



Find Your College Essay Topic in an Hour

A clear, step-by-step guide to figuring out what to write your personal statement about

Overview

The personal statement is your chance to show colleges who you are beyond your grades and test scores. It's where you can highlight your perspective, values, and growth (the things a transcript can't capture). In the pages ahead, you'll learn how to:

- ✓ Identify the values and traits that define you
- ✓ Surface real-life moments that reveal those traits
- ✓ Avoid overused or weak essay topics
- ✓ Choose a story that's personal, clear, and worth telling

This guide will help you figure out what to write your essay about in about an hour, start to finish.

The Game Plan

5 connected brainstorming rounds to help you move from "I have no idea what to write about" to "This is the story I want to tell."

Define Your Values (10 minutes)

You'll begin by identifying the values that guide your choices and shape your identity. These will help you spot which stories are meaningful and worth writing about.

Reflect on What Matters to You (10 minutes)

You'll answer a few open-ended questions to uncover the patterns, moments, and quirks that show how your values show up in your daily life.

Recall Real Moments That Show Those Values (20 minutes)

Next you'll jot down a few personal memories or experiences. These will give you real material to build your essay from.

Test Drive Your Stories (20 minutes)

You'll pick one or two of your strongest moments and explore them in more detail. If one falls flat, you'll try another. No pressure to get it right on the first try.

✓ Choose Your Strongest Topic

Once you've explored a couple of your best moments, you'll use a short checklist to choose the story that feels the most true, clear, and worth writing. Then you're ready to start drafting.

Let's Get Started!



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Round 1: Define Your Values (10 minutes)

Goal: Identify 2 to 3 core values that reflect your personality and priorities.

Colleges don't want a list of achievements (that's what the Common App activities section is for). They want to understand who you are, what you care about, and how you think. That starts with your values.

Step 1: Select 5 values from this list that resonate the most. Feel free to pick your own if there's something important to you outside of this list

Curiosity • Creativity • Grit • Humor • Loyalty • Empathy • Optimism • Justice • Compassion •
Independence • Resilience • Open-mindedness • Leadership • Flexibility • Innovation • Integrity •
Kindness • Authenticity • Accountability • Initiative

Step 2: Narrow down your list to your top 3 values and write them below

Value #1 _____

Value #2 _____

Value #3 _____

**If you didn't print out this workbook, just remember your values.
You'll use them in future rounds!**

Ready for Round 2?



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Round 2: Reflect on What Matters to You (10 minutes)

Goal: Generate insights into your personality, habits, and inner world.

These reflections will help you identify what stories are worth telling. Answer at least 4 of the questions below, whichever stand out. Write freely. No pressure to be polished.

What do you lose track of time doing?

What makes you feel most like yourself?

What do your friends count on you for?

When have you felt deeply proud, even if no one noticed?

What do people misunderstand about you?

What's something you've changed your mind about?

Ready for Round 3?



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Round 3: Recall Real Moments (20 minutes)

Goal: List specific, lived experiences that could become compelling essay material.

These are the scenes and memories that will help you show your values in action. Think of 5 specific memories that reflect your values. You're not writing the full story yet. Just jot down the moment. Use these prompts:

A time something went wrong and you had to adapt

A time you made someone laugh or think

A time you helped someone, or someone helped you

A time you felt out of place but learned something

A moment that changed how you see yourself

A time you stood up for something

A decision you made that most people wouldn't

A small, specific moment that has always stuck with you

Ready for Round 4?



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Round 4: Test Drive Your Stories (20 minutes)

Goal: Explore at least two ideas in depth to see if they show your voice, values, and unique POV

Pick one moment from your Round 3 list and answer the questions below. If it doesn't lead anywhere useful, move on to another!

Questions to test your story:

- What happened?
- Who was there, and how did you feel?
- What made this moment matter?
- What changed because of it?
- What value does it show about you?
- What should a college learn about you from this?

Write this down in a notebook or on your computer!

Round 5: Lock in Your Topic

Goal: Choose your strongest story based on how clearly it reflects you and your values

For both of the stories you explored in Round 4, ask yourself these questions:

- ☒ Is it specific and personal? Could only I have written it?
- ☒ Is it about me and not someone else?
- ☒ Does it reflect one or more of my top values?
- ☒ Does it show change and growth?
- ☒ Does it reveal something not obvious from my resume?
- ☒ Am I actually interested in telling this story?

If you check most of these, you've got a strong foundation. You're ready to draft!

Bonus: check out essay topics to avoid on the next page!



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BONUS: Essay topics to avoid (or how to make them more meaningful)

Some topics are so common that admissions officers can predict the ending. The problem isn't necessarily the subject. It's that these stories often stop at the surface. Either avoid these topics entirely or use the advice below to flip a cliché into something meaningful:

The Sports Injury <i>"I tore my ACL, worked hard in rehab, and learned perseverance."</i> Skip it if: Your only takeaway is that you worked hard and bounced back. Use it if: Losing the sport changed your identity or made you rethink where you find purpose.	The Service Trip <i>"I went abroad and realized how privileged I am."</i> Skip it if: It ends with guilt or generic gratitude. Use it if: The experience actually changed how you act back home, not just how you feel.
Dead Grandparent Tribute <i>"Losing them taught me to value life."</i> Skip it if: The focus is more on <i>them</i> than on YOU. Use it if: Their influence shows up in a habit, belief, or choice you live with today	The "I Worked Hard" Story <i>"I failed, studied harder, and passed."</i> Skip it if: The lesson is just "don't give up." Use it if: You can go deeper on <i>why</i> you failed and how it changed the way you learn or define success.
The (Not So) Humble Brag <i>"I won nationals / started a nonprofit / built a business."</i> Skip it if: You're just rewriting your resume into essay format. Use it if: You can write about a moment of doubt, failure, or surprise that revealed something deeper.	The Generic Identity <i>"I'm [x], and that's shaped who I am."</i> Skip it if: It's a summary of challenges or pride with no real reflection. Use it if: You explore a tension, contradiction, or moment that pushed you to see your identity in a new way.

Next, check out our guide on writing a standout essay!