

# WRITING YOUR COLLEGE ESSAY

B r a i n s t o r m

W r i t e

E d i t

S u b m i t

B Y J O Y C E P E L L I N O C R A N E

# PREFACE

My name is Joyce Pellino Crane and I call myself the *College Essay Confidante*. Year after year, high school seniors confide in me with the details of their lives so I can help them find a college essay topic. As a seasoned journalist with years of essays, commentaries, and news stories in the archives, this process is extremely enjoyable. I love getting to know people.

If you'd like help with your college essay, don't hesitate to contact me at [WinningCollegeEssay@gmail.com](mailto:WinningCollegeEssay@gmail.com), or [CollegeEssayConfidante.com](http://CollegeEssayConfidante.com).

*Here are the services I offer:*

1. “**Brainstorm your college essay**,” for high school juniors and seniors. The three-hour meeting is for small groups. I provide short writing projects designed to pinpoint essay topics.
2. “**Fine-tune your college essay**,” for high school seniors only. The two-hour meeting is for small groups. Students share their drafts with me on Google docs and we edit it together. After revising their drafts, students will send their essays to me for a final editorial review.
3. **Private tutoring**, for high school juniors (at the end of the second semester) and seniors. These are one-on-one brainstorming and editing sessions conducted either in person or by using video conferencing software.

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# INTRODUCTION

The first thing people ask me when they learn I'm a journalist is "how do you find stories?" It's not an easy question to answer because people who are not writers don't always know how to connect the dots. It takes a higher form of thinking and some practice to formulate a good story.

A simple tale can be compelling if told well. But how do you find a topic that makes an admissions officer want to keep reading your essay – especially if she has a pile of essays in front of her, with each author vying for admission to her college?

## **Your true essence**

Starting with a solid topic and a well formulated story makes the process go smoothly. How do you get there? It begins with writing exercises to help you think deeply. More on this later.

I often talk to my students about their "true essence." What I mean by this is that I want them to truly understand whom they are for all their talents, skills, assets, foibles, and insecurities. That's not easy to do. It takes courage to face our less attractive traits and admit them to ourselves. But once we're able to do this, we start to get a clearer picture of ourselves. Here's a quick game to help you get started.



# LET'S PLAY A GAME

Come up with one word to describe yourself for each letter of the alphabet, A through Z. Are you alert, aware, agile, awesome?

abcdefghijkl  
klmnopq...

Would you describe yourself as zany, zen-like, zested, zealous? (Z words are not so easy to come up with!)

This game is designed to make you think about yourself in a detailed way as you begin the process of getting to know yourself intimately. Understanding yourself and skimming over your daily life will help you find an essay topic that engages you.

## FIRST THINGS FIRST

The first step is to decide what type of essay you'd like to write. For the 2017-18 school year, the non-profit Common Application offers seven prompts: (Editor's note: The prompts were slightly revised in winter 2017 with two new choices added to the list.)

The comments in parentheses below indicate which remained the same, are slightly changed, or are newly added.)

“1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story. [No change]

2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? [Revised]

3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome? [Revised]

4. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution. [No change]

5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. [Revised]

6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more? [New]

7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design. [New]"

'Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful...their application would be incomplete without it.'

Prompt 1

# EXAMINING EACH PROMPT

Let's take a closer look at each prompt and see where it might take you.

## Prompt 1 examined

*Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story. [No change]*

In the years that I've been teaching college essay workshops, this has been the most popular and productive prompt chosen. It's certainly the most versatile. Students have written about their role as first violinist in the school orchestra, the death of a parent, the experience of growing up between two cultures, and serious health problems, to name a few. One student related his memories of living on the island of Kwajalein Atoll, part of the Marshall Islands, from ages 9 to 12. There were no cars on the island, he said. Instead inhabitants rode bicycles everywhere. Another student said he played sports with passion but was plagued by a physical illness that once rendered him immobile for three days.

Let's think about your identity and interests. Do you speak another language at home? Did you spend your younger years living somewhere exotic? Was there an untimely death in your family?

While this is the most popular prompt it doesn't trigger a story idea in everyone. If this isn't for you, there are six more from which to choose. Let's take a look...



## **Prompt 2 examined**

*The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience? [Revised]*

One of the most poignant essays I've read came from a young man of Indian heritage who had tried every year since ninth grade to make it onto the varsity basketball team at his high school and failed. His essay was about how he planned to try out again that November as a senior. The essay was memorable for its lack of accusation, anger, or self-pity. It broke one of my key rules: to not write about sports because it's a subject that is common and would not make a student stand out in an admissions officer's mind. But this student's essay was so well written and so unique in its presentation that it was an exception. He talked about being shorter than most basketball players and knowing that his stature made his dream unlikely to come true. It demonstrated a spirit of perseverance and a willingness to move past disappointment that reflected well on him. This student found his true essence and used it to stir emotion and sympathy in the reader.

## **Prompt 3 examined**

*Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome? [Revised]*

This prompt requires a persuasive essay with careful research and accurate facts. I don't discourage students



from this prompt, but I warn them that it's more work and will take more time.

So far, in all my years of teaching how to write the college essay, none of my students have chosen this prompt. But if it interests you, it's probably because you have a burning belief or idea, and don't need to brainstorm for one. I would suggest choosing this prompt only if that's the case. If you don't have tremendous passion for a belief or idea, I would suggest that other prompts are probably a better match.

### **Prompt 4 examined**

*Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution. [No change]*

One of my students was planning to apply to engineering schools so he wrote his essay about a physics team challenge he experienced. His dilemma was that his two teammates seemed not to be as serious about the project as he was. He decided to take charge and direct them. His essay was expository, meaning he explained the project and how his team solved a problem. But he also interjected a human element into the story by acknowledging that he had judged his teammates harshly. By the end of the challenge, he had won respect for both of them and realized their strengths were different from his. In the process of telling his story, he had also highlighted his technical skills without being didactic.

### Prompt 5 examined

*Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others. [Revised]*

Have you traveled to a foreign country and seen something that inspired you to get involved? One of my students took a trip to China to visit relatives. While there, the student noticed what she described as “incredible waste strewn throughout its streets.” She wondered where it could go besides a landfill. That trip motivated her to get involved in her own community by joining her school’s environmental club and raising money to fund the construction of composting bins.

The student’s experience with the environmental club inspired her to aim for an environmental policy major in college. She deftly began her essay with advice from her grandmother who had told her to look at the green colors produced by nature as a way of improving her nearsightedness. She ended her essay with this line: “My grandmother was right: by looking at the green, I found my life vision.”

### Prompt 6 examined

*Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more? [New]*





'When I sit at a computer to write a story, it feels like I'm flying a plane.'

Joyce Pellino Crane

One of the most pleasurable experiences in my life is getting lost in a writing project that wholly captivates me. Do you have a hobby, sport, or pastime that does this for you? If so, try writing about it by telling how you got involved and how you deepened your knowledge. When I sit at a computer to write a story, it feels like I'm flying a plane. I can only imagine that the real experience of flying is just as engaging. Whatever your practice is, find a way to make the reader experience what you feel and you could have a compelling story.

### Prompt 7 examined

*Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design. [New]"*

If you've already written an essay of which you are proud, dust it off and take another look. Does it tell an admissions officer something important about you? If not, start over. Don't take a shortcut just to avoid the investment of time. Your college essay can be the deciding factor in being admitted to the college of your choice. Put the time into it so you know you've tried your hardest to make your dream come true. On the other hand, if you want to take a creative approach to the essay that doesn't follow any of the prompts, I encourage you to give it a try.



One of the most creative first drafts I've seen began like this: "I am not who I am. I am an engineer. I am not an engineer. I am a musician. I am not a musician. My understanding of myself has grown dim as Reality has tightened its grip. Simple knowledge seems to be choked in my confusion of the path to be taken. Just what am I...."

This student was struggling with whether to apply to music programs or engineering colleges. He resolved the essay by acknowledging he's both a musician and an engineer.

## YOUR LIFE

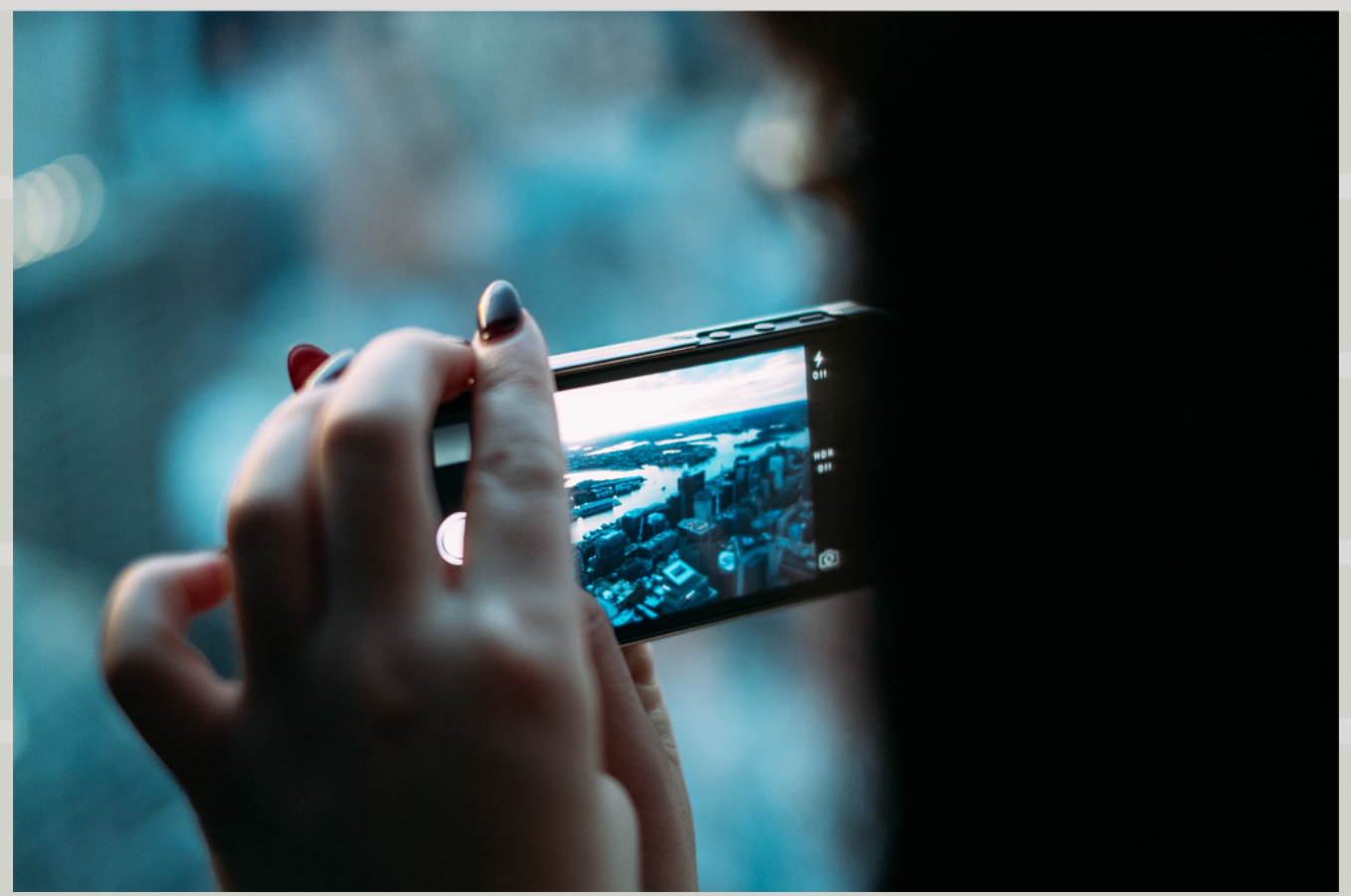
I've been running workshops on "Brainstorm Your College Essay" since 2012 and I've noticed there are two types of students: 1.) Those who have a serious health, emotional or personal challenge; and 2.) Those who have led fairly idyllic lives with little drama.

The first group has an obvious topic. The latter group doesn't have such an obvious story. Many students believe that the essay subject must be grandiose, dripping with sorrow, and end with a crashing crescendo.

These students don't realize that they could focus on a single photograph and tell the story of where and when it was taken. They could detail an ordinary day and see what insight they can discover. They could profile someone important to them and tell why. In other words, it's not necessarily the topic but how you tell it that matters. We all have many tales to tell, but finding a well conceptualized, focused story with a beginning, middle and end, takes some brainstorming.

'These students don't realize that they could focus on a single photograph and tell the story...'

Joyce Pellino Crane



## TYPES OF ESSAYS

There are three types of essays

1. Expository (or explanatory) – An essay that explains something.
2. Persuasive – An essay that tries to influence readers and elicit change.
3. Narrative – An essay that tells a story bringing the reader right inside the room and vividly presenting the scene. [This is my personal favorite because it allows the writer to tell much about her character, culture, and ability to communicate.]

## BRAINSTORMING

Story ideas happen when you think deeply and start to connect the dots inside your head. The best way to do this is by writing about the things that define you. Jotting notes about your passions, habits, and daily routine can help you to think about the things that are important in your life. It could trigger ideas that wouldn't otherwise occur to you.

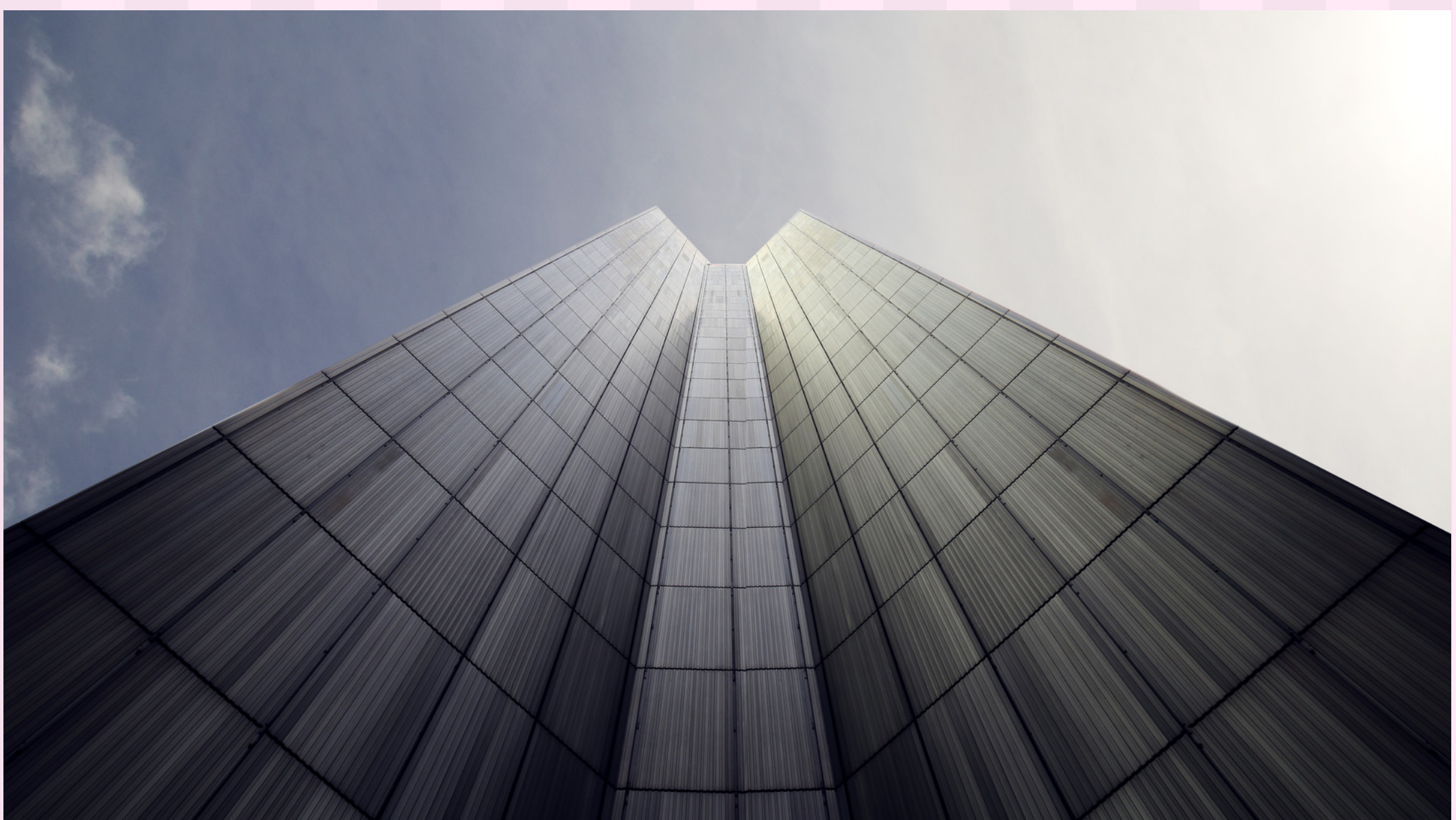


# WRITING EXERCISE #1

So here's your first assignment to help get you thinking about yourself:

- Write a paragraph detailing your bedroom. Tell us what color the walls are, what's hanging on them, what furniture is in the room, what type of floor you have, what's on the bed, how many windows are in the room. Tell us what you do when you're in the room (homework, listen to music, read?).
- Then put things into context. Where inside your family's home is the room located? What do you see when you look out the window? Explaining the geography of a situation or underscoring a trend adds color and texture to your story.

Putting things into context deepens a reader's understanding of what's going on in the story and offers a broader picture of the events. It is also the mark of an advanced writer who understands that providing a paragraph with broad information justifies the reason for writing the story.





# NARROWING YOUR TOPIC

You've come up with a topic but now what? How do you tell your story? That can be tricky. You only have a maximum of 650 words for the essay (and a minimum of 250 words). Anything more and the software won't allow you to submit. That means you have to be efficient, precise and descriptive. Your opening sentence is crucial. Start in the middle of the scene and describe what's going on. Keep it simple and use action verbs for efficiency. Sometimes students try to squeeze too much information into the opening paragraph. Instead, try to choose precise language with descriptive verbs. You'll use fewer words and they will tell a more interesting story. Let me show you what I mean. Here's the beginning of an essay that was quickly in trouble because the student did not have a clear focus as to what she wanted to say.

*“Ever since second grade, I have been trying to prepare myself to be a lawyer. Whenever there was a fight on the playground or bus, I would agree to be someone's lawyer and represent her against the opposing party. One of my best clients was a girl from my bus who got in trouble often. Each time the bus drivers reprimanded her, I would defend her. From an early age I have been an avid Judge Judy watcher. Judge Judy taught me about hearsay and the importance of being honest in court.”*





**And here’s the next draft:**

*The girl on the bus was my best client. Whenever the driver reprimanded her, I would step up to her defense. That’s me, defender of the weak or the clueless. Ever since second grade, I’ve been preparing myself to be a lawyer. Whenever there was a fight on the playground or bus, I would agree to represent one party to the other. I learned what to do by watching courtroom TV. From an early age I have been an avid Judge Judy fan. Judge Judy taught me about hearsay and the importance of honesty in court.*

**Here’s a suggestion for the next paragraph: One time, on the playground...”(PROVIDE AN ANECDOTE THAT SHOWS HOW YOU HELPED SOMEONE).**



## WRITING EXERCISE #2

While teaching a recent workshop I stumbled upon a writing exercise that brought light to the faces of my students. I asked them to write a brief profile of someone who was important to them. But first we went around the table and told each other who that person was and why. The students' level of engagement and interest seemed to rise 10 meters. They were anxious to begin writing.

The people in our lives are the ones who hold our emotions. When we think of them, we feel love, concern, anger, grief, anticipation, expectation, and a host of other emotions. When these feelings are aroused in you, it's time to start writing.

- For your next writing assignment, choose someone in your life who is important to you in some way and write a brief profile of him or her. This need be only one paragraph, but if you get on a roll, feel free to keep going. A profile of someone significant to your life could turn into your college essay. Let the process take its course.

### Your First Draft

If I could give you one gift as you begin to write, it would be the gift of freedom to write anything. This is your first draft and you should not be encumbered with grammar concerns, misspellings, or typographical errors. None of that matters yet. Instead, give yourself the freedom to take your story to an unpredictable direction.



# NOW WHAT?

So you've completed the exercises above and you're still coming up blank, right? That's OK. Don't force it. Let the ideas simmer like a pot of soup on a camp stove. Ideas will surface if you keep doing the writing exercises.

## WRITING EXERCISE #3

Your next assignment – should you choose to accept it (that's a line from the old TV show called "Mission Impossible,") is to get out a notebook and pen, or use an audio recording APP on your phone, and begin interviewing your family members. Write down a list of questions about yourself that are individually targeted for your siblings, your mom, your dad, and even your grandparents. When you conduct the interviews, do them individually in a quiet area of your home.

### **Ask your brother or sister such things as:**

1. What do you think is my best talent?
2. What's the personality trait you like best/least about me?
3. Do you remember those nights when we watched "Sponge Bob" together after dinner? What was your favorite episode?

### **Ask your father such things as:**

1. When you think about my future, what do you imagine me doing?
2. What age was I when you stopped seeing me as a baby and started seeing me as a person?
3. If you could choose the perfect sport for me to play what would it be?

## Ask your mom such things as:

1. What was it like the first time you held me after I was born?
2. Do you have a favorite picture of me? Ask her to show it to you and ask her why it's her favorite photo of you.
3. When you imagine me grown up, what kind of job do you see me doing?

These questions are just to get you started. You may come up with much better ones. But before you start your interviews, write down your questions so you're prepared and be sure to take careful notes. How your family members perceive you could help you understand yourself better.



## START WRITING

Remember the Nike marketing campaign with the slogan “Just do it?” Well, that’s my advice to you. Once you have a topic, dive in. Writing your first draft will be liberating even if it’s no where near the finished product that you want it to be. Don’t be afraid to try an approach that might not work. The sky’s the limit as long as you don’t leave your essay to the last minute.



# SAMPLE TOPICS

*Here are some essay topics to help you get started:*

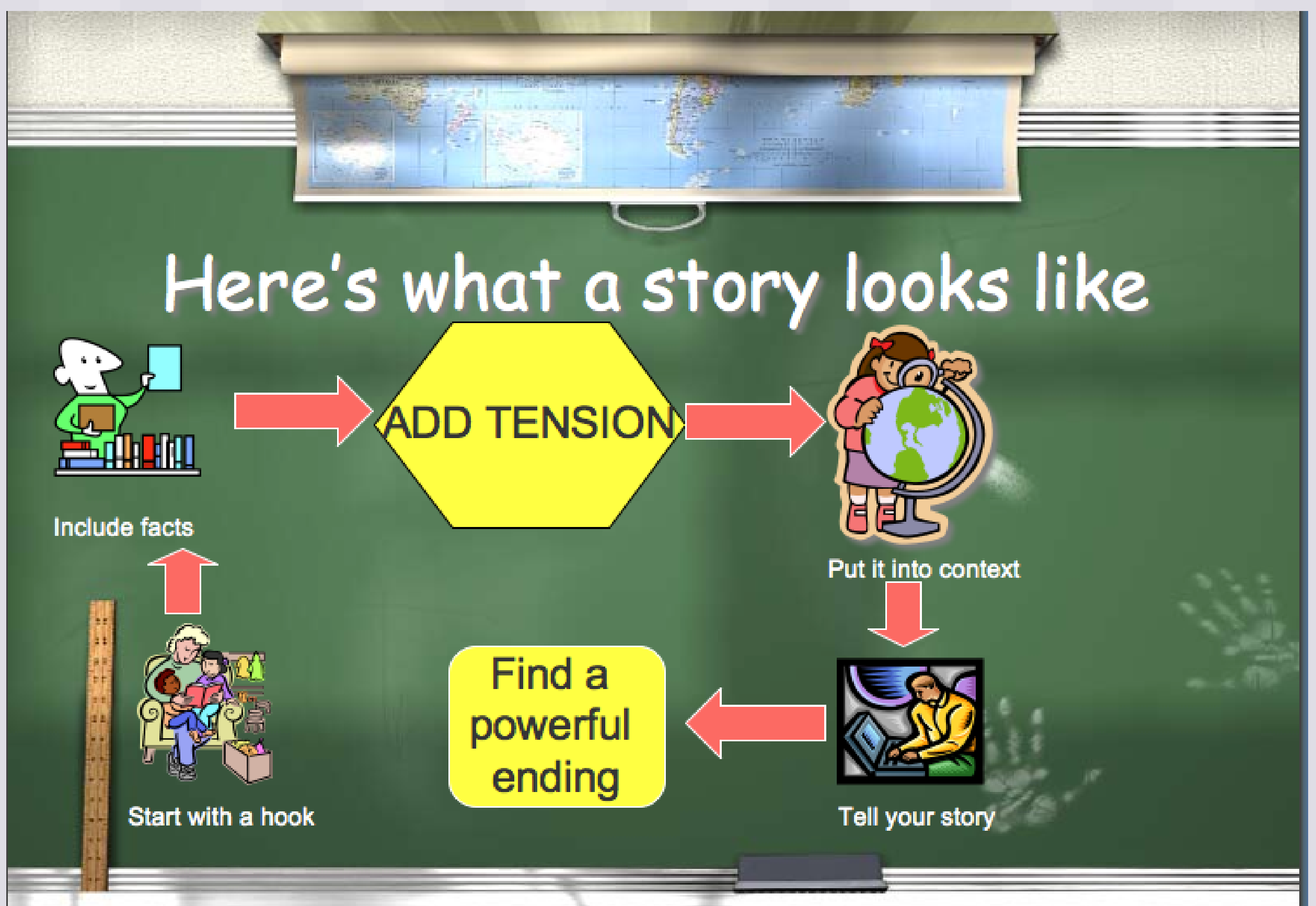
- One student of mine wrote about how she loved to walk down Newbury Street in Boston and observe the fashions displayed in the storefronts because she was interested in the history of fashion and enjoyed tracing the latest styles to their origins. It was a unique story angle and one I had never seen before.

- Another student wrote about the day of her father's funeral when she was only 12. When she wrote the essay, he'd been gone for five years. She wrote about that period and how it affected her and her family members. *"The past five years of my life have felt like I've been stuck on a never-ending roller coaster. At the beginning of the ride, I was living in a world where I felt as if no one could understand the pain and heartache I was going through. This was when I realized I had to snap back into reality and say to myself, 'You are not alone, ...'"*

- A third student wrote about his deafness, focusing on a description of how the technology for his new hearing aides worked. He explained how the devices differed from his old hearing aides, and what he went through to adjust to them. He could have focused solely on his hearing loss, but by writing about technology he showed his adeptness for engineering – the academic major for which he was aiming.

Your first draft can be short and to the point. It's always better to keep your count below the 650 word limit because there will be information you'll want to add. When writing a short essay, it's more difficult to cut a story than to add to it. (This rule is different for longer essays.)





## Developing the Arc of Your Story

Every good college essay has a few key elements.

1. It begins with a hook, meaning an opening sentence that raises interest.
2. It includes accurate facts.
3. It adds tension by introducing a notion that raises curiosity and doesn't get answered right away.
4. It puts things into context geographically, historically, or by denoting a trend or explaining the purpose for writing the story.
5. It provides a narrative that moves the story forward.
6. It ends with a punch by relating the conclusion back to the beginning.

# EDITING YOUR STORY

This is the part most of my students like the least. Editing is tedious and there seems to be no end to it. There's always a better way to write that sentence, right?

Well, here's the benefit of working with an editor like me who produced two newspapers every week for years. You work fast and efficiently and meet your personal deadline. The presses (yes, those old fashioned printing machines) wait for no one, so if I missed my deadline, back in the day, the paper didn't get out and I'd have a lot of explaining to do.

But honestly, editing can be the most engaging part of this project. The hope is that by the time you finish writing, you will be so invested in your own story that you won't want to put it down until you've refined it to your satisfaction.

Think of your essay as a statue you've carved and are now chiseling to perfection. Reconsider every verb and ask yourself if there's a better, more precise action word you could replace it with. Make sure every sentence is structurally sound and every verb properly modifies each noun. If a sentence is awkward, reconstruct it. Omit all unnecessary words. If you're using the right verbs, adjectives are usually unnecessary.

Once you've gotten the story in good shape, print out a few copies and hand it to your mother, father, and siblings. Ask them to check for typographical and



grammatical errors. Stay open to any suggestions they offer. They could help improve your piece. However, don't allow anyone to sway you away from your focus. This is your story and you should stay true to the central theme. Remember, if you've found your own essence, and the story you tell engages you, it's guaranteed to intrigue others.

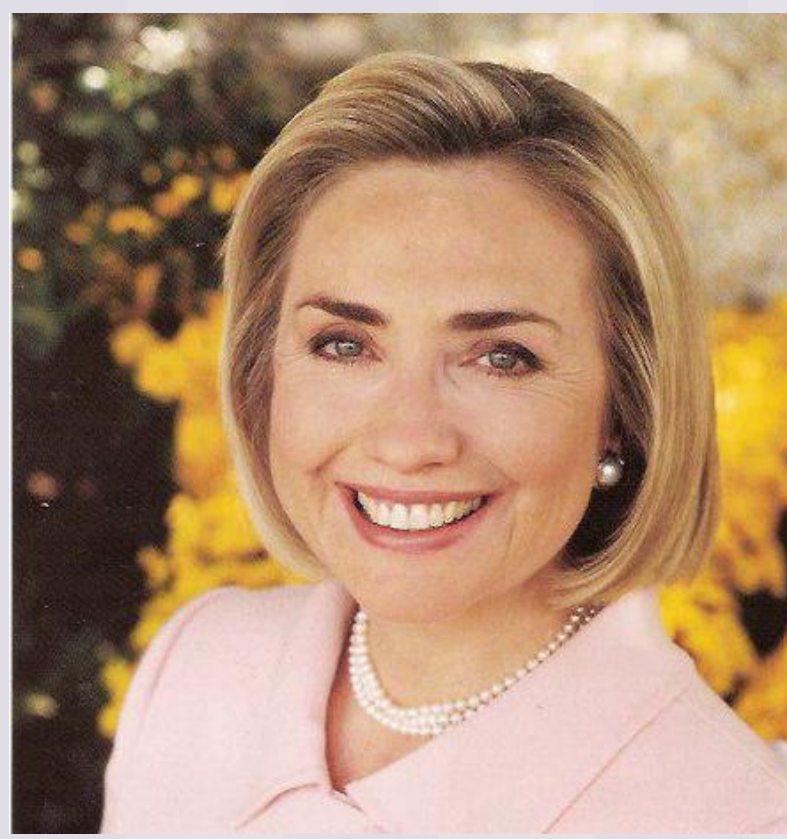
## HOW TO END YOUR ESSAY

My best advice for your ending is this: Don't force it. If you write your entire essay but get stuck at the conclusion, put it down for a few days and let the story percolate in your head. When you return to it, an ending may pop into your head in a moment of serendipity. Sometimes these are the best endings because they are organic and natural. In 2008, I wrote an essay for the *Boston Globe* about how people used to say I looked like Hillary Clinton. Today, Hillary and I look nothing alike, but when she was the First Lady in the early to mid 1990s, her hairdresser and mine must have compared notes. We shared the same blonde bob style.

Years later, when she ran for president for the first time, I wrote about the period of my life when everyone was calling me 'Hillary.' The essay, entitled "Hillary, My Not So Evil Twin," began like this:

*"IN THE late 1990s, after I crossed the threshold into middle age, friends and acquaintances began telling me I looked like*





Joyce Pellino Crane (left) in her Hillary days and the First Lady circa 1998.

Hillary Clinton - a development I was less than happy about. My reaction had nothing to do with politics, it's just that I had always seen myself as more the artistic dancer type, and she was, well, the lawyerly, down-to-business type. Our styles didn't match. Around that time, I was palling around with three semi-retired gentlemen who had started a writers' group in my town. The trio embraced me as the organized sort, good for securing a meeting room at the local library - a lot like Hillary - and they quickly noticed my resemblance to the nation's first lady. They soon forgot my real name and began addressing me by hers. ...”

I wrote the entire 582-word essay and then had nothing significant to say at the end when it was time to pack the punch. I turned in the essay with the uninspiring ending to my editor, who promptly sent it back to me, pushing me to find a better ending. Here’s the two paragraphs leading to the limp, last sentence that my editor wanted me to revise”

*“Now years later, I realize, my aversion to being Hillary had nothing to do with Hillary, after all. It came from my own need to be liked, which for me was more important than to be seen as a leader pioneering new territory the way Hillary did. That role has always belonged to her--a fearless mold-breaker.*



*My path may never cross hers, and she will never know how so Not like her I've spent the last decade being. But as the historians hit the keyboards, I'm starting to get a twinge of regret.*

***(This was the old ending my editor wanted changed:)***

*"Maybe I should have opted for the celebrity look-alike option."*

## THE REVISED ENDING

I was beside myself because this was my first shot at the Globe's Opinion page. Having an essay published there is prestigious for a journalist and I didn't want to blow it. So I calmed down, walked away, stayed cool, got a cup of tea. When I returned to my office and looked at that last paragraph, the ending popped into my head like a text message on my phone.

**I changed the line to:**

*"Maybe I should have taken another look in the mirror,"* and that clinched it.

My essay got published on June 16, 2008, along with two side-by-side photos of Hillary and me during our look-alike days, and I wrote many more opinion newspaper pieces in the years that followed, winning awards and gaining confidence in my ability to tell a story.

It was a happy ending.

# About the Author

Award-winning journalist Joyce Pellino Crane is a former Boston Globe correspondent and the current news director of Westford Community Access Television in Westford, Mass.



Joyce Pellino Crane

She is the former editor of the Westford Eagle and Littleton Independent, newspapers located in communities northwest of Boston.

Crane is the recipient of an editorial award by the 2015 Best of GateHouse, as well as numerous New England Newspaper and Press Association awards presented to her every year between 2011 to 2015, include a first prize for editorial writing.

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