

# College Essay Brainstorming Worksheet

Your college essay should shed light on the unique perspectives, life experiences, and personal qualities that are important to you. Approach your essay drafting process by breaking it down into manageable steps. Use this worksheet to:

1. Answer reflection questions to collect ideas.
2. Brainstorm how your reflections can be incorporated into essay topic options.
3. Review best practices for outlining and drafting.

**Tip:** You can type directly into this document and download it to save your work!

## Reflect

Consider the following prompting questions, and use the space below each one to jot down ideas.

What are three characteristics, qualities, or traits that describe who you are?

What does a typical day in your life look like? How does it reflect what is important to you?

What and/or who are three sources of inspirations for you, and why?

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What characteristics describe your community, and what do you appreciate about these traits?

What are you proud of? Consider challenges overcome and/or successes accomplished.

What impacts have your accomplishments had on others?

What is something you love learning about, and why?

What is a topic you could talk about for hours?

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## Brainstorm

There are several ways to turn your reflections into an essay topic and ensure it responds to the application's essay prompt. Consider the three building blocks of a college essay: a broad topic, a circumstance, and unique points.

You might start your brainstorming by considering broad topics and narrowing them down to specific ideas. Or maybe you find it more helpful to begin with specific details from your reflection, and consider how they inform a broad topic you want to move forward with.

Regardless of your approach, consider how the following building blocks of a college essay are connected, and review examples for each:

### Broad topic

A **broad topic** is an overarching theme that immediately pops into your mind when thinking about the writing prompt. It can be a general starting point for more specific points you want to make.

- *Example: Family*

### Circumstance

A **circumstance** is a specific situation that made or makes the broad topic more influential to you. It's okay if the circumstance is something that many other students may identify with.

- *Example: Single-parent household*

### Unique points

**Unique points** are parts of your circumstance that make your story uniquely your own. While the broad topic and aspects of your circumstance can be relatable to anyone, your unique points should set your story apart from others' with details that are specific to you.

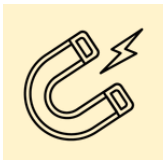
- *Examples:*
  - *Grew to be very independent; mom worked long, irregular hours*
  - *Had to cook for myself and my siblings with a limited budget*
  - *Discovered the use of spices to add flavor to simple ingredients*

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Now, it's your turn! Using your answers to the reflection questions on page 1 and 2, and any other thoughts that come to mind, brainstorm three options for connected broad topics, circumstances, and unique points to give yourself multiple essay topic options to choose from.

|                 | Broad topic | Circumstance | Unique points |
|-----------------|-------------|--------------|---------------|
| <i>Option 1</i> |             |              |               |
| <i>Option 2</i> |             |              |               |
| <i>Option 3</i> |             |              |               |

Next, ask yourself the following questions to help you decide which essay topic option you want to move forward with:



Which option feels most inspiring or energizing to write about?



Which option feels like the most creative approach to telling your story?



Which option brings out the most unique features of your story?

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## Outline

Once you select your essay topic, the next step is to organize your ideas to highlight their connection and create flow. Establish a common thread in order to outline the paragraphs of your essay and add to the unique points of the topic and circumstance that you plan to write about.

### What is a common thread?

A **common thread** is an idea, topic, or theme that is carried consistently throughout your essay. It does not have to be explicit; you do not have to explain how every paragraph relates to the common thread. However, it should be prevalent enough to ensure that the pieces of your essay are united.

## Example

### Common thread: *Resourcefulness*

#### Paragraph 1:

- Eldest of four siblings
- Single mom working long, irregular hours
- Family struggling financially

#### Paragraph 2:

- Responsibility to buy food for siblings with \$20
- Felt determined and resourceful
- Wanted to get creative

#### Paragraph 3:

- Perfected the art of budgeting for meals
- Became very resourceful and strategic
- Loved using different spices and ingredients
- Soon able to make entire meals under budget

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## Draft

After outlining your paragraphs, it's time begin the drafting process. Here are some tips to keep in mind in order to craft a strong essay.

### *Show, don't tell*



Be descriptive. Add concrete or interesting details to bring your story to life for your reader. Think about the five senses (i.e., sight, smell, taste, sound, touch).

*Example:* "There is something therapeutic about the smell of spices sautéing in a pan of caramelizing onions, and there is nothing more relaxing after a long day at school than standing over the stove gently coaxing these ingredients. In 30 minutes and for only \$20, I would have a delicious dinner prepared for my family. And there was always enough leftover for when my mother returned from her 12-hour shift at the hospital."

### *Focus on yourself*



Make sure you are ultimately telling your story, not the story of something or someone else in your essay.

*Example:* "Watching my mother work long, hard hours just to put a roof over our heads has inspired my strong work ethic. Her example has motivated me to put my full heart into the classroom, and at home to take care of my siblings."

### *Use a positive lens*



It's okay to talk about negative life circumstances, but it's best to focus on how you overcame them, what you learned, and how you grew from these experiences.

*Example:* "As the eldest of five, I have to play a parental role at home. I get home from a long day of classes and clubs and head straight to the kitchen to prepare dinner. While this is stressful at times, my situation has taught me the importance of hard work and the strong bond of family."