

Writing a College Essay

Activity 1. Prior to class, post the prompts (see below) at the front of the room, or prepare to project them. Do not tell students that they are the new prompts for the Common Application essay.

When students arrive, ask them to form two concentric circles, facing one another. During the activity, the students forming the inside circle remain still, while the students in the outside circle will travel to their left when given the signal. Explain to students that you are going to do a “speed-dating” activity.

Project or unveil the first prompt and tell students that they will talk about the topic with the person across from them for five minutes. Within that time, each student should play the role of speaker and listener. Set a timer for five minutes and signal that they should begin. Once time is up the outer circle rotates left. Unveil a new topic and begin the process again until students have discussed each topic, rotating to new discussion partners with each prompt. Then, ask students to return to their seats.

- Recount an incident or time when you experienced failure. How did it affect you, and what lessons did you learn?
- Reflect on a time when you challenged a belief or idea. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again?
- Describe a place or environment where you are perfectly content. What do you do or experience there, and why is it meaningful to you?
- Discuss an accomplishment or event, formal or informal, that marked your transition from childhood to adulthood within your culture, community, or family.

Open discussion by asking the following questions:

- Which of these topics did you find the easiest to discuss? Why?
- Which of these did you find difficult? Why?
- Which of these prompts did you want to continue talking (or writing) about?

Then, invite students to share a story.

Finally, share with students that these are the new essay topics for the common application essay and ask them what they think. Are these good topics? Is there something here for everyone? Do some help colleges get to know students better than others? Do they fuel or lessen anxiety about the college application process?

(retrieved from: http://learning.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/04/11/getting-personal-writing-college-essays-for-the-common-application/?_r=0)

Activity 2. Read the cartoons below. Based on them, discuss what the characteristics of a good essay are.



"I can't read a word of this essay of yours. Excellent work."



"Nice essay, Tom, your cut and paste skills are beyond reproach."

Activity 3. Now read the following essay and analyze it. Can you identify all the characteristics mentioned in the previous activity? Are there any other characteristics of a good essay that you would add to your list?

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"Mum, I'm gay."

The horrified look on her face is my biggest fear. She's lived her whole life battling one tragedy after another. She has been caged, staying in an unhappy marriage for the sake of her children.

And now to hear this from her only son. The words terrify her. She cannot comprehend the meaning of this. She just doesn't understand; is it something she did? Is it her fault? Maybe her children did need a father after all. Maybe she could have prevented this if she'd seen the signs.

Maybe she shouldn't have let him play with her *duppattas*, laughing away the concerns of her own mother.

Maybe she could have done something.

And I cry when I think of this. Because I know it may be true, even though it hasn't yet happened. I cry because she might love me less. At the unfairness of such love, based on such trivial criteria. But mostly, I cry because she might blame herself. Because it isn't her fault, if only she could understand. It's taken me years to comprehend, but it's not mine either.

I cannot really blame her. She is a Muslim. She is Pakistani. She was raised, conditioned, to hate me. What am I to say to that?

To distract myself, I fight. I volunteer at an LGBT foundation. I walk the streets, chanting for women's rights. I collaborate with the HRCF to arrange a minority rights conference at my school. I paint, I write, putting all my love, all my despair, all my thoughts onto paper. I cannot state that I am gay, so I fight for everybody else. And in that community, with those activists, I find peace. I find a history, I find lineage. In glitter, I trace my ancestors. I understand, finally, that love is made; relationships are built, not on blood, but on acceptance. Looking at those men and women, bold, brave, bright, I find my family. I realize it is our suffering that brings us together.

I think of my mother's suffering.

She too broke the rules. She is also an outcast. Against the wishes of her family, she became a doctor. Shocking society, she left a man she didn't love. Why do I look at her troubles negatively? She has transgressed as well, perhaps more than me. She would certainly understand. In our suffering, we are bound. With empty hands, we have no choice but to help each other; she and I. I underestimated my mother. Who am I to undermine her troubles? How dare I suggest she is like the rest of society when I know she isn't?

I imagine her, then, looking at me. Bemused. When I've made my big confession. "That's it?" she would say. And then she would walk off, leaving me beaming.

But even if she doesn't accept me, I have understood this: my existence is not based on one person. I have an entire tribe now, rights to fight for, slogans to shout. A whole family tree, waiting to be decked with rhinestones.

(retrived from <http://www.conncoll.edu/admission/apply/essays-that-worked/ahmad-ashraf-17-/>)

Activity 4. Now read the following checklist on how to write a good essay. Compare them to the characteristics you identified in the previous two activities. Is there anything you had not considered? Do you think the writer of the previous essay followed all these tips?

- Answer the question
- Be original
- Be yourself
- Don't thesaurize your composition

For some reason, students continue to think big words make good essays. Big words are fine, but only if they are used in the appropriate contexts with complex styles. Think Hemingway.

- Use imagery and clear, vivid prose

If you are not adept with imagery, you can write an excellent essay without it, but it's not easy. The application essay lends itself to imagery since the entire essay requires your experiences as supporting details. Appeal to the five senses of the admissions officers.

- Spend the most time on your introduction

Expect admissions officers to spend 1-2 minutes reading your essay. You must use your introduction to grab their interest from the beginning. You might even consider completely changing your introduction after writing your body paragraphs.

- Body paragraphs must relate to your introduction

Your introduction can be original, but cannot be silly. The paragraphs that follow must relate to your introduction.

- Use transition

Applicants continue to ignore transition to their own detriment. You must use transition within paragraphs and especially between paragraphs to preserve the logical flow of your essay. Transition is not limited to phrases like "as a result, in addition, while . . . , since . . . , etc." but includes repeating key words and progressing the idea. Transition provides the intellectual architecture to argument building.

- Conclusions are critical

The conclusion is your last chance to persuade the reader or impress upon them your qualifications. In the conclusion, avoid summary since the essay is rather short to begin with; the reader should not need to be reminded of what you wrote 300 words before. Also do not use stock phrases like "in conclusion, in summary, to conclude, etc."

- Do something else

Spend a week or so away from your draft to decide if you still consider your topic and approach worthwhile.

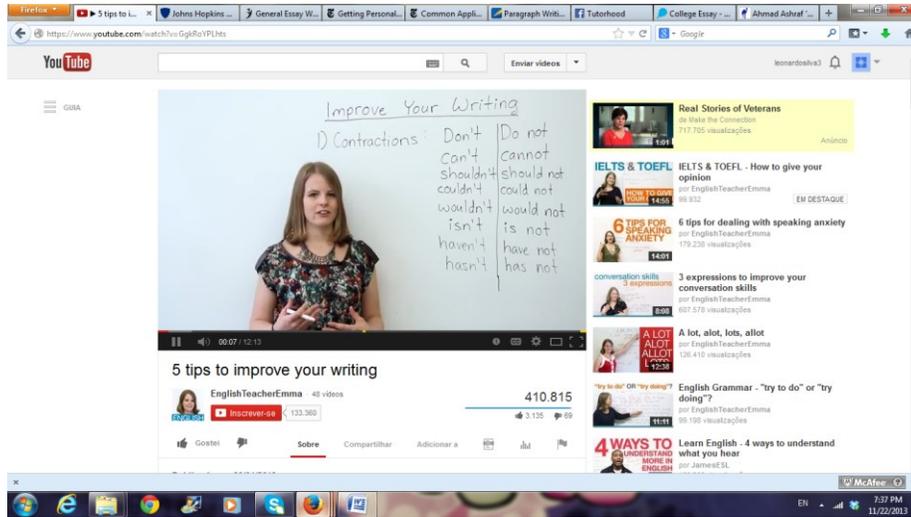
- Give your draft to others
- Revise, revise, revise
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Activity 5. Taking into consideration all the criteria and the tips on how to write a good essay, start thinking about your own text. Choose one of the topics from Activity 1 (the one you felt

more comfortable with) and create an **outline** for it. Remember to include your thesis statement and the supporting arguments. Bring it in the following class for peer review.

Activity 6. Now that you have received feedback from your peers on your outline, start writing the first version of your essay.

Activity 7. After writing the first version of your essay, watch the following video (<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GgkRoYPLhts>) with “5 tips to improve your college writing”. List them below.



Tip #1	
Tip #2	
Tip #3	
Tip #4	
Tip #5	

Do all of these tips apply to college essay writing? Then, have a look at your essay and decide whether they can apply to your text.

Activity 8. Now go back to Activity 4 and use the checklist to revise your essay. After editing your text, submit it to the teacher for feedback.