

Step 5: Write Effective Personal Statements

The worksheets below for **Step 5** will walk you through the process to write compelling, personal statements that are effective for admission to college. Use your Essay Writing Plan from **Step 4.6** with your Calendar from **Step 2** to update your calendar and schedule time to complete work, revise, receive feedback, and proof all writing assignments well before deadlines. If you are uncertain about decisions about who you are and what direction to go in life, spend more time in **Step 3** reflecting on what is important in life and discussing this with family and mentors. If you are uncertain about what college to choose, spend more time in **Step 4** doing research and speaking with college experts. This way, in **Step 5** you avoid digressing into life decisions and college choices, and instead, direct attention to writing effective personal statements that appeal to admission officers at the colleges on top of your list.

Step 5.1 Get Organized

Use the Essay Writing Plan from **Step 4.6** to organize deadlines and essay prompts. Begin with Early Admission, followed by Target, Reach, and Safety Colleges. Requirements to complete a Personal Statement vary by college, but often include two essays and a list of activity descriptions. Some students will have many essays to write, so it is time to get organized. Instructions:

- How many total essays do you expect to write?
- When is the first deadline?
- When is the last deadline?
- Count the total number of essays and note the colleges with similar requirements.
- Write deadlines for each draft, and schedule time for feedback, revision, proof, and final review of the application.
- Use your personal calendar, (on your phone, computer or wall), with the Essay Writing Plan to schedule daily, 20- to 90-minute work sessions to write your personal statements.

Use **Table 4.6** from the previous step to organize the work for each college on your list.

Step 5.2 Brainstorm Creative Responses to Essay Prompts

Brainstorming is an activity to generate lots of creative ideas, main points, catch phrases, interesting stories, and possible answers to the essay prompts.

Here is a method to brainstorm essay responses:

- Schedule an hour session to brainstorm. You need a timer, word processor, and essay prompts from the applications. Eliminate all distractions and interruptions.
- Begin by rewriting each essay prompt from one college into the brainstorm. Read the prompts aloud a few times to fully consider what kind of response is expected from the question. Spend 5 minutes reading and taking notes on the questions.
- Set a timer for 10 minutes. Brainstorm every possible idea, both solid and wild ideas for the essays. The goal is to generate as many ideas as possible, good, cliché or crazy. The goal is to write as many different words as possible rather than working out one great idea to its fullest. Write everything that comes to mind.
- After the first 10 minutes, set the timer for another 10 minutes. Refine the best of these ideas into statements worth including in the next step of outlining the ideas. Order is not important; rather add details to the good ideas that may be useful.
- Repeat this brainstorm process at least one more time. Read the questions, write lots of ideas for 10 minutes, and then spend 10 minutes refining the ideas into phrases, statements, and examples to include in the outline.
- Continue writing everything and anything possible. This is not the first draft, so no order or coherence is necessary at this point. The goal is to have a few ideas in response to each question. Write as much and as fast as possible.
- Save all work. Do not delete anything. Reread it before ending the session.
- Review your ideas with a mentor or counselor before writing your outline.

Brainstorm Personal Statements for one college at a time. If you have 6 colleges with a total of 10 essays, schedule a separate brainstorming session for each college based on priority and deadlines. Many of the prompts may appear similar, but it is best to brainstorm every essay for one particular college during a session; this way, all the essays you submit for a college may be linked, with main points, stories, and examples connecting across the essays. Naturally, ideas may be useful at more than one college; so in later brainstorms, you do not need to repeat ideas, but may extend them and generate further examples specific to the new prompt.

The purpose of brainstorming is to generate lots of good ideas, so that a few good ones emerge, and other ideas may be tied together in the outline. Being stuck and having nothing is part of this process, so it is important to work through the slow parts until ideas begin to flow more naturally. It helps to solicit feedback on brainstormed ideas.

Step 5.4 Write a Sloppy Draft 1

Relax and take the pressure off, at least for now, and let your voice flow as a natural storyteller. Use your outline, talk aloud with gestures, and explain all the details to tell the whole story. Some students prefer to record a spoken version of the outline first, and then write the first draft. The goal is to make a strong point in response to the question. Follow your outline, but allow your writing to be sloppy in order to explain the whole story.

Step 5.5 Read Examples of Effective Essays

What? Should I really read other essays to write a better Personal Statement? Yes, but first, write Draft 1 with all of your best ideas, and then, read the successful essays to develop a sense of standards and expectations for college essays. Let the examples spark ideas for writing and organizing your next draft. Sample essays are available online, often from the specific college. Two excellent resources are:

- *Heavenly Essays: 50 Narrative College Application Essays That Worked* by Janine W. Robinson
- *50 Successful Harvard Application Essays: What Worked for Them Can Help You Get into the College of Your Choice* by Staff of the Harvard Crimson

It is ideal to read examples from the specific college, if available. More volumes of college essays become available each year. Read lots of essays very quickly, as this is how admission officers read them. Then, make notes on how applicants tell a compelling story with precise, supporting details. Essay responses and writing styles will vary significantly; so, write how to use the insight you gleaned to revise your next draft.

5.5 New Ideas	How will you incorporate insight from examples into your next draft?	

Step 5.6: Write a Better Draft 2

It is time to apply what you have learned in order to write a draft that makes concise points in each paragraph. Use college-level vocabulary that explains the reasons behind each of your points. For this draft, remember, a personal statement is about who you are today -- you may reflect upon the past and envision the future, but the point is to answer the essay prompt with concise points and lucid details that demonstrate your character.

Step 5.7: Self-Revision

For **Step 5.7**, applicants need a complete draft that could be accepted by a college. Leading to this point, we brainstormed lots of ideas, made an outline of main points with supporting details, wrote a sloppy copy of a first draft, read examples of high quality college essays, and revised the drafts to meet the expected standard of college admission officers. You should be confident that your essays answer the prompts with concise, logical points supported by an argument and examples that make a memorable personal statement. It is now time to edit this draft.

Use the table below to ensure that you add details and citations, arrange main points to make a memorable argument, replace vague statements with precise details and examples, and remove all words that are not essential to the main points of the essay.

5.7 Editing Tasks	Notes	
Add		
Detail 1		
Detail 2		
Detail 3		
Detail 4		
Citation 1		
Citation 2		
Rearrange		
Catchy Intro		
Strong Point 1		
Strong Point 2		
Point to Conclude		
Find and Replace		
College-Level Vocabulary Words		
Sentences for Stronger Points		
Remove		
Excess Words		
Excess Sentences		

Step 5.8 Insights from Teachers and Mentors

Invite other, trusted people to read your essays. Remember, you do not need to incorporate every suggested idea into your essay. **Table 5.8** guides feedback from teachers, peers and mentors.

5.8 Questions to Focus Edits	Feedback	
What details could be added to make strong, clear points that a reader will remember?		
What sentences could be rearranged to tell a compelling story and engage the reader in a memorable learning experience?		
Find and replace at least: 5 words with stronger vocabulary 5 sentences with stronger points		
What sentences are unnecessary and could be deleted in this personal statement?		

Step 5.9 Revise and Write until the Final Draft is Ready for Proof

Successful applicants write compelling essays by soliciting feedback, making constant revisions, and polishing the final drafts to perfection. It helps to note the major changes and revisions made to each draft to ensure progress, rather than drafting circles. Ask a college counselor to verify that the final draft meets standard expectations and a teacher to proofread it for grammar, spelling, and standard usage.

5.9	Draft	Major Revisions	Notes	
	Draft 1			
	Draft 2			
	Draft 3			
	Draft 4			
	Final			

At this point, applicants need a final, clean copy of each college essay. This document will be copied into the application software. After the essay is copied into the application software, have a counselor proofread it one last time. This essay should be perfect and ready to submit; do not waste time at this point without a final draft. To complete **Step 5.9**, Copy-Paste and proof the final draft within the application software. Once the essays are saved within the software, proofread the entire application.

Minor errors often occur within the application software, so this method is to avoid small mistakes:

- 1 Proof the final draft of the essay in Word (or other word processor). Delete comments, accept all changes, check that it is perfect, and ready to submit.
- 2 Open and copy the final draft into a text editor or save this draft as .txt file and reopen it.
- 3 Proofread the text (.txt) copy and correct all errors in formatting, especially symbols such as “” that may change when copy-pasted between software.
- 4 Open the online application software to the exact webpage to submit the essay.
- 5 Copy from the Text Editor and Paste it into Common App or other online application.
- 6 Save it within the software.
- 7 Proofread your essay after it has been saved in the application software. Read for typos, especially for mistakes that happen when Copy-Paste changes format and font between software. Save the essay within the application.
- 8 Have a counselor or mentor proof the essays and entire application.

The requirements for Personal Statements vary by college, but most selective colleges require at least 2 personal essays and a list of activity descriptions. Schedule time to work so that you have plenty of time to Copy-Paste and then proof your final draft once it is in the application software. **Step 5** is complete when all Personal Statements are saved and reviewed in Common App or the application software for the college. Technical failures are more common in the final week before the deadline, so plan ahead and finish writing all Personal Statements well before the deadline.