AP Lit Summer Reading Part 1: The College Essay

- *Intro to the College Essay*: Pp 1-4
- *Choosing an Anecdote*: Pp 4-5
- *Showing not Telling*: Pp 5-7
- *Voice*: Pp 7-9
- *Dialogue*: Pp 9-11
- *Refining the Message*: Pp 11-14

Introduction to the College Essay:

**What Makes a Great Story? How do you tell one?**

How do I write a great college essay? Well, this is awkward, but as summer reading formatting had to be in pdf, instead of me embedding links to videos, I will provide video titles for you to search for.

- In this case, search for “Khan Academy Writing a strong college essay” and watch the video.

Prompts: Narrowing it down

*Read the prompts for the college essay. Highlight the ones that sound interesting to you.*

2020-2021 Common Application Essay Prompts:

1. Some students have a **background, identity, interest, or talent** that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when **you faced a challenge, setback, or failure**. How did it affect you, and **what did you learn from the experience?**
3. Reflect on a time **when you questioned** or **challenged** a **belief** or **idea**. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

4. Describe a **problem you've solved** or a **problem you'd like to solve**. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

5. Discuss an **accomplishment, event, or realization** that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

6. Describe a **topic, idea, or concept** you find so engaging (exciting) that it **makes you lose all track of time**. Why does it captivate (interest) you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.)

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**Choose a prompt**

The prompt you ultimately choose should be one that draws you in, attracts you. It should be one you can think of an anecdote to support.

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**Exemplar 1: read and think about what makes this a great college essay.**

[1]Crying, like money in a secret Swiss bank account, compounds itself. The littlest thing can get you going, but it just gets worse and worse, with no easy way to stop. A few years ago, during a particularly bad day of a rough stretch, I wound up crying on the bus. Not only was I distressed enough to cry, but now I was crying on
the bus like a moron. The harder I tried to pull myself together, the more I realized I was making a spectacle of myself on the bus, and the harder I ended up crying.

[2]Just after I had managed to dim stomach-hurting sobs into odd hiccupping noises, an older gentleman turned to face me and offered me his handkerchief, the old-fashioned fabric kind with antique lace on the edge. Equal parts humiliated and grateful, I sheepishly blew my nose. It was so sweet and awkward that I had to smile. As he stood to get off the bus, I – slightly fuzzy on the archaic rules of handkerchief etiquette – tried to give him back his now snotty handkerchief. He waved me off and, with a sympathetic expression, told me, “Be kind to yourself.” Although we shared just a tiny exchange, it made me feel massively less alone.

[3]What I didn’t realize then is that this happens all the time. Strangers on the bus give crying people smiles and tissues and sips of water and kind words and awkward back-pats. There’s no reason to comfort a stranger on the bus; there’s nothing in it for you. They won’t be able to repay you with comfort when next you need it. In fact, there’s a chance that they desperately want to be alone, and will just rebuff you or whimperingly try to tell you that they are okay, just so you’ll leave them alone.

[4]Nobody wants that, it only serves to make you feel bad. Still, people do comfort strangers on the bus, just because they worry about doing the right thing.

[5]The value of tiny things is obvious to me, because nobody ever has any idea how big of an impact they’ll have on someone. I imagine that to the guy who gave me a handkerchief, it was nothing; but to me, it’s a positive memory that’s lasted for years.

[6]Because of that fond memory, I make a point of being concerned about strangers, no matter how much this makes me a crazy person. I scramble to pick up pens and lipstick when a lawyerly-looking woman drops her bag; I whip out the Neosporin and Batman Band-Aids when a scruffy twenty-something scrapes his knee. I offer definitions and explanations to classmates who are stuck.

[7]If I see someone looking distressed or lost, I always ask if I can help. I do this because it’s decent, because being kind to strangers makes the world better, because it’s harder than being kind to people I know and that’s
bound to mean I'm doing something right, and because of the off-chance that someone out there has a fond memory of an odd-looking girl wearing a peacoat handing back a used tissue.

[8] Kindness, too, compounds itself. (527 words)

Think about and, if you want to, respond in writing to the questions below to help with your brainstorm for your college essay.

1. What can you guess about the writer after reading their essay?
2. What do you learn about the writer from their essay?
3. What is the most memorable about this essay?

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Choosing an Anecdote

What IS an anecdote?

To best illustrate, watch two videos:

2. What’s the most important element of a good story (The Atlantic)

Brainstorm your College Admissions Essay (CAE) anecdote

Jot down at least 5 ideas. Then use the questions to help you narrow your focus.

1. Idea or story #1
2. Idea or story #2
3. Idea or story #3
4. Idea or story #4
5. Idea or story #5

A. Which story would help a stranger understand the most about who you are?

B. Which story most shows you as you want to be?

C. In which story did you learn the most?

D. Which story or experience had the biggest impact on who you have become, or on what you want to do with your life?

Showing Not Telling

Free Write: think of the anecdote you chose for your college essay.

Mentally zoom in on that event. Write down a detailed description, choosing your words carefully to get across your observations, thoughts, and/or feelings.

What does it mean to show not tell?

To best illustrate, watch two videos:
Exemplar 2: read and think about what makes this a great example of showing not telling.

*From the essay “The Iguana in the Bathtub” by Anne Doten*

When the temperature dipped below 40, iguanas started falling from the trees. Small, sleek green iguanas; big iguanas as long as four feet from snout to tail, scales cresting gloriously from their heads; orange-and-green iguanas, their muscled, goose-pimpled arms resolving into sharp claws. Iguanas were everywhere: in the bushy areas surrounding canals, on sidewalks, in backyards, lying helpless among the fallen, rotting fruit of mango and orange trees.

*Think about the ways Doten shows rather than telling.*

1. What did you notice about the language? What words are surprising? What word or punctuation patterns did you notice, and how do they affect the description overall?

2. What words create an especially strong image? What do they cause you to picture?

3. Where do you think the essay will go from here? Why might all this “showing” be important?

*Now, start drafting your college essay.*

As you write, borrow strategies for showing and just plain good writing from Doten.

- Use lots of high quality adjectives and adverbs (not the first one you think of).
- Use complex sentences like the first sentence in the excerpt: When < >, < >.
- Use parallel structures like the last sentence of the excerpt.
- Use colons and semicolons.

Want more examples?
Search for “4 Standout Essays on Work, Money, and Class.”

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**Writer’s Voice**

**Ponder, then jot down ideas:**

1. When do you tend to feel the most comfortable writing? In other words, when do you think you sound most like yourself?

2. How would you describe your voice? What are its most notable and important qualities? For instance, do you use lots of slang? Do you love “big” words? Do you tend to go off on tangents when you talk? Do you stick to your point? Are you loud or quiet? Funny or serious? What makes your way of speaking and writing unique?

**What is writer’s voice anyway?**

To best illustrate, watch two videos:

1. What is Writer’s Voice (Amanda Werner).
2. How to Find your Writer’s Voice—Advice and Wisdom from 20 Authors

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**Exemplar 3: read and consider how the author’s voice comes through.**

From the essay “Intolerance and Love in Jamaica” by Bryan Washington
I went to the island for a family reunion. And while I’d already hit high school, I’d never seen Jamaica, so I flinched at the shouts once the airport came into view, and then again at all the clapping once we finally hit the tarmac, and I thought, So the hell what. We’ve landed. Big deal. But the lady sitting beside me squeezed my arm, as if to say, Isn’t this marvelous. She told me she was home. She told me I was home.

*Think about Washington’s voice here.*

1. What impression do you have of this person just from this first paragraph? What words or lines suggest that to you? Where do you feel you can “hear” the voice best?

*I read the second paragraph of Washington’s essay.*

I’d heard stories about the situation for queer folks in Jamaica, but they were hard to put in perspective — I had nothing to compare them with. I lived in a small town in Texas. I’d have sooner set myself on fire than come out. I’d never seen a pair of gay people, and I had yet to find them in books, so the notion of a happy ending felt pretty amorphous. Like some pot at the end of this camouflage rainbow.

*Again, think about Washington’s voice.*

1. How does the second paragraph add to your understanding of this narrator and how he sees the world?

*Continue drafting your college essay.*

*As you draft, consider these questions and techniques:*  
- What makes your point of view unique? For instance, how does your identity — your gender, race, ethnicity, religion, age, sexuality, where you live, what you’re interested in or anything else important about who you are — affect the way you see the world? How do any of these influence your “take” on the topic you’ve chosen?  
- Try telling your story out loud and recording it to capture your own unique use of words, as well as your cadence, the way you emphasize certain words or phrases, and how you naturally structure the story as you tell it. Again, tell it as honestly as you can.
• Have a family member read your piece. Ask them the following questions:
  ○ Does this sound like me?
  ○ Where does this essay capture my voice and personality the best

Want more examples?


Dialogue

Optional Dialogue activity: Choose one of the scenarios below and write a brief dialogue;

1. One character wants something and the other doesn’t.
2. The characters are in a fight.
3. The characters are avoiding talking about something.
4. The characters have just met and are getting to know each other.
5. The characters are experiencing something together — maybe they’re on a trip, cooking together, playing a game or at a party.

Tips for Writing Dialogue

To best illustrate, watch two videos:

1. Four Simple Rules for Writing Dialogue by Robert Wiersema
2. Quentin Tarantino Explains How He Writes Dialogue

Exemplar 4:
From the essay "The Missing-Piece Son" by Randa Jarrar

Excerpt #1
I don’t think anything would rattle the mother of a preteen boy quite like the words my 12-year-old uttered this spring: “Mom, we need to talk,” he said. “It’s something serious.” The reversal of roles; the need for him to address me. The “serious” part. These were enough, in the very short time it took to follow him to his bedroom, to completely freak me out. He’d just returned to Michigan after visiting his father in New York. Had something catastrophic happened while he was there? Had he done drugs or had sex? I hoped he’d just left his iPod on the plane.

Excerpt #2
“We should think about this,” I said.
“I’ve been thinking about it, Mom,” he said. “And I really want to.”
Don’t go! I thought.
“Well, then you should do it,” I said.
“Really, Mom? I can?”
Please don’t!
“Absolutely.”

Consider

1. What is the effect of varying spoken conversation with thoughts about the conversation?

2. What do you learn about the son solely through what he says and how he says it? Imagine that this piece was told from the son’s point of view instead, and we had access to his thoughts as he spoke. How might this piece change? What do you imagine some of those thoughts might be?

3. What else do you notice about how dialogue works in this story? Does it help address any of the questions you had after you tried writing your own?

Continue drafting your college essay.

As you draft, consider these questions and techniques:
- **NOTE:** It is okay to write dialogue that is not in English. However, you must translate it for a college admissions officer to fully understand your essay because they might not be bilingual.

- Are there places where you could tell your story more effectively through dialogue? Why? What can dialogue do in your piece that narration alone might not?

- Are there places where a conversation is best simply described, or where only a line or two is needed? Why? How can you make the dialogue you add have the most impact?

- Are there places where it might be useful to borrow the technique in “The Missing-Piece Son” and vary dialogue with the thoughts of a narrator? What could that add to the story?

**Want more examples?**

Search for “Arguing with God” (New York Times) and “Successful College Essay Examples from Top 25 Universities.”

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**The Message**

Reflection, also known as the message of your college essay, is an essential component without which your college essay will be less effective. Consider these ideas and questions in regard to your own anecdote/college essay:

1. My story matters because...
2. This experience made me realize that...
3. Looking back now, I see that...
4. What is the overarching message you want to get across in your college essay?
5. What do you want the college admissions officer who will read your essay to know about you?
Tips for Writing Reflection

To best illustrate, watch this video:

1. Taking your college essay to the next level

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Exemplar 5:

From the essay “The Monster of King's Island” by Christopher Bollen

The monsters of Southern Ohio had long wait lines and strict height requirements. But one behemoth in particular—a roller coaster called the Beast—served as a rite of passage for us kids of Cincinnati. Even before I saw the roller coaster, its infamy was scored in my mind by way of the Beast’s ubiquitous logo: two manacled claws straddling a railroad track that disappeared into a fiery hellhole.

It was a test of courage and bladder control that made watching a slasher film at a friend’s sleepover seem like a walk in the woods. (Full disclosure: At 8, walks in the woods frightened me, as did swimming pools and vans with sliding doors—in fact my childhood could be described as one extended panic attack kept in check by the far worse fear of social ridicule.) Every summer my family packed into our van and drove to our local amusement park, Kings Island. And every summer I was spared the horror of the world’s longest wooden roller coaster by being too short to clear Scooby-Doo’s outstretched paw in the park’s dubious measuring system of emotional and physical maturity.

But by the summer of 1984, my body had failed my innate survival instincts by growing beyond the 48-inch ride requirement. My older sister, Heather, a Beast veteran with lip-snagging braces, brought along her best friend, Traci. On the drive, I tried to calm myself with memories of benign park activities: the rainbow potato-sack slide or the Viking ship. Heather turned to me in the back seat. “I call hitting the Beast first.” I appreciated her biannual tightenings at the orthodontist.

“Are you O.K., Christopher?” my father asked as we waited in line at the Beast’s entrance. “We can skip it.” This might have been the moment I realized that clutching your stomach was an international sign of distress.

Heather and Traci rolled their eyes. “That wouldn’t be fair to Dad,” Heather said. “If you don’t go on, he can’t either.” I watched the line creep forward, filled with wiry young men with Steve Perry haircuts and women
embalmed in enough hair spray that even a rocket launcher wouldn’t disturb their perms. The prospect of fear was a Midwestern mating ritual.

The rickety, brown monster rose vertiginously through the trees. It looked like the Hells Angels had kidnapped Amish barn builders and forced them to erect a shrine of suicidal madness. By the time we reached the boarding station and I towered over Scooby, red cars returned with their shellshocked passengers. I felt the impulse to marry Scooby, to begin a life together on the platform where we would never separate. The teenage conductor grunted. “Chris, come on,” Heather snapped. I belted myself in, my knees nowhere close to touching the bar that was supposed to lock me in place. I just had time to say, “I don’t want to,” before the ride rocked forward.

The car ascended on a jittery chain that did the work of teeth-chattering for me, up a 112-foot peak, and all my brain could contemplate was the drop. My father patted my knee. Goodbye, life. Goodbye, third grade. *Boy who feared risks topples out of coaster.* As we summitted the crest, the world froze briefly, peacefully, and then we plunged. I tried to scream but the wind swept it back into my throat. We were falling a million-miles a second into a black tunnel, swooping on a current of metal and wood, and it wasn’t just the speed but the ride’s jerry-built epidermis that seemed to promise total detachment from the track. We banked turns so fast the landscape became a flip book of greenery and cement. As we shot toward another steep descent, I noticed Traci cringing with her eyes closed, Heather with her metal teeth gritted, her mascara watering and my father, a construction worker whom I had never observed more than mildly irritated, screaming with his back fillings on display.

A sense of joy overtook me, that we could all be scared out of our wits together. Maybe we were always frightened of what was coming, had been forever, but only now could express it in shrieks and tears. Fear was like a connective tissue even if our real connective tissue was sustaining whiplash. After all, that’s what the Beast offered: not death but four minutes of life strapped in and beyond the tether of its own control. The train threaded into the station. We climbed out, laughing dizzily, and I felt something commensurate to love: I had survived the monster, and all I wanted was to go back and be tossed around again.

Consider how Bollen reflects on his experience

1. What do you notice about this final paragraph? What are this narrator’s takeaways? How does he express them? Does it feel to you like a satisfying conclusion, one that helps you understand a larger meaning?
### Continue drafting your college essay.

As you draft, consider these questions and techniques:

- What is the overarching message you want to get across in your college essay?
- What do you want the college admissions officer who will read your essay to know about you?
- How does your anecdote reveal the message you want to get across?
  - (For example: how the anecdote of how I broke my arm on the first day of school but continued to turn in work reveals that I am tenacious and committed)
- Rewrite a section to distinguish clearly between what you thought at the time and what you think about it now.

### Want more examples?

Search for these essay examples: “What an Unemployed Millennial Learned at Summer Camp” by Joi Louviere (New York Times) and “An American in Mexico” by Alex Espinoza (New York Times).

Would you rather watch videos: “3 College Essays that Work and Don’t Suck” and “7 Great College Essay Tips to Help You Stand Out”

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**RUBRIC for COLLEGE ADMISSIONS ESSAY (CAE)**

**Student Name:** ________________________

**A. INTRODUCTION:** How clearly and cleverly does the writer capture the reader’s attention and introduce the narrative?
B. BODY PARAGRAPHS: Is content well organized with smooth transitions between ideas? Does it flow? Does author use details instead of generalizations?

C. CONCLUSION: Does the conclusion artfully follow from and thoughtfully reflects on what is experiences, observed, or resolved over the course of the college essay? Does it provide a finished feel to the essay? Does it satisfy?

D. WORD CHOICE: Does the author use words accurately and precisely? Does he/she use lively verbs and words that show instead of telling? Does he or she use rich sensory language, vivid description, and engaging dialogue

E. VOICE/TONE: Does the writer show his or her personality through his/he writing, specifically through expressing their thoughts and feelings? Is there a sense of lively engagement with the topic or is there a sense of bland drudgery? Is there enthusiasm? Passion? Feeling?

E. SENTENCE STRUCTURE: Did the author take care with the following: varying sentence length, beginnings, and structure? Do sentences flow?

F. PUNCTUATION, SPELLING, GRAMMAR: Does the paper reflect care in proofreading or sloppiness? Is there evidence of attention to detail? One point will be deducted for each error.

G. Did the writer revise effectively in line with directions given?

I. OVERALL IMPRESSION: Overall image of the paper. Is the whole greater than the sum of the parts or do the parts take away from the whole?
1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?

3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.

5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?

7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

*Use this Checklist to help you edit your essay before you submit it.*

**College Essay Checklist:**

_____ Word Count is between 250 and 650 words.

_____ The essay answers the prompt completely.
The writer uses **specific and interesting words** throughout, especially focusing on the **most appropriate active verbs**.

**Details** in the essay are **concrete, lively** and **interesting**.

**Dialogue** adds to the essay and advances the message.

The essay has a **clear structure** (beginning, middle and end).

There are **smooth transitions** between ideas and paragraphs.

All sentences are meaningful (language is **concise**).

The **essay stays focused** (no unnecessary tangents).

Writer’s **voice** and **tone are consistent** throughout the essay.

The **message or theme is clear**.

Each paragraph **develops the message or theme**.

The **audience learns** something specific **about the writer**.

No grammar or spelling errors. This includes sentence fragments; use them sparingly or not at all.

The essay shows that the **writer is a strong candidate** for college.

<Write your College Essay on a new Google or Word doc>