

HIGHER ED INSIDER • DR. NATHAN HURWITZ

# Essay Brainstorming Guide

*A structured way to find what colleges actually want to hear — before you write a single sentence*

## WHAT COLLEGES ARE ACTUALLY LOOKING FOR

Admissions officers aren't asking: "Who has lived the most impressive life?"

### They're asking:

- Who can reflect thoughtfully on their experiences?
- Who understands themselves and their values?
- Who communicates clearly, honestly, and with purpose?
- Who will contribute something real to our campus?

*Strong essays reveal insight, not perfection. Growth, not bragging. Clarity, not drama.*

## WHAT THE ESSAY IS — AND ISN'T

### The essay IS:

- A window into how you think
- A demonstration of reflection and maturity
- An authentic sample of your writing voice
- A human counterbalance to grades and scores

### The essay ISN'T:

- A résumé rewritten in paragraphs
- A list of accomplishments or awards
- A competition over who faced the most hardship
- A place for big words or dramatic language

*The most effective essays aren't about what happened. They're about what it meant, what you learned, and how you grew.*

## THE FIVE BRAINSTORMING CATEGORIES

Read through all five before choosing a topic. Jot brief notes for each — don't draft yet.

### **A Moments of Change or Realization**

- When did your thinking shift in an important way?
- When did your assumptions change?
- When did you fail — and learn something specific?
- When did you take responsibility in a new way?

*💡 Think small. A single moment often carries more weight than a year-long experience.*

### **B Challenges (Academic, Personal, or Social)**

- What was genuinely difficult — and how did you respond?
- Not just emotionally — practically. What did you actually do?
- What skills or perspectives did you develop?
- How are you different now?

*💡 Colleges want agency and forward movement — not complaints.*

### **C Intellectual Curiosity & Interests**

- What subjects interest you beyond the classroom?
- What questions do you enjoy thinking about?
- When have you gone deeper than required?
- What genuinely excites you intellectually?

*💡 Specificity matters more than prestige. Write about what truly interests you.*

### **D Responsibility & Contribution**

- When have others relied on you?
- When did you step up without being asked?
- How do you contribute to a group or community?
- What role do you naturally play?

*💡 Ground these in real responsibility — not titles alone.*

## E Identity & Values

- What values guide your decisions?
- Where did those values come from?
- How have you tested or questioned them?
- How do they show up in your daily actions?

 *This is about depth, not declarations. Show — don't announce.*

## CHOOSING YOUR STORY: THE ONE-SENTENCE TEST

The strongest college essays are narrow, specific, and reflective — not sweeping life stories. A powerful essay often centers on:

- A single conversation, not an entire relationship
- One specific challenge, not a lifetime of obstacles
- A short moment of realization, not years of experience

### THE TEST

*Can you explain this story in one clear sentence? If not, the topic may be too broad. You'll expand it later — but if you can't summarize the core idea simply, start narrowing.*

## FOR PARENTS: HOW TO HELP WITHOUT HURTING

Your instinct is to improve the essay. Resist it. Admissions officers are trained to detect adult voices — and it almost always works against the student.

### What actually helps:

- Ask open-ended questions — don't suggest topics
- Listen more than you speak during the brainstorming phase
- Encourage clarity and honesty, not polish or drama
- Let the mentor guide structure and revision

## WHAT COMES NEXT

- 01 Story Mapping**  
Identifying the core message and key moments

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- 02 Structural Planning**  
Organizing ideas so the essay flows with purpose

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- 03 Guided Drafting**  
Turning insights into a first draft without overthinking

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- 04 Revision with Intent**  
Refining clarity, depth, and voice over multiple rounds

#### **A FINAL THOUGHT**

*A strong college essay doesn't try to impress. It invites understanding. When students learn to reflect clearly and write honestly, the essay becomes more than an application requirement — it becomes a powerful act of self-definition.*

## **Ready to take the next step?**

Schedule a free 30-minute consultation — no obligation.

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