

Writing Your College Essay

Resources & materials from College Essay Guy at <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/>

Introduction

Q: How do I begin to write my essay

A: If you're reading this, you've already begun. In this guide you'll find some ideas on how to brainstorm and structure your essay.

Q: How long should my essay be?

A: It depends. Your main Common App essay can be up to 650 words (as of November 2013). Your UC essays will add up to 1,000 words combined, and your supplemental essays will vary.

Q: How many essays will I need to write?

A: Around 15 is average. These include the Common App, UC 1, UC 2, plus supplements, which number anywhere from 6-20, depending on the number of schools you apply to.

Q: What should my essay be about?

A: In a word, you.

Q: What are college admissions officers looking for?

They're looking for the answers to these three questions: ^{1}_{SEP}

Who is this person? ^{1}_{SEP}

Will this person contribute something of value to our campus? ^{1}_{SEP}

Can this person write?

Q: How do college admissions officers evaluate my essay?

A: Each school has its own criteria and different readers will prefer different elements. Michael Gulotta, former Senior Assistant Director of Admissions at USC, for example, has told me he most looks to the essay to assess a student's writing ability. But Rick Diaz (Regional Director of Undergrad Admissions at SMU) is less interested in writing ability and more interested in a student's story.

Q: So which is more important: your story or your writing skill?

A: Both are important. A good story, well told. That's your goal.

Q: When should I start writing my essay?

A: Today. Right now.

Q: How do I structure my essay?

A: You'll learn about two options on this site: [Narrative Structure](#) and [Montage Structure](#).

Q: How much do essays matter?

A: It depends on the college, but generally between 10%-30%. Essays tend to matter more for small schools, or schools who look at applications holistically.

Q: If my grades are bad, can I get into Harvard with a great essay?

A: Nope. Schools look at your GPA, course rigor and test scores more than anything. When you're being compared to other students with similar GPA/SAT scores, that's when the essays can make or break your chances. Harvard is great, but there are a lot of other awesome schools too. For a list of Colleges That Change Lives, Google "Colleges That Change Lives." (Really.)

Q: Can a bad college essay negatively affect my application?

A: Yes.

Brainstorming

In order for it to work, though, you'll need at least 15 minutes, and a quiet place. The exercise will require your full attention. You can use a computer or laptop, though I've discovered that students tend to have better results when they write this assignment by hand.

I want you to imagine a box.

In this box is a set of objects.

Imagine that each one is one of your essence objects.

What do I mean?

Each object represents one of your fundamental qualities.

Thus, each object is more than just an object.

For example, in my essence object box I would place **a green pen**.

Why a green pen? I always carry a green pen because I grade all my students' essays in green. Why green? Because when a student gets an essay back and it's covered in red marks it can tend to look bloody, like a battlefield. But if a student gets an essay back that's

covered in green it looks verdant. Also, red means "stop" (like a stoplight), but green says "keep going." And that's the essence I want to communicate to my students: keep going. The green pen in my essence object box is more than a green pen.

I would also place in my essence box a well-worn North Carolina Tarheel blue and white basketball. Why? I came home from the hospital wearing Carolina Blue, so I've been a Carolina fan, almost literally, since birth. I've spent more time on a basketball court than virtually anywhere else (which is why the ball is well-worn), and basketball also represents my connection with my dad: when I was a kid we'd watch Carolina games together and play basketball in the backyard for hours. This basketball is more than a basketball.

I would also have the blue Bible with my name etched on it in gold lettering that my grandma gave me when I was seven. (See how specific I'm getting?) For me, this particular Bible represents my having been raised in the Presbyterian Church. And my parents were missionaries, so you could imagine a lot of who I am today has been shaped by the Sunday morning services we attended at Weaverville Presbyterian Church, to which I would always carry my blue Bible. This Bible is more than a Bible.

You get the idea.

I want you to make a list of 20 objects. (Don't complain—you are infinitely complex and creative and could come up with a thousand—I'm asking for just 20.)

Important: Don't write what the objects mean to you as I have just done. I just want you to write the objects. So my list would begin like this:

- green Precise v5 extra fine rolling ball pen
- worn-down, rubber North Carolina basketball
- blue Bible with my name stitched on it in gold lettering
- bbq sauce
- annotated copy of The Brothers Karamazov
- friendship bracelet
- black and white composition notebook
- Amelie DVD
- Evanston Hockey t-shirt

...You get the idea.

Just write the objects with a couple details that describe each, no commentary needed yet.

If it helps, put on some music. Let your mind wander.

Questions to Help with the Objects Exercise

- What's something you never leave home without?
- What's a snack you crave?
- A food that reminds you of your family?
- A food that reminds you of home?
- A tradition that reminds you of home?
- What else reminds you of home?
- An object that represents your best friend?
- An object that represents your father? Your mother?
- Your grandparents, or lack thereof?
- Something you loved and lost?
- A toy you used to play with as a kid?
- Something that makes you laugh?
- A book you love? Best movie ever?
- Favorite guilty pleasure movie?
- An object that represents something abstract that you broke (a heart, a promise)?
- An object that represents a regret?
- A favorite gift you received? A favorite gift you gave?

- An object that represents a secret? (Don't worry, this stays between us.)
- Something about you no one else knows?
- A dream?
- Something you stole?
- Something you found?
- Something that makes you feel safe?
- The worst thing that ever happened to you?
- The best thing?
- The logo on your imaginary business card?
- The image you'd like carved into your tombstone?
- An object that represents: a smell you love, a smell you hate, a taste you love, a taste you hate, the sweetest sound in the world?
- The coolest thing about science?
- Something you forgot?
- Something old? Something new? Something borrowed? Something blue?
- An accident?
- Best thing you ever found in the street?
- Best money you ever spent?
- Your life lie? Your favorite object?
- Something from another country?
- Your favorite sentence?
- You'd cry if you lost this?
- An object that represents someone you'd like to know more about?
- Something you'll never get rid of?
- A bad habit?
- A perfect moment?
- A time you laughed so hard you cried?
- A time you cried so hard you laughed?
- An image you'll never forget?
- What they'd put in the museum of your life?
- A tattoo?
- The cover image on your first self-titled album?
- Three objects from your room?
- A near-death experience?
- A moment when you were so embarrassed you wanted to disappear?
- Recurring dream?
- Worst (actual) nightmare?
- When were you most afraid?
- If you had a clone, what would you have the clone do?
- First love?
- A time you were speechless?
- The moment you left childhood behind?
- A quotation you love?
- Your favorite photo?

Once you've written your list of essence objects...

Survey your list. Which essences are missing? Is every aspect of you there? Think more abstractly. Think of qualities not yet represented on the list. How could you phrase those qualities in terms of objects? For example, if you keep lists, perhaps a post-it note? Are you easily angered (lighter fluid)? Good at lots of things (a Swiss Army Knife)? Or sharp (an Exacto knife)?

Write down three more objects.

The Purpose of the Objects Exercise

T.S. Eliot once said: “The only way to express emotion in art is through an objective correlative.”

What’s an objective correlative? It’s an **object** to which you **correlate** emotions, memories, and complex meanings. It’s an object that’s more than an object.

Every object in your essence object box is an objective correlative for some important, complex part of you.

Now survey your list. Does it feel pretty familiar? It should.

Your college essay should feel that familiar.

Just to clarify, I’m not saying all of the objects on your list will end up in your final draft, but some of them might. And chances are good that you will write about the essences those objects represent.

The point is this: if you’ve taken the objects exercise seriously and have described a unique set of objects, you should have the material for a compelling personal statement. In fact, you should have the material for dozens of personal essays, but right now we’re just writing one.

The question of course is which one? Which essences or objects should you choose?

That’s the next step.

Values Exercise

See paper at end of packet.

Narrative Structure

What is a montage?

Montage is a technique that involves creating a new whole from separate fragments (pictures, words, music, etc.). In filmmaking, the montage effect is used to condense space and time so that information can be delivered in a more efficient way.

Take the classic “falling in love” montage, commonly used in romantic comedies. We don’t see every single interaction; instead, we see: he surprises her at work with flowers, they walk through the park, they dance in the rain, they pass an engagement ring store and she eyes a particular ring. You get the idea.

A few images tell the whole story. And you can use this technique for your essay.

But which essences should you choose? That’s up to you. (It’s art, remember, not science.)

Find a Focusing Lens

The Type D “Scrapbook” essays below employs what I call a focusing lens. You can’t discuss every single aspect of your life, but you can show us a few important points through a single lens or metaphor.

What type of focusing lens might you use to write your essay? A sport? A place? An art form? A hobby? Ask yourself: what’s something I know really well?

Tips for finding a good focusing lens

Make it visual. Storytelling is a visual medium. Use a lens that will help conjure images in the reader’s mind. I’ve had too many students try to write “soundtrack” or “mix-tape” essays in which their favorite songs provide the soundtrack for their lives. The problem with writing this type of essay, however, is that the reader can’t hear the music (and often doesn’t know or have the same emotional connection to the songs referenced).

Write what you know. Know how to cook? Use food. Play chess? Use that! Use your essence objects list (see below) for ideas.

Find a focusing lens that allows you to “go wide.” Use a metaphor, in other words, that will allow you to discuss several different aspects of who you are. Note how the scrapbooking lens allowed the writer to discuss more than two dozen different essences.

Narrative Structure

Here’s the structure that most American films use. Learning this may change the way you watch films (it did for me). It’s a structure as old as time and storytellers have been using it for thousands of years. Joseph Campbell called it the monomyth or Hero’s Journey. I’ll refer to as **narrative structure**. Its basic elements are:

- Status Quo
- Inciting Incident/Status Quo Change
- Raise the stakes
- Moment of Truth
- Outcome/New Status Quo

Status Quo

Life as is. The hero, our main character, is living his/her normal life.

Inciting Incident/Status Quo Change

One day, something happens. A boy discovers he is a wizard (Harry Potter). A girl falls down a rabbit hole (Alice in Wonderland). A murder happens (almost every mystery). You get the idea. In short, the hero is called to adventure.

Raising the Stakes

Things get more dangerous and important.

In small dramas, the events become more important inwardly, to our main characters’ personal lives, threatening to change them forever.

In action movies, events become more important outwardly, escalating until not only our characters’ lives are threatened, but the country, the world, then (in big budget films) Civilization as We Know It.

In some films, the character’s inward journey (what s/he must learn) and outward journey (what s/he must do) are intertwined. See: Star Wars, Avatar, The Dark Knight.

Moment of Truth

The climax. The moment of highest tension. The character must make the Ultimate Choice or fight the Ultimate Battle.

Will Beauty kiss the Beast and save his life? (Beauty and the Beast)

Will Neo realize—and accept—his role as The One before it’s too late? (The Matrix)

Will Frodo destroy the Ring and save Middle Earth? (Lord of the Rings)

Outcome/New Status Quo

The result.

Essay Samples

<p>A</p> <p>Student has faced significant challenges and knows what s/he wants to study.</p>	<p>B</p> <p>Student has not faced significant challenges, but does know what s/he wants to study.</p>
<p>C</p> <p>Student has faced significant challenges, but does not know what s/he wants to study.</p>	<p>D</p> <p>Student has not faced significant challenges and does not know what s/he wants to study.</p>

Sample Essay A: “With Debate” Essay

Written by a student who **has** faced significant challenges and **did know** what she wanted to study.

The clock was remarkably slow as I sat, legs tightly crossed, squirming at my desk. “Just raise your hand,” my mind pleaded, “ask.” But despite my urgent need to visit the restroom, I remained seated, begging time to move faster. You see, I was that type of kid to eat French Fries dry because I couldn’t confront the McDonalds cashier for some Heinz packets. I was also the type to sit crying in front of school instead of asking the office if it could check on my late ride. Essentially, I chose to struggle through a problem if the solution involved speaking out against it.

My diffidence was frustrating. My parents relied on me, the only one able to speak English, to guide them, and always anticipated the best from me. However, as calls for help grew, the more defunct I became. I felt that every move I made, it was a gamble between success and failure. For me, the fear of failure and disappointment far outweighed the possibility of triumph, so I took no action and chose to silently suffer under pressure.

Near meltdown, I knew something needed to be done. Mustering up the little courage I had, I sought ways to break out of my shell—without luck. Recreational art classes ended in three boring months. I gave up Self Defense after embarrassing myself in class. After-school band, library volunteering, and book clubs ended similarly. Continued effort yielded nothing. Disillusioned and wrung dry of ideas, I followed my mom’s advice and joined a debate club. As expected, the club only reaffirmed my self-doubt. Eye contact? Greater volume? No thanks.

But soon, the club moved on from “how to make a speech” lessons to the exploration of argumentation. We were taught to speak the language of Persuasion, and play the game of Debate. Eventually, I fell in love with it all.

By high school, I joined the school debate team, began socializing, and was even elected to head several clubs. I developed critical and analytical thinking skills, and learned how to think and speak spontaneously.

I became proud and confident. Moreover, I became eager to play my role in the family, and family relations strengthened. In fact, nowadays, my parents are interested in my school’s newest gossip.

Four years with debate, and now I’m the kid up at the white board; the kid leading discussions; and the kid standing up for her beliefs.

More importantly, I now confront issues instead of avoiding them. It is exciting to discover solutions to problems that affect others, as I was able to do as part of the 1st Place team for the 2010 United Nations Global Debates Program on climate change and poverty. I take a natural interest in global issues, and plan to become a foreign affairs analyst or diplomat by studying international affairs with a focus on national identity.

In particular, I am interested in the North-South Korean tension. What irreconcilable differences have prompted a civilization to separate? Policy implications remain vague, and sovereignty theories have their limits—how do we determine what compromises are to be made? And on a personal level, why did my grandfather have to flee from his destroyed North Korean hometown--and why does it matter?

I see a reflection of myself in the divide at the 38th parallel because I see one part isolating itself in defense to outside threats, and another part coming out to face the world as one of the fastest- developing nations. Just as my shy persona before debate and extroverted character after debate are both part of who I am, the Korean civilization is also one. And just as my parents expect much from me, the first of my family to attend college, I have grand expectations for this field of study. (*Word count: 630*)

The Type A Essay: Connecting Your Challenges to Your Future Career

- Note that this essay employs the Narrative Structure.
- If you’ve experienced some difficult things in life and you know what you want to study, you’re in good shape. Your challenge is this: how do you connect the challenges you’ve been through to the career you’d like to pursue?
- The answer: through their common **values**.

Here’s how to write the Type A essay:

- Go to the “Values” worksheet at the end of this document.
- Put a **star** beside ten values you developed as a result of the challenges you faced in life.
- What are the values of an excellent [your career here]? Put a check mark beside ten of those.
- Circle those that are in common.

- Ask yourself: what experiences in my life led me to develop that value? That's what you'll write about. If it feels like they should be told in a linear, narrative way (X happened, then Y, then Z), use the Narrative Structure. Chances are this will be the easiest way to tell your story.

Sample Essay B: "Machines" Essay

*Written by a student who **has not** faced significant challenges, but **did know** what he wanted to study.*

As a kid I was always curious. I was unafraid to ask questions and didn't worry how dumb they would make me sound. In second grade I enrolled in a summer science program and built a solar-powered oven that baked real cookies. I remember obsessing over the smallest details: Should I paint the oven black to absorb more heat? What about its shape? A spherical shape would allow for more volume, but would it trap heat as well as conventional rectangular ovens? Even then I was obsessed with the details of design. And it didn't stop in second grade.

A few years later I designed my first pair of shoes, working for hours to perfect each detail, including whether the laces should be mineral white or diamond white. Even then I sensed that minor differences in tonality could make a huge impact and that different colors could evoke different responses.

In high school I moved on to more advanced projects, teaching myself how to take apart, repair, and customize cell phones. Whether I was adjusting the flex cords that connect the IPS LCD to the iPhone motherboard, or replacing the vibrator motor, I loved discovering the many engineering feats Apple overcame in its efforts to combine form with function.

And once I obtained my driver's license, I began working on cars. Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.

My love of details applies to my schoolwork too.

I'm the math geek who marvels at the fundamental theorems of Calculus, or who sees beauty in $A=(s(s-a)(s-b)(s-c))^{1/2}$. Again, it's in the details: one bracket off or one digit missing and the whole equation collapses. And details are more than details, they can mean the difference between negative and positive infinity, an impossible range of solutions.

I also love sharing this appreciation with others and have taken it upon myself to personally eradicate mathonumophobiconfundosis, my Calculus teacher's term for "extreme fear of Math." A small group of other students and I have devoted our after-school time to tutoring our peers in everything from Pre-Algebra to AP Calculus B/C and I believe my fluency in Hebrew and Farsi has helped me connect with some of my school's Israeli and Iranian students. There's nothing better than seeing a student solve a difficult problem without me saying anything.

You probably think I want to be a designer. Or perhaps an engineer?

Wrong. Well, kind of.

Actually, I want to study Endodontics, which is (I'll save you the Wikipedia look-up) a branch of dentistry that deals with the tooth pulp and the tissues surrounding the root of a tooth. As an Endodontist, I'll be working to repair damaged teeth by performing precision root canals and implementing dental crowns. Sound exciting? It is to me.

The fact is, it's not unlike the work I've been doing repairing cellphone circuits and modifying cars, though there is one small difference. In the future I'll still be working to repair machines, but this machine is one of the most sophisticated machines ever created: the human body. Here, my obsession with details will be as crucial as ever. A one millimeter difference can mean the difference between a successful root canal and a lawsuit.

The question is: will the toothbrushes I hand out be mineral white or diamond white? (Word count: 598)

The Type B Essay: Writing Your Essay Backwards

- Note that this essay employs the Montage Structure.
- If you know what you want to study but did not experience significant challenges, you're going to reverse engineer your essay. Here's what I mean:

- **PART ONE: Essential Qualities**

- At the top of a blank sheet of paper in the center of the page write down the name of the career you're likely to pursue.
- Underneath that, on the right side, write "Qualities of an excellent [Write your career here: doctor/teacher/businessperson, etc.]."
- Make a list of the qualities necessary to excel in whichever field you've chosen. If, for example, you want to study business, you might consider "ability to work well with others" and "leadership skills" on your list.
- If you're having trouble coming up with a list, refer to the "Values" sheet at the end of this document.
- List at least five qualities along the right side of the paper. This is your "tell" column.

- **PART TWO: How I've Demonstrated these Qualities in My Life**

- On the left side of your page write at the top "How I've Demonstrated These Qualities in My Life."
- For each quality in your "tell" column, write down a specific moment/example from your life that SHOWS that you have developed this quality. (For example, if you wrote "ability to work well with others" in your right hand column, write in the left hand column a specific instance that shows you work well with others—the time you worked with a large group to organize the Dance Marathon at your school, for example. Or if you've written "good listener" in the right hand column you might describe how while volunteering at the hospital you found that the patients often felt comfortable sharing with you their life stories with you.)
- Keep going until the left hand column is filled with examples that show the qualities that you tell in the right hand column. Remember: the left hand column will be "show" and the right hand column will be "tell."
- Example:

- **How I've Demonstrated These Qualities**

- After-school math tutoring
- Designing my own shoes
- Taking apart machines?
- Always asked questions as a kid

- **Qualities of a Great Endodontist**

- Desire to help others
- Detail focused
- Interested in how human body works
- Curiosity

Write one paragraph on each element on the left hand column (this is your show). Don't reveal (tell) the qualities in the right hand column until the last or second to last paragraph.

Sample Essay C: The "Raising Anthony" Essay

*Written by a student who **did** face challenges, but **did not know** what she wanted to study.*

At age three, I was separated from my mother. The court gave full custody of both my baby brother and me to my father. Of course, at my young age, I had no clue what was going on. However, it did not take me long to realize that life with my father would not be without its difficulties.

My brother, Anthony, was eleven months old when my father placed us in the hands of our first babysitter. I remember being confused at first, wondering where my father had gone and when he would be back, but after a while, I became accustomed to this routine of absence and the never ending babysitters that filled in for him. These strangers consisted of college students, chain-smokers, senile women, and foreigners—all were technically adults, but not one was a suitable substitute for a parent. When my father was home, he still seemed absent; he was distant both physically and emotionally. He was busy bouncing from one girlfriend to the next, sleeping in until 1:30 in the afternoon, and sitting on the couch watching television. He took us out to restaurants every night and wasted the money he earned on expensive dinners, his current girlfriend, and liquor. This continued for ten years.

Legally, we had all the necessities to survive, but in truth our home was devoid of structure. Schoolwork went unchecked. Bedtimes were unregulated. Dust accumulated in thick layers on the paperwork that overflowed on the dining table. Often times, Anthony and I would spend hours waiting at school for someone to pick us up, and most of our dinners were served well past eleven at night. Consequentially, and quite unwittingly, I shed my childhood and assumed the role of "parent" for Anthony before my seventh birthday. I memorized the routes we took to school and led Anthony home myself. I watched professional chefs on PBS and learned how to cook basic meals for two. Unfortunately, as I progressively developed into the parent, Anthony took advantage of our lack of true authority and grew into the epitome of a problem child. He became unruly, and his behavior soon bled into his school life. His

grades suffered and he seemed to act out more often. His rash temper continued to grow until one day the school called our home because he had tried to throw a chair at his teacher.

Anthony was the only kindergartner in our school's history to be suspended. The school counselor recommended that when my father was in town we attend therapy as a family. But that accomplished nothing—my father's initial attempts to implement authority devolved quickly into apathy, and then he was traveling again. I, on the other hand, would not give up so easily. I became the watchful eye and mentor that Anthony and I both needed.

I soaked in the parenting videos that our family counselor had given my dad. I explained to Anthony why a structured lifestyle is important and why retribution is needed for one's misdeeds. To further instill self-discipline in him, I would have him formulate his own penalties. I also began to follow up on his schoolwork by contacting his teachers. On one particularly hopeful afternoon I even tried to introduce him to books that I had read—but I learned I can't win every battle. I wasn't satisfied with just giving a fish to my little brother; I wanted to teach him how to cast lines himself and learn the tools of self-reliance. Looking back at my hectic childhood, I am grateful for the insight it afforded me, and I am grateful for the effect my little brother had on me.

Inadvertently, by raising Anthony I ended up raising myself. Living with my unreliable father and reliant younger brother gave me the need and incentive to find myself and to mature quickly. At a very early age I became resourceful, independent, and responsible. It makes me proud to know that I single-handedly raised Anthony and myself. I now know that I can face any challenge with confidence. Even if I don't succeed, I know I will be stronger just for trying. (*Word count: 690*)

The Type C Essay: Use the Narrative Structure and End with the Values

- Note that this essay employs the Narrative Structure.
- Some students have been through some serious challenges. These may include: the death of a parent or best friend crossing the US-Mexico border in the middle of the night having to learn English while adapting to a new culture taking on huge responsibilities at home due to either absent, ill or overworked parents
- If any of these things apply to you, here's a way you might be able to apply the narrative structure to your story. Answer the following three questions:
 - What's the challenge I faced? (25% of essay)
 - What did I do about it? (50% of essay)
 - How did this make me a better person? (25% of essay)
- **The Difficulty I Faced (The Challenge) 25% of essay**
 - Important note: though you **can** use the phrases below, I'd highly recommend you use your own words. (Or you can use these sentences to get you started and then re-phrase them in your own way.) Originality wins.
 - **Paragraph 1:** My life was forever changed when . . .
 - **Paragraph 2:** To make matters worse . . .
 - Transition sentences (the lowest point of the story):
 - Sentence 1 (the breaking point): The toughest part came when . . .
 - Sentence 2 (the turning point): I realized I had to do something.
- **What I Did About It (The Work I Put In) 50% of essay**
 - **Paragraph 3:** So I started . . . (Describe the specific things you did to make things better.)
 - **Paragraph 4: I also . . .** (What else did you do? Describe the specifics here.)
 - Note: In these two paragraphs, build these from smallest to largest. (Example: "I started volunteering to do more chores around the house" should come before "I started my own club at school.")
 - Transition sentence (the highest point of the story): Give one concrete detail/image that clearly shows that things got better. (Example: "I got straight As for the first time ever" or "My family now sits around the table laughing like we used to.")
 - Note: This is the "stand up and cheer" moment in the movie—or essay.
- **How This Ultimately Made Me a Better Person (The Result) 25% of essay**
 - **Paragraph 5:** Turn each of the difficulties into a strength. (Example: Having to balance school work, plus chores, plus a job taught me the value of time management.) Note: If you need help on this last part, use the "What do I value?" exercise.

Sample Essay D: The "Scrapbook" Essay

*This essay was written by a student who **did not** face challenges, and **did not know** what she wanted to study.*

I look at the ticking, white clock: it's eleven at night, my primetime. I clear the carpet of the Sony camera charger, the faded Levi's, and last week's Statistics homework. Having prepared my work space, I pull out the big, blue box and select two 12 by 12 crème sheets of paper. The layouts of the pages are already imprinted in my mind, so I simply draw them on scratch paper. Now I can really begin.

Cutting the first photograph, I make sure to leave a quarter inch border. I then paste it onto a polka-dotted green paper with a glue stick. For a sophisticated touch, I use needle and thread to sew the papers together. Loads of snipping and pasting later, the clock reads three in the morning. I look down at the final product, a full spread of photographs and cut-out shapes. As usual, I feel an overwhelming sense of pride as I brush my fingers over the crisp papers and the glossy photographs. For me, the act of taking pieces of my life and putting them together on a page is my way of organizing remnants of my past to make something whole and complete. This particular project is the most valuable scrapbook I have ever made: the scrapbook of my life.

In the center of the first page are the words MY WORLD in periwinkle letters. The entire left side I have dedicated to the people in my life. All four of my Korean grandparents sit in the top corner; they are side by side on a sofa for my first birthday –my ddol. Underneath them are my seven cousins from my mom's side. They freeze, trying not to let go of their overwhelming laughter while they play "red light, green light" at O' Melveney Park, three miles up the hill behind my house. Meanwhile, my Texas cousins watch Daniel, the youngest, throw autumn leaves into the air that someone had spent hours raking up. To the right, my school peers and I miserably pose for our history teacher who could not resist taking a picture when he saw our droopy faces the morning of our first AP exam. The biggest photograph, of course, is that of my family, huddled in front of the fireplace while drinking my brother's hot cocoa and listening to the pitter patter of rain outside our window.

I move over to the right side of the page. At the top, I have neatly sewn on three items. The first is a page of a Cambodian Bible that was given to each of the soldiers at a military base where I taught English. Beneath it is the picture of my Guatemalan girls and me sitting on the dirt ground while we devour arroz con pollo, red sauce slobbered all over our lips. I reread the third item, a short note that a student at a rural elementary school in Korea had struggled to write in her broken English. I lightly touch the little chain with a dangling letter E included with the note. Moving to the lower portion of the page, I see the photo of the shelf with all my ceramic projects glazed in vibrant hues. With great pride, I have added a clipping of my page from the Mirror, our school newspaper, next to the ticket stubs for Wicked from my date with Dad. I make sure to include a photo of my first scrapbook page of the visit to Hearst Castle in fifth grade.

After proudly looking at each detail, I turn to the next page, which I've labeled: AND BEYOND. Unlike the previous one, this page is not cluttered or crowded. There is my college diploma with the major listed as International Relations; however, the name of the school is obscure. A miniature map covers nearly half of the paper with numerous red stickers pinpointing locations all over the world, but I cannot recognize the countries' names. The remainder of the page is a series of frames and borders with simple captions underneath. Without the photographs, the descriptions are cryptic.

For now, that second page is incomplete because I have no precise itinerary for my future. The red flags on the map represent the places I will travel to, possibly to teach English like I did in Cambodia or to do charity work with children like I did in Guatemala. As for the empty frames, I hope to fill them with the people I will meet: a family of my own and the families I desire to help, through a career I have yet to decide. Until I am able to do all that, I can prepare. I am in the process of making the layout and gathering the materials so that I can start piecing together the next part, the next page of my life's scrapbook. (*Word count: 809*)

Analysis of the Type D Essay

- **Note that this essay employs the Montage Structure.**
- This type of essay can be one of the most difficult to write. Why? Because:
 - a.) if you don't have particular challenges to discuss you might wonder, "How do I start?"
 - b.) if you don't know what you want to study you might wonder, "How should I finish?"
- First of all, let me say this: if you have not experienced significant challenges in your life, great! Congratulations on having had a pretty awesome life so far. Don't be ashamed of that.
- Second: if you don't know what you want to study, congratulations again! Many people at 17 don't know what they want to study. And many others still don't. You have so much time to decide--or you can just never decide. Many of the most successful people I know still haven't decided what they want to be when they grow up.
- If you find yourself in this situation, here are some ways of generating content for your essay:
 - **Identify a few things that are important to you.**
 - How? Do the Objects Exercise and the Values Exercise.
 - Why? So you'll have some stuff to write about.

- Broadly speaking, the Objects Exercise will provide material for the first half of your essay and the Values Exercise will give you the material for the second half.
- Note for example how in the first two-thirds of the Scrapbook Essay (above) the writer mentions more than 20 objects (or in this case images), each of which reveals something about her: the necklace with the dangling letter “E” from a former student, for example, the arroz con pollo sauce all over her lips, and the large photo of her family by the fireplace listening to the rain. Then in the final paragraphs she identifies what they represent to her: the desire to perhaps one day teach, travel, help others, have a family.
- Taking this as a model, here’s a tip: show first, then tell. Give us the movie first, then wait ‘til the end to tell us what it means. (And there is some debate by the way on whether a student should “tell” at all at the end--some students choose to only show in their essays. While it’s possible to only show in your essay and not have a “moral of the story” at the end, I think there’s a lot to be said for offering a little insight at the end and giving a few examples of things you might be pursue in life.)
- “But how do I do this?” you may be wondering. “Should I just randomly write about stuff that I like for the first half and then for the last paragraph name the values that are important to me?”
- Yes, kind of.
- But your details will seem less random if you can...
- **Find a focusing lens.**
 - What’s a focusing lens? It’s a device (like scrapbooking) that allows you to frame the details you’re choosing to show. This student chose to create the scrapbook of her life. But there are many other frames you can use to set up your montage. Maybe it’s a series of flashbacks while you’re running a race. Maybe you detail the five biggest mistakes you’ve ever made. Maybe how the four elements tell your life story. The sky’s the limit.
 - Another thing that will help your essay feel less random is if you...
- **Include a thesis at the end of the first paragraph.**
I know, I know, you thought you were only supposed to write a thesis on your AP Lang paper. Not so. Can you find the thesis in the Scrapbook essay above?
- (Wait for it...)
- It’s this line: For me, the act of taking pieces of my life and putting them together on a page is my way of organizing remnants of my past to make something whole and complete.
 - Why is this a good idea? Because it lets us know that you’re guiding us. That you know what you’re doing. Just to make it extra clear, she sets up the details to come with this sentence:
 - This particular project is the most valuable scrapbook I have ever made: the scrapbook of my life. Super clear.
 - I once had a student write about the five families he lived with over two years as a foreign exchange student.
 - So here’s a hint: If you’ve got a good solid objects list, you should have all the content you need to write the first ⅔ of your essay. And if you’ve picked 3-5 values that really mean something to you, that’s good material for your ending.
 - The art of the college essay is figuring out how your life experiences (represented by the essence objects) led you to develop your most important values. Simple, huh?
- Final note: this is not the **only** way to write your essay, but it is a way. Give it a shot.

2023-2024 Common Application Essay Prompts

- 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.
- 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?
- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
- Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
- 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?
- 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.