must show the reader a positive quality about themselves that might be attractive to colleges and that might not appear elsewhere in their application.
- Students should be asking themselves, "What does this story really say about me? What kind of person will colleges think I am after they read this story?"

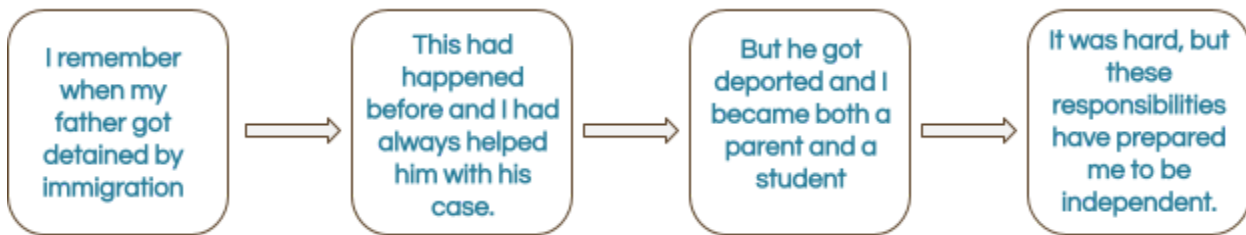
Here are some potential qualities a college essay could reveal:

survivor	passionate
unique	fearless
passionate	resourceful
nurturer	hopeful
curious	thinker

Kernel Essays

Sometimes, getting started can be the most difficult part of writing. A kernel essay is a simple structure that can allow a student to arrange their thoughts and outline the main beats of their story. They can also help bring structure to essays that have a lot of ideas and potential but need some organization. Each kernel should represent a paragraph, boiled down to one central idea. As the student is writing their kernels, try to encourage them to get it down to a single sentence.

Here is an example kernel essay:



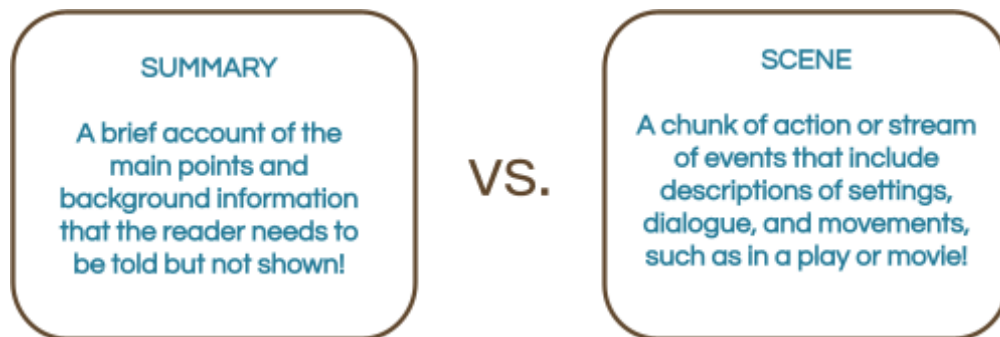
Some questions you may want to ask to help a student write their kernel essay:

- What would be a strong first scene?
- When did this happen?
- What are the key events of this story?
- What do you want the reader to learn about you from this story?
- How do you want to end your essay?

Scenes vs. Summaries

Since the college essay is actually a STORY, it's important to tell it like one! This means breaking up large blocks of summary with vivid scenes that are complete with dialogue and description. However, it's important to keep in mind that SOME parts of a college essay will be more effective if written in scenes, while others will be most effective as summaries.

Shoot for a BALANCE between moments of scene and moments of summary!



Use SUMMARY to describe...

- Background information
- Contextual information
- Less important details
- Analysis and explanations.

Use SCENES to describe...

- Moments that are important or central to the story that readers should pay close attention to.

Areas for revision

Revise for an engaging “hook.”

An effective hook grabs the reader’s attention and makes them want to continue reading. The admissions officers in charge of reviewing college essays spend very little time reading through them. It is important to start off strong.

For example, the opening sentences of sample essay #4 read: “I fell asleep next to my best friend as usual. However, this time it wasn’t so peaceful.”

Revise for voice and word choice.

It is important that a college essay is told in a student’s authentic voice. However, after rounds of revisions, sometimes this is lost. A useful last step can be to inject a draft with the student’s personality by revising for word choice.

Revise for transition phrases.

Sometimes readers can get lost if they don’t understand the relationship between one paragraph and the next.

Revise for length.

Maybe the draft is over the 650 word limit, but students are unsure what to cut. Maybe they don’t need to cut anything, but can express the same ideas in fewer words! Making language concise and to the point is difficult but can result in a much clearer draft that is easier to follow.

Supporting Students Writing About Trauma

Supporting the Student

While impactful essays do not need to be about sad, dramatic, or big moments, many students may choose to write about difficult experiences and trauma.

In order for you to be informed and understand students' thoughts and feelings around the experience they choose to write about, it is important that you are intentional with the language you're using. By building rapport and making space for the students to feel comfortable talking about their experiences with you, you can develop an approach to the conversation that best meets their specific needs at that moment. In this section, there will be tangible tips on how to navigate conversations surrounding trauma, by giving power back to the student and centering the students' recollections and agency first. Open ended questions will often get a better response than direct language.

An important aspect of trauma-informed tutoring is to create a safe space that prioritizes student choice and well-being. As a tutor, you should:

- Allow students space to choose what they want to write and talk about.
- Ask the student for consent to discuss and go into detail about the incident to which they want to write about.
- Be mindful of the impact of your own words beyond the intentions you have behind them. The language we use carries many different meanings and connotations and can replicate harm.
- Validate their feelings, don't impose your own.

Try to stay away from language that includes phrases like: "why?" "explain to me," "what else?" and "is that all?" Instead, you might say:

- "Where would you like to start?"
- "Are you able to tell more about what happened when...?" (make sure to use the exact language as the student described, avoid assumptions or paraphrasing so that you acknowledge you're listening.)
- "Thank you for sharing that. Is this something you want to write about in your essay?"
- "It sounds like _____ is really important to you."
- "I'd feel sad/hurt/angry/jealous, etc. too" (make sure to use the same emotions they name to validate their experience)

Supporting Yourself

When you're supporting students who have experienced trauma, keeping yourself healthy and well is sometimes easier said than done. It's critical that you take time to ensure your own well-being. If you need to step away during tutoring, you can use the 'Ask for Help' button to request an observer join your breakout room and ask if they can step in for a moment.

After your session, try to connect with friends, family, and communities that can offer support and allow you to process your own feelings. Make sure that you're feeding yourself well, getting good rest, and discharging extra energy through a walk or run.

Reporting Guidelines

If you are concerned for a student's physical, emotional, or mental safety and wellbeing, you should privately share your suspicions with an 826 Boston staff or service member.

Volunteers **are not** responsible for determining if a student is at risk or finding a solution to an issue a student brings up. Volunteers **are** responsible for sharing any concerns for a students' mental, emotional, or physical wellbeing and safety with an 826 Boston team member during the debrief.

Additional Resources

Check out additional resources to help guide your tutoring session:

826 Boston Resources

- [826 Boston Volunteer Handbook and Trail Guide](#)
- [College Essay Support Videos](#)
- [Trauma-Informed Tutoring Tip Sheet](#)
- [Sample College Essay](#)

Additional Resources

- [Memoir Graphic Organizer](#)

THANK YOU for signing up to become a College Essay Boot Camp tutor. You are a rock star and we cannot wait to work with you!