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# The Great College Essay Project: Write Your Way In

by Kyley Pulphus, 826  
New Orleans

GRADES 11–12

**TYPE**  
NARRATIVE

**COMMITMENT**  
1 SESSION: 2 HOURS,  
30 MINUTES

**PRESENTED BY**  
**826 NATIONAL AND**  
**REACH HIGHER**

In this lesson, college-bound juniors and seniors will write compelling personal statements for consideration for college admissions. You will support students as they brainstorm and develop an excellent rough draft.

This lesson is appropriate for students who are starting from scratch on their college or scholarship essay. Common App prompts are provided in the student packet, included in the lesson download, for those applying through that resource. Students may bring additional prompts for which they need support.

## **SESSION:**

### **YOU WILL NEED**

- The Great College Essay Project: Write Your Way In Student Packet — Handouts
- The Great College Essay Project: Write Your Way In Presentation — Slideshow
- Computer and projector (if showing the slideshow)

• Computers or paper for students to write

## **HOW TO BEGIN (5 - 10 MINUTES)**

Welcome students and begin by talking about the purpose of the day: to ensure that students leave with a first draft of a high-quality, compelling personal statement to submit to colleges for admissions consideration. If you have enlisted other staff or volunteers to support writers through the writing process, make time for introductions as well.

Explain that **there are many ways to write a compelling personal statement**, not just one, and the method that students will use today is both an effective and easy approach for a variety of prompts.

## **STEP 1 (10 MINUTES )**

### **Student Interviews**

First, get students ready to write about themselves using the student interview questions provided on the accompanying lesson handouts. Students will first answer a series of questions about their lives. The questions are many and varied, giving students an array of topics that could inspire compelling writing. For instance, a nickname could reveal an important background or identity. The last thing posted on social media could be a problem they wished could be solved. Students should complete as many of the questions as possible. As 10 minutes will go quickly, encourage students to focus on only those questions that really resonate with them and to keep their pens and pencils moving the entire time.

## **STEP 2 (15 MINUTES)**

### **Start with A Story: Personal Connection to a Piece**

Everyone loves a good story, but what kind of story should you tell? College admissions officers want a clear picture of who is applying, and people often write best when they have a personal, meaningful connection to the subject matter. Tell students:

*“After admissions counselors read your essay, you want them to feel definitively that you are a great fit for their school. They are reading hundreds and hundreds of essays. How will you stand out? Make them laugh, make them cry, make them feel something.”*

Then, read the beginning of the sample personal statement. Prompt students to notice the strengths of Kelly’s essay. Discuss what stood out to them and pinpoint how they responded as a reader: *Where does Kelly get our attention? How does she do it? Where does she paint a clear picture of who she is? How does she make us feel?*

Tell students that they, too, will start with a story. Remind them that their interview responses may provide inspiration and material for a story they want to write about. Ask students to use these responses, along with the prompt they wish to respond to, to narrow in on the story they want to tell.

### **STEP 3 (20-25 MINUTES)**

#### **Independent Writing**

Students will draft their personal story. As they write, they should keep the following in mind. They should:

- Write about ONE important and interesting moment. *Reinforce that this moment doesn't have to be grand, or even particularly unique. The key thing is that they zero in on a small moment in their lives that they feel strongly about.*
- Write in ways that gets the reader to picture what was happening, using clear descriptions, telling dialogue, action, and thinking.

#### **STEP 4 (10 MINUTES)**

##### **Making It Fit: How Does the Story Relate?**

A story alone does not meet the requirements of college admissions essays. We must also show how the story relates to the prompt, and connecting the two will most likely be the largest part of the essay. To illustrate this point, take a volunteer or two to read the middle of Kelly's essay out loud. As a group, discuss strengths and weaknesses.

After students offer a few ideas for strengths and weaknesses, ask them to identify where in the middle portion of the essay Kelly clearly connects the story to her purpose and career path. How does her initial story in the beginning connect with her career path? What words, transitions, or other devices does Kelly use to connect the dots? Where does her voice come through?

#### **STEP 5 (20 - 25 MINUTES)**

##### **Independent Writing**

Students will write the second part of their essay keeping the following in mind. They should:

- Show how the story relates to the prompt
- Answer the prompt with one or more reasons
- Use transitions to help flow from one part of the writing to another
  - “I share this story because...”
  - “This is why...”

## **STEP 6 (20 MINUTES)**

### **“I Am the Greatest”**

Finishing strong is just as important as starting strong. The last words of the essay are very powerful; it is what you leave the admissions team with, and it should make them feel like you deserve a spot.

Though it may feel weird to talk highly about yourself, it’s OK! We can learn from the boxer Muhammad Ali who was always very good about owning his worth. Share the following quotes with students:

“I am the greatest. I said that even before I knew I was. I figured that if I said it enough, I would convince the world that I really was the greatest.” – Muhammad Ali

“When will they ever have another fighter who writes poems, predicts rounds, beats everybody, makes people laugh, makes people cry, and is as tall and extra pretty as me? In the history of the world and from the beginning of time, there’s never been another fighter like me. Eat your words! Eat your words! I am the greatest.” – Muhammad Ali

Then, return to Kelly’s essay and read the final paragraph. Prompt students to turn and talk to a partner or their table about its strengths, then discuss as a class: *What is revealed about this student? How does the ending connect to her purpose for writing/prompt? What words or phrases are used for a powerful effect?*

## **STEP 7 (20-25 MINUTES)**

### **Independent Writing**

Students will write the conclusion of their essay keeping the following in mind. They *can*:

- State the wonderful things they plan to do, in college and after
- Include the adjectives they wrote about themselves in the student interview
- Say “you should select me because...”

As students finish their first draft, refer them to the Writing Checklist in the accompanying handouts.

## **STEP 8 (10 MINUTES)**

### **Conclusion**

To wrap the day, ask for a few volunteers to share out a portion of their essay with the whole group. Before closing, you may choose to go around and ask everyone to share one of the following:

- Something that surprised you when writing
- A challenge you worked around (or are still struggling with)
- A favorite line from your essay
- Something you want to focus on during revision

Now, it's time to congratulate students for their hard work! Each and everyone of them has what it takes to write a strong college essay and to reach higher in college and beyond.