**The Essay Process**

The essay writing process might be challenging at times, but it should also be rewarding. My goal is not only to help you write essays you are proud of and that showcase who you really are to colleges, but also to help you improve as a writer, so you can arrive at college confident and ready to tackle your writing requirements.

I view my role in this process as somewhere between that of a professional editor and a tutor. I will make both content and sentence-level edits on the essays, as would a professional editor; however, except in cases of grammatical mistakes, I do not view these edits as corrections. They are meant to model specific ways of writing sentences and shaping content, but they do not represent the *only* way to approach an essay (although I will always be happy to explain to you why I think it might be the *best*way!). Through reviewing and actively engaging with our feedback, you can improve as a writer and as a thinker throughout this process.

We are excited to collaborate with you on this process!

…but first, a few guidelines:

* It should go without saying, but **please read these guidelines carefully**. They will ensure our work together is as efficient, effective, and low stress as possible. I take them seriously, and you should, too.
* I also cannot stress how important it is that you **read the samples in the attached packet** **now and reread them tomorrow**—and again whenever you’re having trouble writing. Writing an application essay is very different from writing an essay for school. Even if you’re already a good writer, you will have to learn how to write within this new genre, and studying the samples is the first step toward understanding and mastering it. I will also refer back to these samples during our work together so it’s crucial you’re familiar with them.
* It is equally vital that you approach the brainstorm as seriously as you would a graded final project at school. The best essays tend to come from the longest, most detailed brainstorming documents; **aim to fill at least 7 pages in the brainstorm and up to 20 if you feel inclined**. I don’t know you as well as your parents or friends and can only make suggestions based on what you tell me. Plus, the more thoughtful your brainstorm is, the less work you will need to put into writing the essays—part of it will already have been completed. (In the past, I have pulled entire first drafts of the personal statement and more than one supplemental essay directly from the brainstorm.) So, consider the brainstorm your first writing task; I hope to be impressed!

**Okay, got it. So how will this process work, on a technical level?**

You complete the brainstorming process documents, send them to me, and then I will review and be in touch. From there, we will discuss your ideas and the ides I have based off your ideas. We will brainstorm and sometimes outline essays using Google Docs, so we both have live/real-time access. If you prefer to do this in Word, that also works.

On early drafts, I will focus on the content and the narrative, rather than on the nitty-gritty details of sentence structure, spelling, and grammar (that is called line editing). Instead, I will either send written feedback or add comments using the comments feature in Google Docs / Word. But once it is time to start line editing…

**I will only edit in Microsoft Word.** And once I have edited a document, I will not accept it back for editing via Google Docs. This is because we will use track changes, which are inefficient to work with in programs other than Word. If a file is sent to me in another format (like Pages), I might ask that you save it as a Word doc (go to File, Save As, then choose doc or docx as the format) and resend. In the case of Google Docs, you can export the file as a doc or docx.

When I send you back edited documents with tracked changes, please work off those exact documents and **keep the track changes on**. This helps me see immediately how and where you responded to my comments and edits. This also helps ensure we are always working on the most recent drafts, which speeds up the process tremendously!

*Note: If you are not familiar with using track changes in Word, please let me know and I will send you a short, written tutorial we can review together over the phone.*

**How long will this take exactly?**

Each essay will usually go through a minimum of three (shorter supplements) and up to six or eight or more drafts (longer supplements and the Common App essay/personal statement).This is a new kind of revision process just as it is a new kind of writing. Don’t take the edits personally; you are learning how to write in a new form and know that it gets easier/faster as we progress through the supplements.

**Why more than one or two drafts/revisions?**

You might not be used to writing more than one or two drafts of an essay. But the difference is often huge, especially early on in the process. An essay that only goes through one or two revisions is often: unfocused; either too simple or too confusing; too focused on the details of a story rather than the larger picture; lacking in serious, thoughtful reflection; unpolished; potentially generic or cliché; and, if applicable, not specific enough to the school. That same essay, four or more drafts in, will be focused, clear, nuanced, polished, unique, highly targeted to the specific school (if applicable), and strike a balance between narrative detail and reflection!

**…And how do I know when we’re done?**

We will revise essays until I let you know I think they are final. I have two colleagues, Emma and Kris, who will also review your essays. After many drafts, a second set of trusted eyes is a good thing!

**What if I am unsure about my “final” list? What essays will we work on first? How often can I change my list?**

We ask to have a final list from you by September 1st of your senior year. However, we understand that if you are still seeing schools, or more commonly, still have some testing left to complete, that your list could change slightly. By “slightly,” we mean a few (2-4) schools may come off or on, but there should be no drastic changes to the list after September 1st. We also ask that you do your best to decide on an ED school by September 15th of your senior year. If you absolutely cannot decide on an ED school by that time, we will ask that you work on sets of essays for each ED school you are considering, starting September 15th. Changes made to your list after October 1st of your senior year can be difficult to manage because, with all that goes on in seniors’ lives that fall, you may not have the time and space needed to write the additional essays in that timeframe. You need to give your ED school the time and energy it deserves, and we hope this guideline will allow you to do that. Please do your best to confirm your list early and make few if any changes.

Here’s our ideal timeline for the essay writing process:

* May–June: Complete the brainstorming packet; develop a strong idea for, write, and perfect the personal statement.
* Mid-June–July: Many colleges release their supplemental essay prompts on their websites. We will create a shared Google Doc and begin compiling essay prompts for all the schools you know will 100% be on your list.
* July: Identify which schools on your list have early action (EA) plans and begin working on those supplemental essays at that time.
* August 1st–August 5th: When the Common App opens on August 1st, we ask that you log in and fill out the Questions section for all of the schools on your list that use the CA and **double check/confirm all supplemental writing prompts** by August 5th.

*Note: This is a crucial early step as prompts can change not only year-to-year but over the summer. Yes, this means some schools will say one thing on their website in June, but have a different thing on the Common App in August. Filling out the Questions section in its entirety will also help us locate any “secret” prompts (e.g. for certain majors or honors programs). We will discuss how to do this for schools that do not use the CA on a school-by-school basis.*

* August–September: Work on and finalize essays for ED and EA schools.
* October–December 15th: Work on and finalize all other application essays.

**I just sent you a draft! When can I expect to hear back from you?**

You will be sent feedback in 24-48 hours. Please remember that our regular hours of business are from 9 AM to 6 PM (EST) Monday through Friday. Communication received outside of business hours will be reviewed and replied to as soon as possible the next business day. This means that materials received after 12:00 pm on Friday may not be returned until the following Monday. If you want something back to work on over the weekend, please send it Thursday to ensure we can get it back to you Friday.

**My mom/dad wants to edit my essay. Is that okay?**

If you plan to share your essays with a parent, please do so as they are marked final (i.e., do not wait to share essays until the day or even one week before the deadline). If a parent has comments or edits, please create a new version of the doc, turn on the track changes, and have them edit/add comments. We know this process can often be a team effort, so we will happily review parent feedback and incorporate it into our final versions as we see fit. If you end up wanting to make additional changes that we do not feel enhance the essay, just let us know so we do not change them back on the final review of the application!

**Can I share my essay with my English teachers, school counselors, grandparents, my parents’ friends, my friends? The more eyes the better, right?**

Actually, not always. As a team, we put a lot of care and energy into essay work, getting to know you over a significant amount of time and helping you shape a narrative in your voice—one that we firmly believe will best position you for college acceptance based on our expertise in this field. We ask that if you do get feedback from individuals outside of our work together, you create an alternate draft and follow the guidelines above on parental reviews. We are happy to review and incorporate it into our final versions as we see fit, but we will not work directly with other “editors.” We love a third set of eyes, but any more than that will make this process far more complicated than it needs to be (and it is complicated enough!). If you are uncertain about specific edits we have requested or essay ideas we have suggested, tell us—we are happy to explain why it makes sense for a given school and/or for your profile.

**Some FAQs (and Guidelines) for Writing the Common Application Essay/Personal Statement**

**I am student body president/lacrosse team captain/editor of my school paper/founder of the Computer Science Club/president of the biggest community service effort at my school/insert something else super impressive here—I’m obviously going to write about that for my personal statement (PS), right?**

Not necessarily. The reader needs to walk away from the essay having learned something about you that he/she can't glean from the rest of your application material, and we will actively discourage you from writing about any academic or extracurricular accomplishments that are already clearly communicated from your resume or the activities section of your application. There will be plenty of other ways to highlight these aspects of your profile, including your application data, resume, interviews, and supplemental essays and/or interest letters, where applicable. If you want to write about being student body president etc. because being president precipitated some serious personal crisis—then, yes, you might write about that. But if you want to write about being student body president because you think it looks “impressive” to colleges, we will steer you away. They will already be impressed by seeing it on your resume!

**Should my PS relate to my intellectual interests and potential major?**

Again, not necessarily. Cultural, literary or academic references (e.g., an intellectual or academic interest, connection to future major of study, etc.) can add to an essay, but if you have a compelling personal story, they are usually not needed.

**What do you mean when you say “show, don’t tell” or talk about “concrete” versus “abstract” language?**

A personal essay like the PS should be written more like a short story or a novel than an academic essay. This means it should include vivid, descriptive, and concrete language. When I use the word concrete, I am talking about using specific details.

An example of a specific and concrete sentence is: "I woke up at 6am to my phone blaring ‘Come as You Are’ by Nirvana. I'd had the same alarm for six years, and I still loved it." This is an exciting opening with interesting details that create a sense of a unique voice and personality and makes me want to keep reading.

An example of a non-concrete sentence on the same topic is: “I like to wake up early.” This sentence doesn’t give me any details and doesn’t have much personality; I feel like anyone could have written in it. I’m less inclined to keep reading and already less disposed to like the essay.

An example of an abstract sentence is: "I need to be true to myself." The use of a conventional idiom makes the sentence boring and vague—what does it mean for you to be true to yourself, in whatever context you’re discussing? I’m not sure. Again, I get the sense anyone could have written it.

A strong PS will need to strike a balance between concrete and abstract (but not cliché) language—between action and narrative (concrete) and reflection on that action (abstract).

**I don’t know how to begin my essay. Do you have any tips?**

We often encourage starting with a “framing anecdote”—a brief story that serves to set up the larger narrative of the essay. If you’d like to learn more about writing an anecdote, and about “showing, not telling,” please review the following links:

Written: <http://www.essayhell.com/2014/08/how-to-turn-a-real-life-moment-into-an-anecdote/>

Or, if you prefer video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-pC1jsoD0ns&feature=youtu.be>

If you think you will benefit from an outline, let us know as soon as we begin this process, and we can provide one.

**I’m a terrible procrastinator! Will that be a problem?**

Yes. It is crucial to give yourself enough time to write and revise your work, and we will push you to work on essays far in advance of deadlines. No matter how good of a writer you are, **thoughtful essays certainly can’t be completed in a night, weekend, or, in most cases, even a few weeks.** I cannot stress this enough.

**Will this be fun?**

Runners often talk about “type 1” and “type 2” fun. Type 1 fun is the kind that you generally think of—the kind of fun you actually experience in the moment, like laughing with friends or playing with your dog. Type 2 fun is the kind of fun that is not fun in the moment—like running a really hard race or writing an essay—but *is* fun in retrospect. The “fun” comes from looking back and saying, “Wow, that was crazy and tough and I did it.” Writing application is definitely “type 2” fun, even if you love to write.

This process is not always going to be easy, and will very likely cause you frustration, especially at first. But we’ve been doing this for a long time and can assure you those feelings are common. We trust that, with our guidance, you’ll uncover ideas, stories, and feelings you might not know existed. We’ll help you translate them into the language best understood by college admissions officers, and along the way, you’ll become a better storyteller, writer, and thinker. However, this won’t happen by magic. Though we encourage, and hope, you will be an active participant throughout this process, we ask that you trust our expertise and try to see through ideas and edits that you might not initially prefer, or even like, before trying another approach. Above all, do not take edits personally. Know that even professional writers go through a similar process—they get their sentences changed, holes poked in their ideas, things moved around, and major cuts suggested. It is not personal; it is a normal part of the writing process, and learning how to listen to critiques of your work and accept edits will make you a better writer and student in the long run. Finally: embrace the struggle! We’re confident you’ll thank us later…and maybe even, one day, see the “fun” in the process.

**Ok, fine, but I really, really like *my* versionbetter.**

This your essay, and of course you have final say. However, know that if you choose not to take our full feedback and guidance, there is a chance that you are missing an opportunity to craft essays that demonstrate your new, enhanced ability as a writer, and that choosing to “go your own way” could have a large impact on your applications overall. Remember that we don’t take pleasure in asking you to write about a topic or in a way you don’t like! We do it because we care deeply about helping you craft the best application possible; we want to help you appear, on the page, as the unique, interesting, smart person we know you to be from our interactions.