

## Writing the Essay I

### The **BIG** Idea

- What is the college essay and how can it help me get into college or land a job?

### AGENDA

Approx. 45 minutes

- I. Warm Up (5 minutes)
- II. Unit Introduction: An Essay About You (10 minutes)
- III. What Makes a Successful Essay? (15 minutes)
- IV. Types of Essay Questions (10 minutes)
- V. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

### MATERIALS

#### STUDENT HANDBOOK PAGES:

- Student Handbook page 10, Essay Excerpt
- Student Handbook pages 11-12, Sample Essays I
- Student Handbook page 13, What Makes a Strong Essay?
- Student Handbook pages 14-15, Sample Essay Questions

- Overhead and LCD projector

### OBJECTIVES

During this lesson, students will:

- Understand the purpose of a college essay and its relevance to job hunters as a tool to highlight their “unique selling proposition.”
- Identify characteristics of a quality essay by reviewing a successful example and an unsuccessful one.
- Identify the types of questions commonly asked in college essays.

## OVERVIEW

This lesson kicks off a five-week unit in which students complete a personal essay suitable for a college application. Students will review the main purpose of the essay and learn how writing one will benefit job seekers as well. In the first part of the lesson, students will read and compare two essays, one that is very strong and one that still needs work. Then they'll identify and discuss characteristics of a successful essay. Finally, they'll discuss different types of essay questions. Their assignment for the next lesson will be to find the essay questions for the colleges to which they're applying.

## PREPARATION

- List the day's **BIG IDEA**, vocabulary, and activities on the board.
- The following handouts need to be made into overhead transparencies or copied onto chart paper:
  - **Student Handbook page 10, Essay Excerpt**
  - **Student Handbook pages 11-12, Sample Essays I**
  - **Student Handbook page 13, What Makes a Strong Essay?**
  - **Student Handbook pages 14-15, Sample Essay Questions**
- Prior to facilitating this lesson, consult with your school counselor about developing college essays.

## VOCABULARY

**Unique selling proposition:** An advertising term borrowed by career counselors. The one thing that makes a person or product different from others.

## IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

Prior to beginning **Activity Step II, Unit Introduction**, you may wish to have students list what makes them anxious about writing a college essay. When discussing the activities for the upcoming weeks, you can illustrate how each lesson will address their concerns.

## ACTIVITY STEPS

### I. Warm Up (5 minutes)

1. [As students enter, ask them to read **Student Handbook page 10, Essay Excerpt**, in which they read a few paragraphs from a college essay. In the space provided, students characterize the writer, then underline the passages that led them to this conclusion.
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** What do these paragraphs say about this person? What kind of person do you think he is? Would you want this person as a friend? A roommate? Why? [Have volunteers share details or specific phrases that reflect the person's character. For example, the writer comes across as honest, admitting he was too shy to pull the bull's horns, or that he was jealous of his friends' big houses and fancy cars. He also seems thoughtful or insightful, appreciating what his parents sacrificed to move to America.]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** What you just read is part of an essay from a college application. As you can see, a good college essay doesn't repeat stuff that's in the application—it gives a look at who a person is: what's important to them; how they see the world; how they respond to challenges. The college essay describes you in a way that statistics—grades and test scores—cannot. It also highlights what makes you stand out from other applicants.

### II. Unit Introduction: An Essay About You (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Over the next five weeks, each of you is going to write your own essay. For those of you applying to college, you should be able to use this essay for applications that require them. But this essay will also be helpful for job hunters. Just as an admissions committee wants to know what makes you special, potential employees will want to know what sets you apart from other applicants. People in advertising call this your "unique selling proposition." Maybe you're dependable, motivated, or a real problem solver. For job seekers, writing this essay will be valuable preparation for any job interview.
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** If you're already feeling a little stressed out by the idea of writing an essay, take a deep breath. You'll have five weeks for this task so you'll have plenty of time to plan, write, and revise your essay. And you're not in this alone. We'll walk through the process together, so you'll have help from me and all your classmates. Here's a quick look at what we'll do over the next five weeks:
  - Today, we'll read two sample essays and pinpoint what makes a strong one. Then we'll look at the different types of essay questions you might encounter.

- Next week, you'll identify the one or two personal strengths you want to highlight in your essay, and think about evidence of these strengths in your life.
  - In week 3, you'll identify a single experience or event that reflects those strengths—in short, your essay topic. You'll brainstorm specific details about this event and write a description.
  - In week 4, we'll review techniques for writing and organizing essays and you'll write your drafts.
  - In week 5, we'll work in small groups to proofread each other's essays and make revisions based on this feedback.
3. [As a class, turn to **Portfolio pages 3-4, College Application Tracker** from previous lessons. Remind students that this will help them keep track of which colleges require essays.]

### III. What Makes a Successful Essay? (15 minutes)

1. [Have students turn to their **Student Handbook pages 11-12, Sample Essays I**. For each essay, students should underline the sentences that tell what the writer is really like.
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** What's different about these two essays? Which one highlighted more of the person's activities or accomplishments? Was this one more effective? Why or why not? Which essay gives you a better sense of this person? [Point out that the second essay does not include many details about the person. You don't get a sense of what this writer thinks and feels. Rather, the writer just repeats information that would be included in the application. Also, the second essay isn't focused – it's not clear what the applicant wants to say about himself or herself. Finally, it includes clichés and weak language.]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** I think we're starting to see what makes a good essay. [You may want to write this phrase on the board.] **Depth, not breadth!**

The point is, the more focused the essay, the stronger it is. Your essay is a chance to write your own story, rather than be defined by your transcript. A good essay doesn't try to say it all. Instead, it focuses on one event that highlights one positive quality, and provides evidence of that quality.

4. [Have students turn to their **Student Handbook page 13, What Makes a Strong Essay?** Review this page together, discussing the characteristics of an effective essay:
- **Focused:** Describes a single event or experience. Clearly answers the essay question.
  - **Convincing:** Supports claims you make about yourself with specific, strong details.

- **Descriptive:** Provides several vivid details about the experience – makes readers feel like they’re there.
- **Organized:** Starts with a strong opening; provides a clear purpose; clear, logical transitions; ends with strong conclusion.
- **Personal:** Shows clear, insightful thoughts and feelings; reflects personal strengths.
- **Easy to read:** The language is conversational and easy to read aloud; writing is clear.
- **Grammatically correct:** Does not contain grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.

#### IV. Types of Essay Questions (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** As you’ve seen, the point of a college essay is to tell about yourself. But colleges ask this question in different ways.
2. [Have students turn to **Student Handbook pages 14-15, Sample Essay Questions** and show the page on an overhead projector. With the class, review the three types of questions, examples, and the approach or strategy suggested for each one.]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** For next week, your assignment is to find the applications for the colleges you’re interested in and write down the essay questions for each college. For those of you not planning to apply to college at this point, you’ll consider either of two questions that you’ll hear in many job interviews: “Tell me about yourself.” Or “Why should we hire you?”

#### V. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now that we’ve read some essays and looked at different kinds of questions, I hope everyone’s getting excited to begin — or at least, a little more comfortable with the idea of writing essays.
2. [Wrap up with a brief class discussion:
  - How are you feeling about the college essay?
  - What did you learn today that makes you feel better about the essay?
  - What things are you still worried about?
  - What questions do you still have that we can answer in the coming weeks?]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Next week, you’ll start some serious self-exploration! You’ll think about some of your own strengths, then identify one or two you’d like to highlight in your essay. Then you’ll think about how you show these strengths through your life and actions.

That’s it for today. Remember to bring in your essay questions for next week.

## Essay Excerpt

Read this excerpt from a college essay and answer the questions below.

I was introduced to Wall Street when I was two. My parents and I had just arrived in New York from China to visit relatives. They took me to Wall Street and showed me the famous statue of the Charging Bull, a bronze giant ready to charge forward. They tried to get me to pull on his horns, which are supposed to be good luck, but I was a shy child, so all I would do is reach out and cautiously pat his nose.

A few years later, my family returned to New York, this time as new immigrants. I was nervous to move to the United States. I didn't want to leave my friends and settle in a foreign land. I didn't recognize that my parents were sacrificing much more than friends and familiar surroundings. They were giving up their homeland and their hard-won stable jobs, but they did it so that I could have better opportunities. "The schools are better in America," I heard them whisper to each other late at night.

Living in New York, my English improved quickly, while my parents' English lagged behind. While I flourished in school, my parents struggled. Instead of the office jobs that they had previously held, my father became a warehouse clerk and my mother went to work as a home health attendant. Although I didn't realize it at the time, it would have been much easier for my parents had we stayed in China. They would have kept their friends, they would have kept those office jobs, and they wouldn't have to face the difficulties of learning a new language.

Growing up in America, I was often jealous of my peers, those who lived in big houses and whose parents drove fancy cars. We lived in a small one-bedroom apartment and rode the subway for hours each day to get to work or school.

How would you describe the writer? \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

Underline the sentences that lead you to this conclusion.

## Sample Essays I

Read the two essays below. Underline the passages that reveal what the writer is really like – something you wouldn't know from his or her application.

### Essay #1

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There is a street in New York called Wall Street. It's very much a New York street: cars honk as they lurch and weave around each other, busy people race forward in thick streams along two strips of sidewalk, and food stands dot every other corner. Some of the stands hawk fragrant chicken halal sandwiches and others offer juicy kosher hot dogs and salted pretzels. But the real wonder of the street is in its soaring buildings that seem to hang from the sky.

I was introduced to Wall Street when I was two. My parents and I had just arrived in New York from China to visit relatives. They took me to Wall Street and showed me the famous statue of the Charging Bull, a bronze giant ready to charge forward. They tried to get me to pull on his horns, which are supposed to be good luck, but I was a shy child, so all I would do is reach out and cautiously pat his nose.

A few years later, my family returned to New York, this time as new immigrants. I was nervous to move to the United States. I didn't want to leave my friends and settle in a foreign land. I didn't recognize that my parents were sacrificing much more than friends and familiar surroundings. They were giving up their homeland and their hard-won stable jobs, but they did it so that I could have better opportunities. "The schools are better in America," I heard them whisper to each other late at night.

Now that we were living in New York, my English improved quickly, while my parents' English lagged behind. While I flourished in school, my parents struggled. Instead of the office jobs that they had previously held, my father became a warehouse clerk and my mother went to work as a home health attendant. Although I didn't realize it at the time, it would have been much easier for my parents had we stayed in China. They would have kept their friends, they would have kept those office jobs, and they wouldn't have to face the difficulties of learning a new language.

Growing up in America, I was often jealous of my peers, those who lived in big houses and whose parents drove fancy cars. We lived in a small one-bedroom apartment and rode the subway for hours each day to get to work or school. So while my middle school classmates dreamed of being firefighters and astronauts, I decided to work on Wall Street. I didn't really know what exactly it meant to work on Wall Street, but I saw characters on TV or real people on magazine covers who worked on Wall Street, and they always seem to have mansions in the Hamptons or Ferraris in the garage. I thought that if I made enough money, I could buy my parents a big house and a nice car. Then they wouldn't have to work anymore. They could retire and enjoy life.

As I entered high school, I felt I had a direction, a goal: I wanted to work on Wall Street and get rich. I joined Model UN and was delighted when I was assigned to the World Bank Committee — I saw it as an opportunity to hone my financial skills. We were supposed to debate about the food crisis in Africa and how to combat corruption within partner nations. As I researched and debated the issue, I began to realize what true poverty really was. It was where a piece of bread meant a meal for a family of eight, where babies cried for days without food to comfort them, where children's skin hung slack off their bones, where the loss of a family member to war and

strife was so common that tears no longer flowed. Yet here I was, in my own little world, wanting to get rich on Wall Street.

When I returned from the conference, Wall Street looked different to me. I saw cold concrete canyons, where workers walked with their backs hunched, their eyes to the ground as though they were carrying burdens that were almost too much for them to bear. Street-corner hawkers short-changed their customers, natives elbowed tourists out of their way, and the homeless slept on the subway platforms while the morning commuters hurried past. The giant skyscrapers no longer soared to the sky—they were obstacles blocking out the sun.

I spent the next several months trying to decide my next steps. I spoke to my parents and they smiled at my naïveté. They asked me to follow two rules: to do no evil and to be happy. I began to realize that my true passion lay with Model UN. I started to seriously consider how I could help others through similar work after college. I thought about the actual United Nations, where I would put the skills from Model UN to real use, to be able to help others and to solve the world's problems.

A few days ago, I walked to Wall Street again. The Charging Bull is still there. Once again, I rubbed his nose. But this time, I gave his horns a good, hard tug. Hopefully, good luck and guidance will follow.

## Essay #2

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As my high school career comes to a close, I reflect on my many accomplishments both in academics and in extracurricular activities. These achievements reveal my commitment to success and show that I am hard working, ambitious, a team leader, optimistic, detail-oriented, imaginative, modest, a people person, and ready for all the challenges that lie ahead.

First, I have worked hard in school to maintain a 3.8 GPA. I did not shy away from challenging courses, including three AP classes. My high SAT scores also reflect my commitment to academic excellence.

I am also proud of my achievements in sports. I play volleyball and basketball and am captain of both teams. I give it my all in practice and in competition. I take my position as team leader very seriously because I am representing my team and my school and people look up to me. I have received many sports awards, too.

School clubs are another area in which I have excelled. I am very active in the Spanish Club, the Prom Committee, and the Recycling Club. I am also the chairperson of the Double-Blue Club, which takes an exceeding amount of time and energy.

In addition to these numerous commitments, I have also held a part-time job for the past two years at our local ice cream shop. This job taught me people skills and shows that I am reliable and responsible.

In college, I will continue to excel in academics and I will be active out of the classroom too. It will be hard work, but life won't hand me success on a silver platter. I can achieve anything I set my mind to. I know that my accomplishments have prepared me for many of life's challenges.

## What Makes a Strong Essay?

All good college essays share common strengths. A good essay is

- **Focused:**  
Describes a single event or experience. Clearly answers the essay question.
- **Convincing:**  
Supports claims you make about yourself with specific, strong details.
- **Descriptive:**  
Provides several vivid details about the experience—makes readers feel like they're there.
- **Organized:**  
Starts with a strong opening; provides a clear purpose; clear, logical transitions; ends with strong conclusion.
- **Personal:**  
Shows clear, insightful thoughts and feelings; reflects personal strengths.
- **Easy to read:**  
The language is conversational and easy to read aloud; writing is clear.
- **Grammatically correct:**  
Does not contain grammatical, spelling, or punctuation errors.

## Sample Essay Questions

College applications tend to ask three types of questions:

### **Tell Us About Yourself**

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These questions ask to tell about who you are, a significant experience, or how you've become the person you are today. Examples:

- Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you. (Common Application)
- Identify a person or an experience that has had a significant influence on the formation of your values. (Marietta College, OH)
- Life is a process that challenges us to respond, grow and change. Select an experience or event that has challenged you this past year and describe its impact on you. (Binghamton University, SUNY)
- If we only had one space left in UB's freshman class, tell us why we should offer that space to you. Consider, for example, how your extra-curricular activities in high school and in your community have shaped you, what you have learned from those experiences, and how you will use those experiences to contribute to UB's campus community. (University of Buffalo, SUNY)

**Strategy:** While this is a great way to reveal your personality, be sure to keep your essay focused one or two qualities. Remember, you're telling about yourself, so keep the tone conversational.

### **Tell Us Why You Chose This College**

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These questions ask you to reflect on your choice of school or major. Examples:

- Describe what you expect from yourself as a student at Virginia Wesleyan College.
- Who or what influenced you to apply to Ohio Valley University?
- Why did you choose Hunter? Please share any information related to your decision to attend Hunter College, including academic experiences and interests, family history, financial considerations, etc. (Hunter College, CUNY, scholarship application)

**Strategy:** Make a clear connection between your goals and what the school offers. Be sure you've researched the college carefully so your essay reflects the programs and opportunities that the school actually provides.

### **Tell Us What You Think About...**

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These questions ask you to reflect on something beyond yourself or the school, such as a national issue, a famous person, a work of literature, or a quotation. Or it may tap into your creativity.

Examples:

- It has been said that high school is "four years of being misunderstood." What do you think? (Marietta College, OH)
- Respond to the statement, "We do not read great books, they read us." (Marietta College, OH)
- We are a global community. Choose a national or international issue and describe its importance to you. (Binghamton University, SUNY)
- Describe a character in fiction, a historical figure, or a creative work (as in art, music, science, etc.) that has had an influence on you, and explain that influence. (SUNY Fredonia)

**Strategy:** Your essay should reflect your creativity and the breadth of your knowledge. Be sure your essay is well informed and honest — it should reflect your views. Don't be afraid to be creative, but use common sense.

*Based on information from "The College Application Essay" by Sarah Myers McGinty.*

