

# Essay Brainstorming Guide

*Finding your story — a structured approach to discovering what's worth writing about*

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Every student has a story worth telling. The challenge isn't finding one — it's recognizing yours. Most students skip the thinking and go straight to writing, which is why so many first drafts feel generic. This guide slows you down on purpose. Spend real time here before you write a word. The quality of your essay depends on the quality of your reflection.

***Set aside 60–90 minutes for this guide. Write without stopping or editing. Bullet points, sentence fragments, and messy thoughts are all fine — this is thinking on paper, not writing for an audience.***

## Part 1: Theme Discovery — Getting Started

The questions below are designed to surface material you might not think to include on a résumé. Write for two to five minutes on each one without stopping. Don't screen for 'good enough.' Screen for honest.

**1** **What have you discovered about yourself in the past year or two?** Not what you've accomplished — what have you understood? About how you think, what you need, what you're capable of?

*Your thoughts:*

**2** **Describe a challenge that changed how you see something.** It doesn't have to be dramatic. A difficult class, a team conflict, a personal setback. What shifted in your thinking?

*Your thoughts:*

**3** **What small detail matters more to you than most people realize?** The way a workspace is organized. A ritual before a performance. The texture of a specific experience. What do you notice that others walk past?

*Your thoughts:*

**4** **Which questions keep circling back in your mind?** Not homework questions — real ones. About fairness, identity, how systems work, why people behave the way they do. What do you find yourself thinking about without being asked to?

*Your thoughts:*

**5** **Is there a moment from the past two years that remains unusually vivid?** Not because it was big — because it meant something. What do you remember with unusual clarity, and why?

*Your thoughts:*

**6** **What topics ignite your academic or intellectual curiosity?** Where do you go when you have free time to learn? What do you read, watch, or explore that has nothing to do with school?

*Your thoughts:*

**7** **When do you feel most like yourself?** Not when you're performing or impressing — when you feel most genuinely, authentically you. What are you doing? Who are you with? What does that tell you?

*Your thoughts:*

**8** **What do people typically seek your advice or help with?** There's usually a reason people come to you for specific things. What is it — and what does it reveal about how you show up for others?

*Your thoughts:*

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**What would you change about your school, community, or world if you could?** Not a policy answer — a personal one. What specific thing, based on something you've actually experienced, do you wish were different?

*Your thoughts:*

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**What is something you used to believe that you no longer do?** Changed minds are interesting. What shifted your thinking — and why does that shift matter to who you are now?

*Your thoughts:*

## Part 2: Identity Mapping — Find Your Core

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'Who am I?' feels like an impossible question. So we don't answer it directly — we build a picture of it piece by piece through smaller, more specific questions. For each category below, write 3–5 bullets without overthinking. Speed matters here: your first instincts are usually more honest than your considered ones.

### IDENTITY

Which groups are you part of — teams, family, clubs, cultural communities, neighborhoods? What roles do you play in those groups? How would you describe yourself as a thinker — methodical or intuitive? Collaborative or independent? Creative or analytical?

*Your answers:*

### VALUES

What do you care about more than most people realize? What qualities do you most respect in others? What principles do you try to live by, even when it's difficult or inconvenient?

*Your answers:*

### CURIOSITY

What problems do you want to solve — not because someone assigned them, but because they won't leave you alone? What ideas genuinely interest you, even outside of school? What would you study if grades didn't exist?

*Your answers:*

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|----------------------|--|
| <b>EXPERIENCES</b>   | <p>What challenge has shaped you — even one where you didn't succeed? What achievement are you proud of, large or small, that most people don't know about? What moments have genuinely changed you?</p>                           |
|                      | <p><i>Your answers:</i></p>  |
| <b>RELATIONSHIPS</b> | <p>Who has taught you something important — and what was the lesson? Is there a person whose perspective has permanently changed how you see something? What do the people you're closest to know about you that others don't?</p> |
|                      | <p><i>Your answers:</i></p>  |

### Part 3: From Reflection to Topic

By now you have pages of raw material. The next step is to identify which thread is worth pulling. Use the questions below to narrow from 'lots of thoughts' to 'a clear essay topic.'

#### Filtering Questions

- Which answer from Part 1 or Part 2 surprised you most? Surprise usually points toward something genuine.
- Which response felt the most specifically *you* — something that couldn't have been written by most people at your school?
- Which experience or insight could you talk about for an hour without running out of things to say?
- Which story has a real arc — something changed, something was learned, something shifted?
- Which topic, if you cut out all the events and kept only the insight, still has something worth saying?
- Which topic are you slightly nervous about writing — not because it's inappropriate, but because it feels honest in a way that's unfamiliar?

#### The Topic Test

Before you commit to a topic, run it through this three-part test. If you can answer yes to all three, you have a topic worth developing.

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|--|--|
|  | <b>Is it specific?</b>   |
|  | A great topic is about one thing — one moment, one insight, one lens — not a survey of everything you've done. |

### **Does it reveal something about you?**

The topic is the vehicle; the revelation is the destination. If someone read your essay and couldn't tell you anything real about who you are, the topic isn't doing its job.

### **Does it have an insight?**

Something must have changed — your thinking, your behavior, your understanding. If the essay ends where it began, it's a description, not a story.

## **Part 4: Supplemental Essay Strategy**

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Most selective colleges require supplemental essays in addition to the personal statement. These are not afterthoughts — at many schools, they carry as much weight as the main essay. Here's how to approach the most common types.

### **Why This School?**

This is the most common supplement — and the most often done badly. Admissions officers can tell the difference between a student who has genuinely researched their institution and one who has recycled a generic paragraph.

- Name specific programs, professors, research opportunities, or initiatives — not rankings or 'prestigious faculty.'
- Connect what you'll bring to what they offer: how does your specific background or interest fit with what they're doing?
- Visit the school's website, catalog, and student newspaper. Find things that genuinely excite you — and say so specifically.

### **Community / Identity Essay**

Many schools ask how your background or community will contribute to campus life. This is your opportunity to be specific about your perspective — not just your demographic category.

- Don't just describe your identity — describe how it has shaped how you think or what you notice or what you care about.
- Be specific: a community is not just a group. It's shared values, shared experience, shared meaning.
- Show what you'll bring, not just where you come from.

## Challenge / Setback Essay

If a school asks about a challenge, they're not looking for the most dramatic story — they're looking for how you handle difficulty and what you learn from it.

- Focus on the growth, not the suffering.
- Be honest about what was hard without performing victimhood.
- Show how you think through difficulty — that's what they're actually measuring.

## Short Answers and 'Intellectual Interest' Questions

Many schools ask about your academic interests in 150–250 words. These feel minor but reveal a great deal.

- Be specific and enthusiastic — a student who lights up about organic chemistry is more compelling than one who says they're 'passionate about science.'
- Connect your academic interest to real experiences: a class, a book, a project, a moment of genuine confusion that led somewhere.
- These are the easiest to write generically — and the most rewarding when written well.

***The best essays are not the ones with the most impressive stories. They're the ones with the most honest ones. Start with the truth. The writing will follow.***