



College Essay Toolkit

Brainstorm · Draft · Polish · Shine

a Daeva Collective guide

Everything you need to write an essay that sounds like you, only better.

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01 · Brainstorming Prompts

The best college essays aren't about résumé highlights, they're about small, specific, real moments that reveal who you are. Use these prompts to dig deep.

Who Are You?

- ♥ What's a belief or opinion you hold that most people around you don't share?
- ♥ Describe a habit, quirk, or ritual that is completely uniquely you.
- ♥ What's something you know how to do that you've never been asked about on an application?
- ♥ If your bedroom (or backpack, or phone camera roll) could speak, what story would it tell about you?
- ♥ What role do you tend to play in a group? When did you notice this about yourself?

Formative Moments

- ♥ Describe a time you changed your mind about something important.
- ♥ What's a failure or mistake you're genuinely grateful for now?
- ♥ Recall a conversation that shifted how you see the world.
- ♥ Write about a 'small' moment, a single afternoon, a random Tuesday, that turned out to matter.
- ♥ When was the first time you felt out of place, and what did you do with that feeling?

Your World

- ♥ What does your family, community, or culture ask of you that you willingly carry, or have questioned?
- ♥ Describe a place (physical or not) where you feel most like yourself.
- ♥ What problem in your community do you think about even when no one asks you to?
- ♥ What's something you've taught yourself outside of school?

Unexpected Angles

- ♥ Pick an object you own and write its biography (how it connects to your story).
- ♥ If you could have dinner with one historical figure and one fictional character, what would you all argue about?
- ♥ What's a question you keep coming back to that you haven't answered yet?
- ♥ Rewrite a moment from your life from someone else's point of view.

◆ Brainstorming Tip

Set a 10-minute timer and free-write without editing. Weird, embarrassing, or 'too small' ideas are often the best ones. You can always cut, you can't cut what you haven't written.

02 · Essay Structure Templates

There's no single right structure, but these three patterns cover most great college essays. Pick the one that fits your story.

The Zoom In / Zoom Out

Best for: a single powerful scene that opens up into bigger reflection.

1. Hook	Drop us in the moment. Start mid-action or mid-thought. No "Ever since I was little..."
2. Scene	Stay in the moment. Sensory details. Show, don't tell. ~2–3 paragraphs.
3. Shift	Pull back to reflect. What were you thinking/feeling below the surface?
4. Connection	The bigger 'so what'. What did this reveal about you, your values, or how you move through the world?
5. Look Forward	Brief landing. A sentence or two anchoring this to who you're becoming.

The Before / After

Best for: a clear turning point, challenge overcome, or mindset shift.

1. Before	Set the stage. Who were you or what did you believe before this?
2. Inciting Moment	What changed? The event, discovery, or encounter that disrupted your 'before.'
3. During	The messy middle. Struggle, confusion, effort, growth. Be honest, avoid the tidy hero arc.
4. After	Where you landed. You don't need a bow. Just authentic reflection on what shifted.
5. Implication	Why it matters. Connect to your values, goals, or how you'll show up in college.

The Braided Essay

Best for: two or three intertwined threads (a passion + an identity, two contrasting worlds, etc.)

1. Thread A	Introduce first strand. One concrete story, image, or idea.
2. Thread B	Introduce second strand. A seemingly separate story or idea.
3. Thread A	Continue / deepen. More detail, raising a tension.
4. Thread B	Continue / deepen. The tension grows or an unexpected link appears.
5. Convergence	The threads braid: show how they're connected and what that reveals about you.

03 · Drafting Checklist

Before you get into editing mode, make sure your draft has these foundations.

- **Opening hook, no generic intro** — Your first sentence earns the reader's attention.
- **Specific, concrete details** — Names, places, senses, moments, not vague generalizations.
- **Your voice sounds like YOU** — Would your best friend recognize this as yours?
- **A clear emotional or intellectual journey** — Something changes, in you, in your understanding, in your approach.
- **You're the main character** — Not your coach, parent, or cause, YOU.
- **No résumé recapping** — Essay doesn't repeat what's already in your application.
- **Strong ending (not a summary)** — The last line lingers. It opens outward, not closes down.
- **Word count is in range** — Know your prompt's limit and stay within ~50 words.

◆ Drafting Reminder

Your first draft is not your last draft. Give yourself permission to write badly. The goal of a first draft is to have something to work with, not something to send.

04 · Editing & Polishing Checklist

Run through these once your draft feels 'done.' Then do it again.

Big Picture

- The essay answers the prompt (directly or indirectly)
- The 'so what' is clear, reader knows why this matters to you
- The essay shows, not just tells, your personality
- The narrative arc is coherent, beginning, middle, end (or intentional subversion of it)

Sentence Level

- Cut filler phrases: 'In conclusion', 'Throughout my life', 'Since as long as I can remember'
- Vary sentence length, long, then short. Short punches.
- Replace passive voice with active voice where possible, e.g. 'I was taught by my grandmother' → 'My grandmother taught me'
- Replace weak adverbs with stronger verbs, e.g. 'walked quickly' → 'strode'
- Trim 10%: cut every word that isn't earning its place

Read Aloud Check

- Read the whole essay out loud, you'll catch what your eyes miss
- Any sentence you stumble over: rewrite it
- Does it sound like you talking, not a formal essay?

Mechanics

- Spell-check run (especially proper nouns)
- Consistent tense throughout
- No contractions used inconsistently
- Dialogue punctuated correctly (if used)

05 · Final Submission Checklist

You're almost there! Don't let a small detail trip you up at the finish line.

- Confirm exact word/character count for this school's portal
- Pasted into the portal (not just uploaded), formatting may change
- Re-read the essay in the portal's text box, check for formatting breaks
- School name is correct if mentioned (VERY common mistake)
- Essay prompt matches the essay you wrote (double-check after switching between schools)
- A trusted adult has read the final version
- You've slept on it at least one night since your last big edit
- Submitted before the deadline (aim for 48 hours early)

◆ You've Got This

Admissions officers read thousands of essays. They're not looking for perfection, they're looking for a real person. Be specific. Be honest. Be you.

06 · Quick Tips & Reminders

On Topic Choice

There is no 'wrong' topic if you write about it with depth and honesty. Sports injuries, grandparents, and mission trips can work, if you go beyond the expected narrative.

On Vulnerability

You don't have to share trauma. But you do have to be honest. Emotional specificity, naming the real feeling, not the polished version, is what makes essays stick.

On Supplements

"Why This School" essays are researched, not generic. Name specific professors, programs, clubs, or ideas from the school, not things any school could say.

On Getting Feedback

Feedback is most useful at the big-picture stage, not the sentence level. Ask your reader: 'What did you learn about me? What felt vague or unconvincing?'

On Perfectionism

A slightly rough edge is better than a lifeless polish. The essay that sounds real will beat the essay that sounds perfect every time.

On Common App Prompt 7

'Topic of your choice' is a gift. Use it if none of the other prompts fit your story, don't force your best story into a worse prompt.

Believe in your story. It's the only one like it.

Made with love by Daeva Collective — a free, student-led community for research, debate, and leadership.

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