

# Getting Started with Essays

This document contains brainstorming exercises that will serve as the basis for your personal statement as well as concepts we might use for supplemental essays.

As we've already discussed, the personal statement is a vessel for the message you want to convey. It should give greater personal insight into what matters to you, what you value, and/or what you're passionate about. Here are a few things to keep in mind about your message:

- The message should give insight into who you are and what you care about.
- There is no right or wrong message. A few choices: lessons of personal growth/realization, lessons from facing and managing challenges, and a value/belief that you live by or have been influenced by.
- Admissions officers should learn things about you that they couldn't find elsewhere in your application, thereby adding depth and context to your application.

Things to keep in mind:

1. Don't brag
2. Be vulnerable
3. Some of your core values should be imbedded in your personal statement
4. Specifics and details are key
5. This essay should be something only you can write
6. The person who works in admissions is reading essays and wondering: "Do I want this person on my campus? Will this person be additive to the community? Will this candidate be a good roommate?"

Okay, let's get started!

### **Some ways to get the brainstorming going:**

- What's something you never leave home without?
- What's your earliest memory?
- A food that reminds you of your family
- A tradition that reminds you of home
- What else reminds you of home?
- An object that represents your best friend
- An object that represents your father / mother / any meaningful family member
- Something you loved and lost
- A toy you used to play with as a kid
- Something that makes you laugh
- A book you love
- Favorite movie
- An object that represents a regret
- A favorite gift you received
- A favorite gift you gave
- Something about you no one else knows
- A dream
- Something you stole
- Something you found
- Something that makes you feel safe
- The worst thing that ever happened to you
- The best thing
- The image you'd like carved into your tombstone
- The coolest thing about science
- An accident
- Best money you ever spent
- Your favorite object
- Your favorite sentence
- You'd cry if you lost this
- Someone you'd like to know more about
- A bad habit
- A perfect moment
- A time you laughed so hard you cried
- A time you cried so hard you laughed
- An image you'll never forget
- What they'd put in the museum of your life
- The cover image on your first self-titled album
- Three objects from your room
- A near-death experience
- A moment when you were so embarrassed you wanted to disappear
- Recurring dream
- Worst (actual) nightmare
- When were you most afraid

- If you had a clone, what would you have the clone do?
- A time you were speechless
- A quotation you love
- Your favorite photo
- What would you tell your younger self?
- What do you want to be able to say about your life when you're 90?
- What do you wake up in the middle of the night worrying about?
- What class or teacher did you like most, and why?
- What class or teacher did you dislike most, and why?
- What is the story your parents love to tell about you?

## THE VALUES EXERCISE

1. Highlight your top 10 values from the list below
2. Of those 10, bold your top 5
3. Underline the one you'd put at the top of your list

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o community</li> <li>o inspiration</li> <li>o intellectual status</li> <li>o financial gain</li> <li>o laughter</li> <li>o serenity</li> <li>o physical challenge</li> <li>o responsibility</li> <li>o competition</li> <li>o career</li> <li>o fame</li> <li>o working with others</li> <li>o freedom</li> <li>o security</li> <li>o strength</li> <li>o self-control</li> <li>o hunger</li> <li>o personal development</li> <li>o trust</li> <li>o faith</li> <li>o involvement</li> <li>o adventure</li> <li>o vulnerability</li> <li>o adaptability</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o challenges</li> <li>o commitment</li> <li>o leadership</li> <li>o helping others</li> <li>o influence</li> <li>o wit</li> <li>o success</li> <li>o patience</li> <li>o listening</li> <li>o diversity</li> <li>o love</li> <li>o nutrition</li> <li>o competence</li> <li>o practicality</li> <li>o creativity</li> <li>o excitement</li> <li>o collaboration</li> <li>o social change</li> <li>o beauty</li> <li>o ecological awareness</li> <li>o quality relationships</li> <li>o travel</li> <li>o decisiveness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o self-expression</li> <li>o stability</li> <li>o art</li> <li>o autonomy</li> <li>o risk</li> <li>o balance</li> <li>o self-discipline</li> <li>o courage</li> <li>o family</li> <li>o empathy</li> <li>o working alone</li> <li>o humility</li> <li>o efficiency</li> <li>o intensity</li> <li>o health and fitness</li> <li>o meaningful work</li> <li>o my country</li> <li>o spirituality</li> <li>o loyalty</li> <li>o honesty</li> <li>o independence</li> <li>o supervising others</li> <li>o recognition</li> <li>o curiosity</li> <li>o friendship</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o music</li> <li>o truth</li> <li>o resourcefulness</li> <li>o respect</li> <li>o bravery</li> <li>o communication</li> <li>o change and variety</li> <li>o compassion</li> <li>o nature</li> <li>o expertise</li> <li>o order</li> <li>o privacy</li> <li>o close relationships</li> <li>o religion</li> <li>o knowledge</li> <li>o excellence</li> <li>o power</li> <li>o passion</li> <li>o cooperation</li> <li>o affection</li> <li>o wisdom</li> <li>o growth</li> <li>o accountability</li> <li>o democracy</li> </ul>
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## **21 RANDOM DETAILS**

List 21 things that people may not know about you. Big or small, funny or sad. Be honest.

For inspiration, consider....

- Pet peeves
- Unusual Interests
- Things you pretend to hate but secretly like
- Your parents' biggest pet peeves about you
- Weird injuries or talents
- Obsessions
- Things your friends make fun of you for
- Fears – real or imagined
- Favorite books, movies, TV shows
- Things you geek out about
- Favorite smell and least favorite smell
- Favorite place
- What is hanging on your bedroom walls?
- What is hiding under your bed or in your room?
- Something you cannot live without?
- Something you cannot live with?
- Biggest character flaw
- Favorite family member
- Favorite meal / food
- Favorite role model
- Biggest insecurity
- Favorite memory (or more!)
- Favorite family tradition
- What you would do with a 25th hour in the day
- Most prized possession
- A moment that was really hard at the time, but it turned out okay
- A secret (or not so secret) skill
- Your spirit animal
- The title of your autobiography
- An experience that you wish never happened
- The activity that most calms you down
- What you wish people knew about you but probably don't

## **ESSENTIAL OBJECTS**

Think about an object that represents one of your fundamental qualities, values, memories, personality traits...

Thus, each object is more than just an object. The object can be a physical object that links to a memory or value or it can be a metaphorical symbol of a memory or value.

The object should have some character to it. You should be able to describe it with some detail. What does it look like? Feel like? What marks are on it? What does it smell like? How is this object uniquely yours?

Don't do the most obvious example. For example, if you played volleyball, your first impulse may be to have your object be a volleyball (which isn't bad), but better to choose something we don't expect, like Epsom salts.

Don't overthink these – just put down what comes to mind.

Here are two examples:

Concrete Object: Stack of worn playing cards with the joker bent in half

My dad taught me counting skills by teaching me basic cards games like go fish and crazy eights. As I got older he taught me more sophisticated games like poker, bridge and how to bet in a casino on 21. To him, playing cards represented fun and required skills (like bluffing in poker) that one could use in life. We used to play for hours on vacation – he taught me how to cheat so I would know if someone was cheating me. I have to say, I didn't handle losing well, which was another one of the lessons he always tried to teach me. I got so angry once I bent the joker in half.

Symbolic Object: Thick black Sharpie marker with fuzz on the tip

I am always mindful of being fair, perhaps to a fault. I always mediate amongst my friends and family and try to find solutions that make everyone happy (I have come to learn you cannot make everyone happy). I also happen to be highly organized. When I was little, to my mother's horror, I had taken all 30 of my stuffed animals and marked their heads with a number using a thick black Sharpie. While she may have been furious that I had "ruined" all my stuffed animals, I was only trying to be fair – marking each of their heads with a number so that I could rotate who I slept with and making sure none of them would be left out.

Come up with 5-10 objects, either concrete or symbolic. For each object, write a couple of sentences (as you can see from the example) about what it means to you and why you picked it. Why is this object more than an object?

## **TWENTY-FIVE QUESTIONS**

Here are 25 questions to ask yourself to help you get started writing about you.

1. What's the toughest decision you've ever made?
2. What did your father teach you?
3. What did your mother teach you?
4. What's the best thing that ever happened to you?
5. What has been the hardest thing in your life?
6. What has been difficult for you to accomplish?
7. At what point have you felt inadequate, and why?
8. Which of your relationships have you worked at the hardest?
9. What have you done that they said couldn't be done?
10. Name a weakness you have worked on the hardest.
11. Which experience really pulled you out of your comfort zone?
12. Who or what makes you laugh?
13. When are you most yourself?
14. What's perfect about your life?
15. Describe one of your colossal failures.
16. What are you terrible at but love doing?
17. What's the moment you left childhood behind?
18. What's missing from your life?
19. What is your favorite (or least favorite) story that relatives tell about your childhood?  
Why? How does it relate to the person you are today?
20. What is the most out-of-character thing you've ever done?
21. Were you obsessed with something as a child?
22. If you weren't allowed to go to college, and had to start a career right now, which would you be most qualified for?

## **PROUST QUESTIONNAIRE**

The Proust Questionnaire has its origins in a parlor game popularized (though not devised) by Marcel Proust, the French essayist and novelist, who believed that, in answering these questions, an individual reveals his or her true nature.

1. What is your idea of perfect happiness?
2. What is your greatest fear?
3. What is the trait you most deplore in yourself?
4. What is the trait you most deplore in others?
5. Which living person do you most admire?
6. What is your greatest extravagance?
7. What do you consider the most overrated virtue?
8. On what occasion do you lie?
9. What do you most dislike about your appearance?
10. Which living person do you most despise?
11. What is the quality you most like in a person?
12. Which words or phrases do you most overuse?
13. What or who is the greatest love of your life?
14. When and where were you happiest?
15. Which talent would you most like to have?
16. If you could change one thing about yourself, what would it be?
17. What do you consider your greatest achievement?
18. If you were to die and come back as a person or a thing, what would it be?
19. Where would you most like to live?
20. What is your most treasured possession?
21. What do you regard as the lowest depth of misery?
22. What is your favorite occupation?
23. What is your most marked characteristic?
24. What do you most value in your friends?
25. Who are your favorite writers?
26. Who is your hero of fiction?
27. Which historical figure do you most identify with?
28. Who are your heroes in real life?
29. What is it that you most dislike?
30. What is your greatest regret?
31. How would you like to die?
32. What is your motto?



## **WHAT I WANT COLLEGES TO KNOW ABOUT ME**

This is a list of details and possible topics for your personal statement, supplements, activities list and additional info section.

Have fun. This doesn't have to be a chore. It's you basically making a list of everything that you love about yourself, about who you are and what you've done.

Back up general stuff with specific examples. If, for instance, you write, "I can motivate people!" or "I stick with things I'm passionate about!" provide a specific example that backs up your claim--or better yet, both claims! (Like the fact that you helped raise debate membership from 19 to 96 at your school over four years.)

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

8.

9.

10.

## **ADDITIONAL BRAINSTORMING IDEAS**

### **CONTRADICTIONS**

Contradictions can add complexity to your essay and we ALL have contradictions in our life. Try to think of a few.

Examples:

I love my family but they are my greatest source of anxiety

I love ketchup and tomato soup but hate tomatoes

I love beating my younger brother in tennis, but afterwards I feel a tad guilty

### **AN ARTICLE OF CLOTHING**

Many people have an item such as a favorite sweater, a beloved T-shirt, or a well-worn pair of shoes. It is often possible to spin stories around an item that has been with you through many experiences, or that can be made to represent truths in your life.

### **A FAMILY GATHERING OR TRADITION**

You could pick anything from your family at the dinner table to an annual trip to the beach. You may decide to write about an extended family gathering, and thereby give yourself more characters and interactions to describe.

### **YOUR WALK OR RIDE TO SCHOOL**

Any trip that you take on familiar ground, day after day, is a good possibility. A walk through your neighborhood would allow you to reflect on experiences that you have had at each place you pass.

If you are a runner, you could describe a course that you have run many times, and your thoughts along the way.

If you've lived in your house a long time, a look around the backyard could bring to mind good times with family or friends that might come together in an essay.

### **DRAW A TIMELINE**

Here's another visual brainstorming method: write a timeline of your life. Then go back and underline or highlight the high and low points. Also, note any other epiphanies or pivotal moments. Don't worry if no single experience changed your life; that's not usually how it works anyway. You can write a thoughtful essay about a change that happened over time, focusing on a particular incident to illustrate your point.

### **THE INTERVIEW** with some people who know you well:

Ask them what they see as your strengths. What three adjectives would they use to describe you and why? What were you like as a child? Were you the kid constantly wearing elaborate costumes everyday, drawing imaginary worlds at the dinner table, building Lego towers in your bedroom, or the kid debating if LeBron is the greatest basketball player? You might see a theme develop or a fond memory might spark a discussion about you and something you forgot about yourself.

## ISSUES OF IMPORTANCE

Think about issues that matter to you, important moments in your life, high school experiences that stand out in your mind, and places and people that left an impression on you. Jot down emotions you often experience, verbs that mean something to you, and smells that bring back strong memories. Don't limit yourself to happy experiences: Not all good stories are happy stories. Maybe one of your keenest memories is sitting and crying on the steps outside the school auditorium after you found out you didn't get the lead in the play. If a moment was meaningful and you can write with your emotions, your reader will feel connected to your story. The goal is to mine your life for a subject that will pour out instead of trickle.

## INTERESTS AND HOBBIES

Think of 5 interests and hobbies of yours

Are any of them interests that people might not expect of you?

How about your after-school or weekend activities?

How about last summer? Did you work?

Even working at Starbucks or babysitting can be a topic source, depending on what happened when you were doing those jobs.

Remember, you are looking for little interesting moments.