



Capstone
Higher Education Experts

College Essay Brainstorming Workbook

2021-2022

Exercise 1

What does your college application (*not including* essays) reveal about you? What do admissions officers learn about you from the rest of your application?

In the box below, please list the types of information that admissions officers will find in the non-essay sections of your college application and describe what they say about you.

Exercise 2

What does the essay add to the college application? Why do college applications include an essay component or letters of recommendation, and what do admissions officers hope to learn about applicants from them?

In the space below, list the kinds of information that admissions officers can learn about you from your essays or letters of recommendation that they won't learn from other parts of your application.

What are the primary differences between an academic essay and a college application personal statement/essay?

1. The personal statement is not a formal argumentative essay. It is actually informal and personal.
2. You do not necessarily need to have a traditional introductory paragraph with a clear thesis embedded in it. Instead, your personal theme can be implied. It can appear in the first paragraph, but it is often revealed near the end fo the essay. (We will share examples of good personal statements).
3. In an academic essay, there are no "I" statements. In a personal statement, you are the story, so it's important to use "I" statements.
4. An academic essay shows how you think, and how well you can present an argument. A personal statement also shows how you think, but it goes beyond to include how you feel, what is meaningful to you, and how you live. It reveals your personal thoughts and experiences.

Exercise 3

How do you reveal your personal qualities by *showing*, not *telling*, your essay reader?

In the box below, please list 2 or 3 personal qualities that you believe are essential for admissions officers to know about you, and describe meaningful activities (formal or informal) that you have participated in that demonstrate those qualities. Think about how you have spent your time outside of class and what stands out most to you.

Exercise 4

6-Minute Free Write

It's the morning of . . .

- Your hardest final or an AP exam; or
- Your final band performance; or
- An important game, tournament, or meet; or
- The first day back to school in-person this spring; or
- Another equally significant day in your high school career.

In the box below, describe everything you did and felt from the moment you woke up and opened your eyes. It can be stream-of-consciousness. Think about all your senses and use imagery in your descriptions. Don't judge your writing; just let the words flow.

Now, review what you wrote. What stood out to you in any way? Was it something interesting? Did it remind of you another experience? Did it sound the way you think you sound as a writer? Did it make you smile? Where in your writing did you feel that you found your “flow”? Copy one or more of those gold nuggets and paste them below.

Exercise 5

Use UC PIQs to brainstorm essay themes

UC PIQs (350 words max; first drafts 400 words max)

Before you decide what to write about in any of your college essays, you’ll want to explore several possible themes and stories. Your essays should be personal narratives—stories—that draw the reader in, and from which the reader can infer specific personal qualities you have, values you hold, or what you find meaningful, as well as insight into your ways of thinking or communicating.

We start the essay brainstorming process by reviewing each of the 8 UC Personal Insight Questions (PIQs) with you below, because the UC PIQ prompts capture the most common essay topics that students will need to develop for their college applications.

In the next exercise, for each PIQ, think about relevant activities or interests you have that relate in some way to the PIQ prompt. Then, list or add notes about those activities or interests in the space following *Notes/Activities*. This information will help us to evaluate the relevance of each prompt to your personal experiences and to help you choose the prompts that will work best to show the reader who you are.

For each of the PIQs, jot down any relevant thoughts or activities, then write out your story related to those thoughts.

The exercise begins on the next page

PIQ #1

Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, OR contributed to group efforts over time.

Notes/Activities

Your story

PIQ #2

Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Notes/Activities

Your story

PIQ #3

What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time? – *Talents are abilities you're born with; skills are acquired through practice.*

Notes/Activities**Your story:**

PIQ #4

Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity OR worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.—*Internship, job shadow, SEAL, self-taught coding, robotics, PCC course, etc.*

Notes/Activities

Your story:

PIQ #5

Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this affected your academic achievement?

Notes/Activities

Your story:

PIQ #6

Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.

Notes/Activities

Your story:

PIQ #7

What have you done to make your school or community a better place?—*Community service/volunteering; being an informal leader; mentoring; tutoring for free. Think about how your close friends would describe you.*

Notes/Activities

Your story:

PIQ #8

Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California? *(or your top-choice college if you're not applying to UC)*

Notes/Activities

Your story:

Exercise 6

Reflect with your family and draft your first PIQ response

Now that we have reviewed the PIQ prompts and jotted down topics, we recommend that you set aside time with your family in the next day or two (at the dinner table, for instance) to talk about each prompt and your ideas, if you are comfortable doing so. Parents and siblings often have different perspectives or remember experiences that you may have forgotten, and that information can enhance your essays.

Once you have finished gathering more data by speaking with your family, you are now ready to tell your story through your response to one of the UC PIQ prompts. For the first PIQ, we recommend that you choose the topic that you feel the most comfortable writing about. Please remember the 6-minute free write for your first draft, and don't overthink your writing or spend too much time perfecting syntax. However, do proofread your work to ensure that the spelling and grammar are correct, and remember that great writing takes time to produce. You will achieve better results if you write over multiple days, instead of hammering it out at one session.

By the assigned deadline (usually Sunday night), please choose one PIQ prompt to respond to and draft your response. In each of the following 3 weeks, you will draft a PIQ response to one of the other 3 PIQs and make revisions to previously drafted PIQ responses.