

1600.io Guide for Starting a College Essay

The following exercises are for generating ideas and starting a draft that is built around showing who you are with narrative details. Try these as a starting point.

1. Take a look at the prompts for the Common App

Each one has a focal point-- in some cases, seeing the keywords and different emphases of these questions can help a writer generate ideas. For each prompt, jot down a few ideas that may help you respond to it.

2. Make some brainstorming lists

You don't have to build your essay around these-- you're just trying to get a sense of your subject. Consider making lists of the following:

- a. **Traits and characteristics about yourself.** Come up with your own, but it's sometimes a helpful exercise to ask a couple of people who know you well to contribute a few. For example: "honest, direct, empathetic."
- b. **Meaningful events.** Don't think that you have to write about the most important event in your life. You're just trying to think of times in your own story that stand out. It's memorable to you for a reason. For example: "wrote a skit and performed it with my friends; took apart an oscillating fan and put it back together."
- c. **Hopes / Ambitions.** Try to think of some of your short and long range goals (outside of getting accepted to your college). They can be academic in nature, but they don't have to be. For example: "I want to build my own business, I want to see the islands of the South Pacific."

3. As you draft, try to "explode a moment" in your story

Select a common app prompt or just consider a story that is important to you. Think about the story, then choose ONE MOMENT from it. Explain everything that is happening at that moment:

- a. What are you thinking?
- b. What are you feeling?
- c. What do you hear, see, smell, etc.?
- d. Try to be as detailed as possible. Don't worry about word counts or requirements-- just create the moment as concretely as you can.

4. Create a timeline for your narrative that lists the key events

When you have a story in mind, create a bulleted list than contains the key events. Consider:

- a. What is a good place to start? Why? Keep in mind the scope of the essay, and that you don't HAVE to start with the first chronological event.
- b. What is the tone you wish to achieve? (That is, do you want your story to be serious, light-hearted, quirky, etc.) What events/descriptions will help build this tone?
- c. Put a star next to the events in their timeline that they deem most significant. Why did you select this event (or events)? Explain.
- d. How will you communicate to your reader (without directly telling) that this event is especially important in the narrative?