

# THE ART OF THE PERSONAL STATEMENT



Alex Thaler

## **Copyright Info**

© Copyright Alexander David Thaler (“Alex Thaler”) (2012).

View the copyright license [here](#). All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or distributed in any form or by any means without the written permission of the copyright owner.

The above license covers individuals only. If you are interested in licensing this book on behalf of a company, organization, group, school, etc., please address inquiries to [licensing\(at\)dearadmissions.com](mailto:licensing@dearadmissions.com).

## **NOTICE: All Readers**

Thank you for reading The Art of the Personal Statement. Although this book is offered free of charge, certain rules/restrictions apply.

1. Alex Thaler and Better Education, Inc. retain the sole right to distribute this book.
2. This book is for your personal use only. It is illegal to distribute, forward, give, attach, send, transmit, share, or otherwise convey your authorized copy to another person. If you would like to share this book with friends, please refer them [here](#) so that they may obtain their own legal copies.
3. If you have obtained a copy of this book through any means *other than* by downloading it at [www.dearadmissions.com/personal-statement-book](http://www.dearadmissions.com/personal-statement-book), you, and the person who gave this book to you, may be in violation of the copyright license. Please visit the website above to obtain your own authorized copy.
4. These rules enable us to continue to offer this book free of charge. Thanks in advance for your cooperation!



---

This book is intended to change the way you think about admissions essays. It is organized around the idea that mindfulness – something we all have the power to cultivate – is the guiding force behind an admissions essay that is unique, compelling, and reflective of your individual personality.

You might also think of this book as a series of thought experiments. The purpose of these experiments is to condition your writing muscles. It's not an overnight process. I can't promise that by the end of this book, writing your essay will be easy, but I can promise that you'll have the tools you need to write something that sets you apart.

---

# Table Of Contents

Forewords		5
Blueprint		10
Setting the Stage		11
Original Face		15
Drifting		19
Mindfulness		22
The Writing Cycle		28
Brainstorming		29
Drafting		51
Drafting II		59
Editing		77
Risk		85
Reality/Perception		89

## FOREWORDS

By Eric J. Furda, Dean of Admissions, and Amy Smith, Regional Director of Admissions,  
University of Pennsylvania



As the Dean of Admissions at the University of Pennsylvania I, perhaps predictably, look to Benjamin Franklin for insight and inspiration. A Franklin quote, “Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn,” provides important wisdom on how to think about the work of the college search process. I am a strong proponent of providing “frameworks” of thought to students and parents. As an example, my blog <http://page217.org/> provides an approach to self-assessment (the 5 I’s) and examining colleges (the 4 C’s). Given Franklin’s sentiment about a process of involvement, I appreciate advice on the college process which doesn’t try to give answers or false promises; instead I embrace guidance which provides an opportunity for responsibility and growth.

The experience of writing a college essay, or personal statement, is an integral part of the application process and can be one such catalyst for personal growth. We ask seventeen-year-old students, as they stand between a known past and unknown future, to reflect on their experiences thus far and to assess what they will bring to the world ahead. The result is a powerful statement—and analysis—of self. It is not uncommon for us, as admissions professionals, to pause after reading an application and honor the narrative it holds.

“The Art of the Personal Statement” by admissions advisor Alex Thaler provides a framework that recognizes the importance of reflection and expression in the personal statement. He charges readers with the task of mindfulness—“the process of monitoring the little fountain of mental activity within us” (21)—as a tool for moving forward in this process. Awareness of the brain’s capacity and meanderings elicits greater depth in the content of the personal statement. Admissions Committees embrace applicants’ *cognitive edges*, so to speak. We look for hints of creativity, thoughtfulness, adaptability, and the propensity to innovate and take risks. These characteristics and experiences, among others, will translate to a high-impact presence on campus.

In a state of mindfulness, we at once observe and embody our person; we are removed and simultaneously present. To translate this practice to paper can be challenging. Alex matches the informal and cerebral act to a step-by-step writing process. He introduces a writing cycle alongside detailed guidance to nudge the reader towards

productivity, originality, and a polished final project. This acts as a durable foundation for a process that follows students from their junior summer to the fall of senior year. As admissions professionals, we encourage students to get started early and to be understanding of the drafts inherent to this process. With the proper tools, students can write at the beach, the bus stop, or the local library.

The personal statement adds a spark to the larger application. This piece is a point of reference for the scholar, roommate, classmate and friend each candidate will become. Now, on the threshold of a new journey, the practice of mindfulness and reflection has more relevance than ever. As you begin, we wish you the best of luck. We continue to be inspired by your narratives of striving, of challenge, of achievement.

*By Amy W. Jarich, Assistant Vice Chancellor & Director of Undergraduate Admissions,  
UC Berkeley*



As an admissions director, I frequently talk about the importance of the personal statement. However, I am going to let you in on a little secret. I can't remember the topic of my own college essay. Trust me, I have tried to remember for years, but it never comes back. I only vaguely remember something about my belief in the power of a smile. But, did I write about my own smile? Did I write about my reaction to someone else's smile? I can't remember.

The topic escapes me, but the process doesn't. What I remember is the stress that I felt trying to fit multiple eye-catching thoughts – all eloquently stated, of course – into a 500 word statement. My primary concern was that the external forces (mainly the admissions office) would be pleased with my work. I remember how I wrote it – on an old manual typewriter that left no room for error. I remember where I wrote it – in my humble childhood home, surrounded by the sound of local network television and my hard-working parents discussing the day. I even remember the smell of the wood stove that heated our home. And of course I remember when I wrote it – way too close to the deadline.

I didn't do it then, but I realize now that if I had simply engaged my senses and written about how I fit into my environment on that night in front of the typewriter, I could have had a powerful personal statement. An act of simple self-expression, but a powerful statement of who I was. I intentionally use the past tense here because education and life experience have changed my perspectives. I've grown, but I remember who I was. Knowing what I do now about the admissions process, I wish that I had paid tribute



to that 17 year-old version of myself. It might have included something like the following excerpt:

*My world is full of repurposed items that I probably do not appreciate as much as I should. These salvaged items – combined with the smell of smoke from the wood stove that heats our home – represent a sense of safety for me. A sense of place that I don't think I will never be able to recreate.*

*I'm tediously tapping these words out on a manual typewriter that my dad carried home from his job at the General Electric plant. It was no doubt one that they were tossing out when the new electric versions were delivered years ago. Tonight, as I type, this old cranky typewriter is the tool that I need to move from this space into the next one that awaits me. I doubt that my father could have imagined that when he rescued it from the trash. If he had, would he have made sure that none of the keys stick?*

With these limited recollections - and recreations - of my own experience, what can I share with you as tips for success? Three things. First, I suggest that you read this book carefully and use it as a resource while you prepare your own personal statement. It will challenge you to think about reflection and communication (skills that will help you find success well beyond the college application process). Next, don't find yourself like me, writing on the night before the deadline. This is a process – start early. Finally, make sure that you are writing this statement for all the correct reasons. Don't be motivated by the desire to please an admissions officer.

For many schools, including mine, there is no interview process, making this personal statement your only opportunity to hear your voice. If I met you in a non-admissions context, what would you want to tell me about yourself? What type of picture would you paint of yourself and your world? My suggestion to many stressed applicants is to begin writing your story as if no one else will ever get to read it. I *promise* you that we will read the version you send to us, but we will notice that you wrote this through a process of self-reflection, not an analysis of what the admissions office is looking to see. In my example, it would have been hard for me at 17 to believe that anyone would care about my environment and how it made me feel. But, as it turns out, that is exactly what I now enjoy most about reading the personal statement portion of the application. This is your time to be a storyteller. A well-written personal statement reinforces my belief that we all have a compelling story to tell.

I should also say that while this is a key part of your application in many admissions offices, this is not an exercise designed to create stress. This is an opportunity, not a burden. Find ways to make it fun. Start a journal. When you are in the middle of an exciting or meaningful moment, start saying in your head – or aloud, “Hey, that is



personal statement material.” Do incorporate others into your process who will be a positive influence, but be cautious of those who suggest, “You should write it this way.” This is your personal statement. Own it and enjoy it. (And, save a copy so that if you are ever asked to write about the essay that helped you get into college, you will be able to recover it.)

When you have successfully submitted all of your college applications, I suggest you pass this book to someone who will be applying to school next year. It is a timeless resource that will continue to serve your younger siblings and friends. Thank you, Alex, for creating this important resource. And, thank you, reader, for using this resource to create a new wave of personal statements that will inspire and inform.

# Part I

## BLUEPRINT

The term “personal statement” gets an average of 1,000,000 hits on Google per month. That represents around a million people a month trying to figure out what the personal statement is all about.

What can these individuals expect to learn from this search? It depends. The results come in the form of a disjointed patchwork of lists, tips, do's, and don'ts. *Be specific. Avoid clichés. Research your program.* Most of these suggestions, taken alone, seem sensible enough. But to the student facing a blank page, they aren't particularly helpful. Why? Because they are not part of a comprehensive framework for approaching the personal statement.

Imagine that you have been asked to divide your living space by building a wall. You've never built a wall before, so you start to do a bit of background research. After reviewing all of the available information on the subject, you come up with the following list:

- Use Douglas-fir two-by-fours every 16 inches.
- Nails are better than screws for framing.
- Plan in advance where to put your electrical box.
- Tie your studs to the ceiling joists using Simpson hardware.
- Use a stainless-steel spatula to apply joint compound; applying too much pressure makes it harder to create a smooth surface.

Okay, time to start building. Do you feel ready?

Most people wouldn't have the slightest idea where to start because the list fails to provide a comprehensive blueprint for the project. Without that blueprint, the perfectly sensible suggestions in the list are useless.

This book is your blueprint for writing the personal statement.

## SETTING THE STAGE

---

Let's consider for a moment the application process and the role of the admissions essay within that process.

Your application has three major components: GPA/grades, standardized-test scores, and the admissions essay. The first two of these are sometimes weighted and combined into a single number using an academic index. The [University of California admissions index](#) is one of the better-known examples of this approach. Admissions indexes are often favored by schools with high application volumes because the indexes allow them to sort applications more quickly.

Many schools use successive rounds of review to evaluate applications. For example, at some schools an application is first assigned to a pair of admissions officers, each of whom independently assesses the application. If both officers decline the application, the application is declined. If there is a split opinion or both recommend admission, the application moves to a broader panel of admissions staff.

*On occasion, schools will let students write their way in.* That is, from time to time the admissions staff will be so impressed by a personal statement that they will admit an applicant despite weaknesses in her application that would have disqualified other applicants.

If you stop to think about it, the fact that a two-page personal statement has the potential to persuade a school to admit you is . . . rather incredible. It is really a testament to the power of words – typically around five hundred of them – to influence a decision that will change the course of your life.

---

---

So, what is it that makes a great application essay great? Put another way, what is it about a great essay that persuades the admissions committee to conclude “we need this student!”

The answer is: its capacity to create a favorable *emotional* response. And broadly speaking, that response is: **I like this person**. That’s it. It’s not about demonstrating qualifications or proving to the reader that you are a good student. That’s what grades and test scores are for. It’s about getting the reader to like you.

There are some people who balk at the idea that emotions play a role in admissions. Shouldn’t it just be about qualifications? Perhaps, if we lived in a world where raw talent and qualifications were the only things that mattered. But we know from experience that a variety of soft qualities – the ability to earn trust, emotional intelligence, etc. – do in fact influence success.

The emotional component of decision-making is certainly not unique to admissions. Emotions regularly play a role in some of the most significant decisions we make. Take for example the decision to sell a house. After my wife and I were informed that our bid on a home was the lowest of three, I wrote a letter to the seller telling her a little about us. At the end we attached a picture of us on a hike in Muir Woods (a state park just north of San Francisco). Several days later our agent informed us that the seller had really liked our letter and was moving forward with us, despite the fact that ours was the lowest of the bids she was considering.

If you stop to think about it, the seller had no logical reason to choose us. Her interest in the home would end when we bought it; from a logical perspective, she should have been focused on maximizing the sale price. But that’s not what happened. Instead, her decision was influenced by her emotional attachments and by the idea that a nice couple with a kid on the way would move in.

---

---

Admissions officers, perhaps more than home sellers, are susceptible to the same kinds of emotional pressures. They want to admit students whom they like. As you think about your own essay, try putting yourself in the shoes of an admissions officer who knows very little about you other than what's included in your application. Ask yourself: *would I want to hang out with me if I were an admissions officer?*

This brings me to my first point:

**Admissions officers are real human beings with real emotions. If they like you and think you are interesting, they will be more likely to admit you.**

Getting people to like you is not complicated. People tend to gravitate to other people they connect with. Sincerity, humor, and individual style are some of the elements in the equation. By contrast, the kind of information that doesn't really add to or subtract from your likeability are things such as your GPA and standardized-test scores. A high-scoring student who conveys negative qualities can come off as a smart jerk. But a low-scoring student with a compelling narrative might tempt the admissions committee to take a chance on him. This leads me to my second point:

**Your application is dynamic; as a general matter, all of your strengths and weaknesses are considered together.**

This includes your letters of recommendation, any honors you may have received, the difficulty of the classes you have taken, your extracurricular activities, your work experience, and of course your admissions essay, among other factors. Increasingly, it also includes information about you from beyond the four corners of your written application. I am talking in particular about that sea of data known as the Internet. Any online information about you can (and will) be accessed by

---

---

admissions officers. That means Facebook, Twitter, and any other social network you happen to be on. This concept is summarized by the following principle:

**Any information about you that can influence the admissions decision is part of the application, regardless of its source.**

In other words, *every bit of contact you have with the admissions officers is an opportunity to persuade them to admit you.* This might take the form of an essay, an addendum, an interview, or an on-campus visit hosted by admissions, to name a few examples. Keep in mind that just as these contacts have the potential to positively influence your candidacy, they also have the potential to undermine it.



## ORIGINAL FACE. . .

*By men's words we know them. –Marie de France*

The personal statement is in some ways the most important part of your application. Unlike your GPA and test scores, which convey almost nothing about your personality, the personal statement will be mined, scrutinized, and dissected for clues about the kind of person you are.

It's actually pretty difficult to write an essay about yourself that reflects your best qualities. Perhaps there is something about the completely unstructured nature of the application essay that contributes to this difficulty. Perhaps it's the fact that you are writing about yourself. Whatever the cause, this difficulty often manifests as a disconnect between the author's real personality and her personality on paper.

Let's explore this idea of "personality disconnect" through an example. The following is the opening of a law school admissions essay:

*Just after my graduation ceremony I received the following from Dr. Giles, my English professor: "Just writing to send you my congratulations and reiterate what a pleasure it has been to be your professor. Your presence alone has made this school a better place. You will be missed."*

*This was not the first congratulations I had received from a professor; I have always been a go-getter and a good student. But this one made me feel that all of the late nights and study sessions had been worth it.*

How would you describe the author? Is her message unique or interesting? Do you get the sense that she is trying too hard to impress?

People's reactions to the excerpt above range from "boring" to "boastful." And yet during my conversation with this student, it was clear that she was anything but

boring or boastful. So what went wrong? In this case, her desire to demonstrate achievement made her feel a need to make several references to her accomplishments without placing them in the context of her personal story. Without a personal narrative, these accomplishments and characterizations give the wrong impression. By the time we get to the last sentence, we're a bit tired of hearing about how great she is.

It's important to note here that the author's problems have nothing to do with her choice of subject. Rather, at some point in the drafting process, the presentation of that subject went off track. Let's try a bit of an adjustment:

*Just after my graduation ceremony I received the following from Dr. Giles, my English professor: "Just writing to send you my congratulations and reiterate what a pleasure it has been to be your professor. Your presence alone has made this school a better place. You will be missed."*

*I was the first person in my family to attend college and felt completely intimidated by professors like Dr. Giles during my first year. She was sharp, completely committed to her field, and painfully frank in her assessments of her students' work. But it was those frank assessments that pushed us to improve. Four years later, after studying with Dr. Giles for eight consecutive semesters, her note reminded me of how far I had come and made me feel that all of those late nights and study sessions had been worth it.*

What comes to mind now? Are you able to relate more to the author? Can you put your finger on what makes this version better (or worse)? Let's try another revision:

*I was the first person in my family to attend college and felt completely intimidated by professors like Dr. Giles. She was sharp, completely committed to her field, and painfully frank in her assessments of her students' work. But it was those frank assessments that pushed us to improve. After studying with Dr. Giles for eight consecutive semesters, I found myself on the graduation stage accepting the M.H. Goldstein Memorial Prize, given to the student with the highest overall achievement in his or her class (a completely overwhelming experience).*

---

---

*Immediately following the ceremony I received the following note from Dr. Giles: “Just writing to send you my congratulations and reiterate what a pleasure it has been to be your professor. Your presence alone has made this school a better place. You will be missed.”*

*The thought of that note still brings a smile to my face and reminds me not only of how far I have come, but of how lucky I have been to have had such great teachers.*

Did the author manage to win you over in this version? Why or why not?

In taking you through this exercise, my hope is to give you a sense of how a relatively minor adjustment can impact the reader’s feelings toward the author. The world of admissions essays is all about influencing those feelings, about writing an essay that allows the reader to connect with you.

My goals for this book are ambitious. Through this book I introduce several concepts that will help you utilize your greatest asset – your mind – so that you can use everything unique and distinctive about you to inspire your personal statement.

I mentioned earlier that this book is intended to condition your “writing muscles.” In the spirit of beginning that conditioning, I offer the following riddle, taken from the Zen tradition:

Ward, a spiritual man, was pursued through the streets by a group of angry students, one of whom was Blake. Blake had been a judo champion before he was a student and was quick and strong. Realizing that he would be overrun, Ward stopped and laid down his cup, which his predecessor had given to him. When Blake arrived, Ward said “This cup represents our group’s teaching. We can’t compete for it. We may as well fight over who owns the wind. Take it. It’s yours.” Full of rage, Blake growled “I came for the teaching, not for the cup.” Ward then responded: “Without thinking in terms of good or evil, what is the original face of Blake?”

What do you think is meant by the term “original face”? What is your original face?

---

---

## PART II

## DRIFTING

In many ways, admissions essays are more about thinking than about writing; after all, every written word owes its existence to a thought. Most of the books on this subject are concerned primarily with the “rules of writing” – grammar, syntax, word choice, etc. This approach is like a car manual that tells you to change the tires when the engine isn’t working. The new tires might look good, but they won’t get the car running.

Let’s start our discussion about thinking with a short story. What does the following bring to mind?

You find yourself in a small rowboat in the middle of the ocean. There are no other boats around you – in fact there is nothing but water for as far as you can see. You have an intuitive feeling that you should head north. As you begin fitting the oars into their locks, you notice a small compass mounted on the hull. Using the compass as a guide, you begin to turn the boat around until it is pointed north.

After you have rowed for some time, you notice that the waves have knocked your boat slightly off course. In fact, as you try to get into a rhythm, you find that the continual, gentle knocking of the waves makes it almost impossible to row in a straight line. Frustrated by your seeming lack of progress, you stop rowing. Within a few seconds the boat begins to turn and drift west. You begin to wonder why you were headed north in the first place. Perhaps west is a better direction?

After taking a deep breath, you rotate the boat and begin rowing west. For the first few minutes it seems like you are making good progress. You notice that you are spending a lot less time fighting the current, which makes it much easier for you to get into a rhythm. But your progress is stopped suddenly by a change of current. Now the waves are headed south, and you are again fighting to stay on track. After struggling with the boat for another hour you throw the oars in the hull and close your eyes. How can you possibly get anywhere in this water? The whole endeavor feels pointless.

Okay, so the story of the rower seems like an obvious metaphor for the admissions-essay writing process, right? After all, this is a book about admissions essays.

The metaphor is actually meant to illustrate a more fundamental point about the interplay between our brain and our mind. Imagine for a moment that the rower is the conscious part of you and that the ocean is your brain. The conscious part of you has an idea that it wants to proceed in a particular direction. In our case, it wants to write an exceptional admissions essay. But your consciousness happens to be situated in the incomprehensibly complex tangle of circuits that comprises your brain. And one of the properties of your brain is that it works continuously, emitting little thoughts and emotions, some of which find their way to your conscious self.

You don't have to take my word for it that we are built this way. There is a simple, quick test that demonstrates what I'm talking about. Here it is:

Simple Test:	
1.	Find a quiet, secluded area with a comfortable place to sit.
2.	Sit down and close your eyes.
3.	Clear your mind of all thoughts for five minutes.

Surprisingly difficult, isn't it? Like the rower in the story, we can't really control the waves of thoughts and emotions that pop into our heads. To use a different metaphor, you might think of the brain as a thought-secreting organ. It oozes thoughts without regard for your intentions or desires.

Most people don't generally pay attention to that stream of thoughts, emotions, and impulses. They are too busy reacting to the events that are going

on around them. In many situations, this is completely appropriate, if not necessary. Imagine trying to drive a car while focusing on the murmurs of your mind. Not exactly a safe state to be in for that particular activity.

For a writer, however, it is not only a safe state to be in, but a necessary one. If you stop to listen to these little rumblings, you will notice that they are like pure, unedited letters from your core to your consciousness. Sometimes they are surprising. Sometimes they are entertaining. Occasionally they are a bit scary. In all cases, these little sparks of thought and emotion will help you infuse your creativity, insight, and personality into your writing.

Throughout this book, I use the term “mindfulness” to refer to the process of monitoring the little fountain of mental activity within us. Most of us are not in the habit of tuning-in to our own thoughts, much less of using these thoughts for a creative endeavor. In the next chapter I introduce an easy, intuitive framework for getting acquainted with mindfulness, and for using mindfulness to write an admissions essay that will be noticed.

# MINDFULNESS

---

Imagine being asked to evaluate a personal experience using only two emotions: Like and Dislike. Would be kind of hard to write something meaningful, wouldn't it? Of course, the advent of social media has heralded an age in which we are often encouraged to reduce our feelings to these emotions.

Many of the students who come to me are motivated by a sense that their writing is missing something. But I haven't yet had a student who didn't have *something* interesting or unique to say. Somewhere between that original message and the finished essay they get sidetracked.

Nine times out of ten, the problem is a misplaced focus on "what the admissions committee wants to hear." Inevitably, this leads students to think about things like "academics," "leadership," and "public service" rather than the real reasons their experiences are important to them. They're not quite limiting themselves to Like and Dislike, but they're not that far off.

I've been a personal-statement coach for the better part of a decade, during which time I've learned a thing or two. A big part of my job is to chip away at the limitations that my clients impose on themselves. Once these limiters have been removed, all sorts of interesting information floats to the surface and we can start thinking about different ways to approach the essay. But you don't necessarily need someone like me to do that for you. With a little practice, you can do this on your own. Mindfulness is just one technique for getting in touch with your own thoughts, for opening yourself to the full spectrum of human emotion. It's about gaining access to the only source of information that will allow you to write from the heart.

---

---

People-watching is a great way to practice mindfulness. For the following exercise, see if you can find a place that has a lot of foot traffic. It might be a busy sidewalk, a café, or the quad in your school. Try to find a place where you won't run into friends, family, colleagues, or acquaintances. Now find an area off to the side where you can sit comfortably and watch the goings-on. As you sit there, relaxed, watching the scene in front of you, gently focus your attention on the body language of the people you are watching. Take notice of your observations. Do people seem hurried, relaxed, happy, tense, angry, distracted, purposeful, or something else? What is it about them that leads you to your conclusion? A facial expression? A posture? The way they are walking? Avoid focusing on any single person for too long and instead try to passively observe the entirety of the area you have chosen. As you listen, watch, and feel the scene unfold in front of you, what thoughts come to mind?

If you sit for long enough your thoughts will inevitably stray from people-watching to something else. Maybe it's an assignment, a desire to eat, or a person you have a crush on. When this happens, simply acknowledge the thought and turn your attention gently back to people-watching. The goal is to stay lightly focused on the scene in front of you.

At some point you will feel the need to leave. Gently turn your attention away from the area you have selected and take a moment to reflect on your people-watching experience. Did you have any particularly memorable thoughts or revelations? How often were you distracted from the exercise?

People-watching is a great way to develop your innate ability to passively observe the world around you. We are all born with this ability. The passive observer is the part of you that takes in all of your experiences without reacting to them or judging them. It's like a little video camera that records all of the sensory input your body sends to your brain.

---

---

There's a part of us that just sits back and takes everything in, and with some practice we can get better at seeing the world from that non-reactive, non-judgmental perspective. It's a great perspective to have. As a passive observer, you are able to take notice of an incredible amount of information that you might not have otherwise been aware of. This information, and the thousand little discoveries and insights that accompany it, are a kind of fuel for your essay-writing efforts.



The best personal statements cause the reader to form a positive emotional connection to the author. Cultivating that emotional connection is no easy task. The only way you can hope to achieve this feat is to communicate something about your essential character – an aspect of you that is distinct from other applicants. Mindfulness is a tool that can aid you in exploring that essential character.

In the previous section I discussed the idea of the passive observer and how viewing your surroundings in that frame of mind makes you more receptive to the huge amount of information bombarding us from all directions. Imagine now turning that passive observer on yourself, another great fountain of information. By gently focusing the passive observer on yourself, rather than on others, you'll start to notice all sorts of useful information that might not otherwise have been accessible. This process – the process of experiencing your thoughts in a non-judgmental, non-reactive manner – is the essence of mindfulness.

I invite you to concentrate, at least for now, on using mindfulness to aid you in the accomplishment of the following three goals:

- 1. Deconstruct.** As you reflect on your life experiences, take note of the many emotions, feelings, thoughts, and sensations that arise. You might think of each

experience as a culinary masterpiece. Using taste alone an inexperienced chef can name only the most obvious ingredients. But an accomplished chef can identify all of the ingredients and their respective proportions. Similarly, if you are attuned to your own thoughts, you can more fully deconstruct your experiences by taking note of the various elements that compose them.

2. Avoid the “what the admissions committee wants to hear” trap. The most common challenge for students (by far) is to express themselves without resorting to the clichés that admissions officers are tired of reading.

Take the example of a student who wants to write about her experience in student government. Reflecting on this experience, she becomes overly focused on the idea that her commitment to student government demonstrates leadership (and that leadership is something schools look for). With this in mind she writes the following:

*Serving as Student Body Vice-President changed my life in several ways. First, it instilled in me the values of hard work, public service, and satisfaction in a job well done. But more importantly, it taught me what it means to be a leader. In the future, I would like to continue my involvement with student government at [X School], which will allow me to polish the leadership skills I have already acquired.*

Sounds like it could've been written by any student, right? And that's precisely the problem! By the time the admissions officer has finished the paragraph, she is yawning or wondering how many other essays she has to read that day. The reason why the paragraph fails to capture interest is that it is a generic statement that does little to i) demonstrate that the student really is a leader, ii) differentiate the student from the hundreds of other students who were also in student government, iii) communicate something unique about the student's character or personality.

---

---

The mindful student avoids this problem by simply acknowledging when her thoughts meander to admissions clichés. Rather than becoming overly focused on a particular idea, she takes note of every thought, emotion, sensation, etc., that arises. She can then begin the process of selecting and developing a story that is authentic and unique. For example, she might choose to talk about how her experience changed her view of politics:

*I started out my campaign for Student Body Vice-President thinking that the election would be about issues affecting students. That assumption wasn't exactly untrue, but I underestimated how much the election could be influenced by...other factors. Although I was organized, my plan wasn't particularly complicated – I simply tried to be myself while talking with as many other students as I could. To my surprise, I was elected by a landslide. But this left me wondering whether the qualities that help someone win an election are also the qualities that help them govern wisely.*

Now the author has given us something to think about. We also know a little more about her worldview and personal philosophy. Although her actual experience may have been similar in many ways to the experience of other students, she manages to distinguish herself by presenting a few intelligent observations.

- 3.** Think about the effect that your words will have on someone who has never met you. Ask yourself whether your words, phrases, or ideas might be interpreted differently from the interpretation you intend them to have.



Be patient with yourself – this kind of work is difficult for everyone. However, it is necessary. To find your true voice you have to know, from moment to moment, what's on your mind.

## PART III

## THE WRITING CYCLE

Everyone has at one time or another faced a blank screen. The next several chapters explore themes of process, content, structure, and format, all of which will help you as you progress from empty page to finished essay.



The essay-writing process can be broken down into three distinct phases: **Brainstorming, Drafting, and Editing**. These phases are connected, as suggested by the following illustration:



The three phases are presented as a cycle to illustrate the following principle:

**The best essays are the result of many successive brainstorming sessions, drafts, and edits.**

With that in mind, let's take a look at a few ways to approach each of these phases.

## BRAINSTORMING

### i. **Brainstorming** → **Generating ideas**

Brainstorming is not just about making a list of ideas. It's much more than that. *Brainstorming is the process of **generating, developing, and shaping** ideas.*

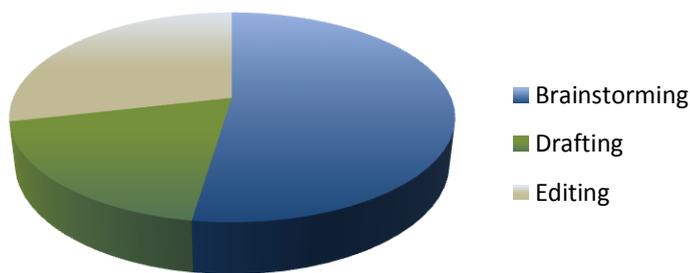
Everyone engages in brainstorming in one form or another. There are some students who say that they prefer to skip brainstorming and go straight to the first draft. But it is impossible to write a coherent essay without spending some minimal amount of time figuring out what to write about. So it is more accurate to say that some people prefer a very short brainstorming process.

Don't give short shrift to brainstorming! The amount of time spent in this stage is almost always reflected in the quality of the essay. Everyone is different, but as a general matter I encourage students to spend the majority of their time brainstorming. In my case, for example, that usually means a bit more than half of my time.

Consider the example of Michelangelo.

Confronted with a giant block of marble he does not quickly begin to chisel a head. Rather, he contemplates the stone. He walks around it. He leaves and returns later to continue his study. When he is able to see the outline of David in the stone, he

#### How Alex Budgets His Time



begins his work. Once that happens, creating the statue is a matter of carefully executing the technique he has already acquired.

Everything begins with the essay prompt. The prompt not only provides the basic guidelines for your essay, but also provides clues to what the essay should be about. So the first step in the brainstorming process is to do a little prompt analysis.

Let's try an example from the University of California application:

**Tell us about a personal quality, talent, accomplishment, contribution or experience that is important to you. What about this quality or accomplishment makes you proud and how does it relate to the person you are?**

Okay, the basics. The prompt asks for two different but related pieces of information. The first sentence asks you to identify something – a quality, talent, accomplishment or experience. The second sentence asks you to take what you have identified and show why it is relevant to you.

Let's stand in the University of California's shoes for a moment. Why would the UC care about what makes you proud? Because by asking you to describe something that makes you proud, it is asking you to reveal something about your value system. Put another way, if you are proud of something, it's because it is important to you. There are (hopefully) many things in your life you are proud of; your choice to discuss one in particular says something about you. So this essay is not really about the actual accomplishment or experience as much as it is about revealing what is important to you.

Now that we have a very general idea of what this essay is about, it's time to come up with some ideas for our topic. Find a quiet place and turn off your phone/TV/cool electronic toy. You'll do better with fewer distractions.

---

---

As thoughts and ideas come to you, write them down. It doesn't really matter how you write them. Some people prefer lists or bullet points. I prefer to space my ideas out across the page so that I have room to jot down notes under each idea. This is your idea page. Let's take a look at a hypothetical idea page:

Piano - how I learned how to feel the music



The Big Game - essay on soccer?

Motivated/hard worker - focused on goals, will accomplish them in college.

Typing 120 words/minute - ??

When aunt Sharon passed away - personal relationships, life lessons

Volunteering at the hospital - made me want to be a doctor

X-ray Vision - special talent: seeing through anything (walls, phony excuses, myself)

There are a few aspects of the idea page that I'd like to draw your attention to:

First, notice how each idea is a discrete, relatively narrow topic. Students often feel the need to fill the essay with descriptions of all the great things they are doing. There are two problems with this approach: 1) it doesn't make for a cohesive essay, and 2) there isn't enough space to properly develop all of the different ideas presented. The result is a disjointed essay that is broad in scope but shallow in depth. No one wants to read those!

It is impossible to really describe who you are in an admissions essay. You are large, you contain multitudes! There is simply not enough space to treat those multitudes. There is enough space, however, to reveal one facet of your personality. The term "facet" comes from the French *facette*, a diminutive of *face*. We all have many "faces"; the admissions essay is about illustrating one or two.

Second, two of the ideas above may stand out as unusual: "Typing 120 words per minute" and "X-Ray Vision." The first is an accomplishment/talent that seems totally mundane. The second is a fictional talent. I have included them to emphasize the following point: **Don't restrict yourself to the obvious.** Take your creativity off the leash, especially in the brainstorming phase. Unusual ideas can flower into a memorable essay.

A corollary of the point above is that the topic alone does not make the essay. Some of the best essays are on very common topics. And many essays on unusual topics fall flat. An essay is great because of its capacity to elicit a favorable emotional response. Demonstrating character, insight, and a unique angle are some of the tools that help you earn that response.

---

---

---

## ii. Brainstorming Developing ideas

Back to our brainstorming. Now that we have some topics in front of us, we can start to develop them a bit by filling in the details and thinking about the message we would like to convey. Recall our discussions about mindfulness. This is a great place to get in that frame of mind. As you think about each topic, try to attune yourself to the various emotions, feelings, and thoughts that come up. Use that heightened awareness to distinguish between ideas that are genuine and authentic and those dull, hackneyed ideas that your mind gravitates toward because they sound like something the admissions committee wants to hear.

Are there any topics on our idea page that fall in the category of “something the admissions committee wants to hear”? How about “Motivated/Hard worker”? It is true that colleges like students who are motivated, hard workers, but there is a big difference between trying to convince someone that you are a hard worker and implying it through an example. Would you believe a stranger who claimed to be a hard worker?

The better way to persuade someone that you possess a particular quality is to select facts and examples from your life that demonstrate the point. Show, don't tell. Let the reader draw his own conclusions.

Now that we've briefly reviewed our list of ideas and eliminated one, let's see if we can develop the idea of “The Big Game.” We'll assume that the author, Mina, has played soccer for many years and that her team recently made it to regional finals. She wants to write about the tournament but is a bit stuck as to how she'll turn her experiences into an essay.

---

---

Of course Mina already has all the information she needs to write the essay. All of her experiences, epiphanies, emotions, and wisdom is locked away somewhere in her mind; all she needs to do is access it.

This problem of unlocking your own mind – you might call it “the access problem” – is shared by everyone. One of the most effective ways to solve this problem is to ask yourself a series of simple questions. Form your questions from the perspective of a stranger who is interested in learning everything about you and your chosen topic. The questions you ask need to be comprehensive enough to allow this stranger to get a real sense of who you are.

Here’s an example of what I mean:

**Alex:** How long have you played soccer?

**Mina:** 11 years.

**Alex:** How did you get started?

**Mina:** My dad signed me up at AYSO.

**Alex:** Do you know why he chose soccer and not some other sport? Did your dad play soccer?

**Mina:** Not really, but my grandfather played. He was a forward for the Uruguayan national team.

**Alex:** Do you know what sorts of tournaments he played in?

**Mina:** He was in a lot of South American tournaments. I’m not sure whether he ever played in the World Cup.

**Alex:** Did you know your grandfather?

**Mina:** Yes, but he passed away when I was 12.

**Alex:** Do you think he was one of the reasons your dad signed you up?

**Mina:** I've never really thought about it that way, but I guess now that you mention it, yes.

**Alex:** Did you hear stories about your grandfather's playing growing up?

**Mina:** Yeah, I remember a lot of stories about that.

**Alex:** Did he go to your games?

**Mina:** I loved it when he came to my games. He would cheer so loudly. And after the game he would always take me out to Gino's, my favorite restaurant.

**Alex:** Okay, so tell me a little about the positions you play. Do you remember what you played when you started?

**Mina:** I was actually a goalie for the first few years. But I remember really wanting to be out on the field so I became a left midfielder. I'm left-footed.

**Alex:** So you kick with your left? Do you also write with your left?

**Mina:** Nope; write with my right.

**Alex:** What position do you play now?

**Mina:** I'm still a left midfielder.

**Alex:** And I noticed you're on Varsity?

**Mina:** Yeah. Junior Varsity until halfway through my sophomore year.

**Alex:** Do you play with any clubs?

**Mina:** Yes, two clubs.

**Alex:** Have you noticed any differences between the dynamic of your Varsity team and the dynamic of the clubs you play with?

**Mina:** Well, club soccer is more competitive. People play hard and they want to win. Not to say people don't want to win on Varsity, but it's different at high school.

**Alex:** That's interesting. Which do you prefer?

**Mina:** Playing club definitely makes me a better player, so if I had to choose between only playing club and Varsity, I would choose club. But I like my high school team better, because it's more about the team. I'm friends with pretty much everyone there and so practices are really fun.

**Alex:** If you like Varsity better, why wouldn't you choose it, if you had to make a choice?

**Mina:** I guess because I do want to do more than just have fun. But even if I'm not out there with friends, I still love just being on the field. It's sort of like a moving chess game. Players have to constantly move around based on where the ball is, where their teammates are, and where the other side is. I really like that part of it.

**Alex:** Looks like you were a counselor at a youth soccer camp. What that about?

**Mina:** Yeah, it's a free all-girls soccer camp for girls who don't have the money to join something like AYSO. It's amazing being around those kids and teaching them about the sport. They come in never having played, and after a few weeks we're doing scrimmages and analyzing soccer videos. I still keep in touch with some of those girls.

**Alex:** Tell me about one of these girls.

**Mina:** Okay, well, the first that comes to mind is "Patatina Brava." She comes from an Italian family and at home her nickname is Patatina, which I think means "little potato." Something to do with her butt. Anyway she's an awesome defender and so the head coach added "Brava," which means "good."

She came to me during the middle of summer camp and told me about some problems her family was having. She has a real quiet kind of personality and I knew that it was probably kind of hard for her to tell me so I thought it must be serious. After talking through some issues I arranged for her to stay at our house for a while until things cooled off at her house. So I became a big sister for a few months. We still talk almost every day.

**Alex:** Are you doing the camp again?

**Mina:** Yep, next summer.

**Alex:** Do you think "Patatina Brava" will be there again?

**Mina:** I hope so!

**Alex:** So, do you want to play in college?

**Mina:** I would love to, if I can make the team.

**Alex:** Okay, slight change of topic but...what is the most embarrassing thing that has happened to you on the soccer field?

**Mina:** Oh god! That's easy. Last year I accidentally scored a header against my own team. A forward from the other team had a breakaway and I started to sprint back to our goal. The forward made a shot but must have hit it weird because it went straight at my face instead of the goal. I tried to flick my head a little to clear the ball away but ended up knocking it straight into the upper right corner of our goal. It was like a perfect head shot...against my own team.

**Alex:** So what did you do after that happened?

**Mina:** I was so totally embarrassed. I wanted to cry.

**Alex:** How did your team members and coach react?

**Mina:** My coach, who was usually pretty hard on us, came over to me and put his hand on my shoulder and said "that could

have happened to anyone. Don't worry, it's just a game." Those words really stuck with me.

**Alex:** Why?

**Mina:** I think there are a lot of people that get caught up in the competition. At the end of the day, it's just a little ball being kicked around a grass field. There are way more important things than winning a soccer game.

*[conversation continues...]*

After reading through the excerpt above, do you have any ideas for Mina's essay? What other questions would you want to ask her? Do you feel like you already have some sense of who she is?

The interview above illustrates how different lines of questions can reveal important information that the author has either taken for granted or overlooked. Mina's initial idea had been to focus on a particular tournament; through a series of questions we have discovered that her connection to soccer is much deeper and richer than the average player's. Most of us have a tendency to take our own experiences for granted or to fail to take the time to thoroughly understand them.

Sprawling valleys of information can be developed through the right kinds of questions. All it takes is a bit of practice (and discipline) to hone your question-asking skills.



What are the "right" kinds of questions? As always, the questions you ask should depend on the goals you are trying to achieve. In the world of admissions essays, your questions should allow you to not only create a comprehensive foundation of facts on your topic, but also to see the deeper connections and relationships that tie these facts together and make them relevant to you. By "fact,"

---

---

I mean a piece of information that does not require or depend on your interpretation.

Many of my students find it helpful to organize their questions by category. The following is an example of the types of categories and questions that can be helpful when thinking about a sport you've participated in:

<b>Background/ Foundational Questions</b>	How long have you done X sport?
	How did you get started?
	Why did you get started?
	Are you still doing it? Why or why not?
	How often do you play/train?
<b>Development</b>	Have you improved at X sport over time? How so?
	What roles/responsibilities do you have now that you didn't have when you started?
	What skills do you have now that you didn't have when you started?
	How has your perception of the game changed over time?
<b>Specific Events</b>	Think about your entire experience playing X sport. What are the most memorable events?
	For each event: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>i) What happened and why was it memorable?</li> <li>ii) What was your role?</li> <li>iii) Who else was involved?</li> <li>iv) How does that event relate to who you are?</li> <li>v) How does the memory of that event make you feel? Why?</li> <li>vi) Did the event play any role in your personal development? Did it change your view of something?</li> </ol>

<b>Positive Aspects of Sport</b>	In what ways does the sport improve you physically?
	In what ways does participating in the sport make you a better person?
<b>Negative Aspects of Sport</b>	Is there anything about the sport that has negatively impacted you?
	Have you done anything to counteract that negative impact?
<b>Persons, Places, Things</b>	Describe the physical properties of the area where you play.
	Have you traveled out of town to train or compete? Where?
	Who else is involved with you in X sport? What role do they play?
<b>Emotions</b>	Have you ever been embarrassed while participating in X sport? Describe what happened and why you felt embarrassed. Did the event cause you to change in any way?
	Have you ever felt angry while participating in X sport? Why? Was your anger directed at someone else? At yourself? Why?
	Have you ever felt frustrated while participating in X sport? Why?
	Describe instances in which you felt disappointed while participating in X sport? Why did you feel disappointed?
	How would you respond to people who say "It's just a game"?
	How does the sport make you feel? Is this a unique feeling, or are there other activities that cause you to feel the same way?
	What aspects of the sport are in line with your personal characteristics? For example, a relationship might be observed between Curling, which requires a high degree of strategy, and people who tend to be analytical or calculating.
<b>Interplay with Personal Characteristics</b>	What aspects of the sport are out of line with your personal characteristics? For example, a small person with a slight build would not appear to be suited to the sport of Rugby.
	Has the sport shaped or influenced your personal characteristics? How?

<b>Relationships to Human Condition/Society</b>	In what ways does the sport reveal aspects of the human condition?
	In what ways is the sport a microcosm for society?
<b>Mentors, Mentees, Coaches</b>	Have you had any mentors? How did they help you along the way?
	Have you mentored anyone? Describe your relationship with your mentee.
	Describe your relationship with your coach. In what ways has it changed over time?

Keep in mind that the categories and questions above are just a starting point. After every answer, ask yourself whether you need to ask a follow-up question. Take another look at my interview with Mina. There are a million other questions I could have asked about her grandfather, right? When did he emigrate from Uruguay? Did he speak in Spanish to her? What other memories of him did she have? As you think of and respond to questions, take note of the thoughts and emotions that come up. What direction are those thoughts and emotions going? Why? As you might imagine, question-asking can be (and often should be) an enveloping activity requiring your complete attention.



---

### iii. Brainstorming Shaping ideas

Now that you have generated and developed your essay ideas, it's time to mold these ideas into something that you can use to create your first draft. We need some sort of structure or template that will help guide your writing.

You might notice that I'm taking pains to avoid using the word "outline." There is a very good reason for this: traditional outlines don't work.

For reasons related to the way in which writing is and has been taught, outlines tend to be about form rather than substance. What I mean is that students have come to associate outlines with the structure of the essay – the number and organization of paragraphs – rather than its content. The "Five Paragraph Essay" is a great example of what I mean. Here is a sample outline for a Five Paragraph Essay:

#### **Paragraph 1**

- Introduction
- Thesis Statement

#### **Paragraph 2**

- Topic Sentence
- Example/Evidence
- Explain how example supports topic sentence
- Summary/Transition

#### **Paragraph 3**

- Topic Sentence
- Example/Evidence
- Explain how example supports topic sentence
- Summary/Transition

#### **Paragraph 4**

- Topic Sentence
- 
-

- Example/Evidence
- Explain how example supports topic sentence
- Summary/Transition

### **Paragraph 5/ Conclusion**

- Summarize main points
- Restate thesis

What stands out about this outline? How about its repetitive, formulaic quality?

Unfortunately students are rarely taught about the interplay between the form of an essay and the substance of an essay. The form of an essay should support its substance. So what sort of substance does the form of the Five Paragraph Essay support? Something like a scientific proof, because it allows the author to lay out a bunch of evidence to support her point.

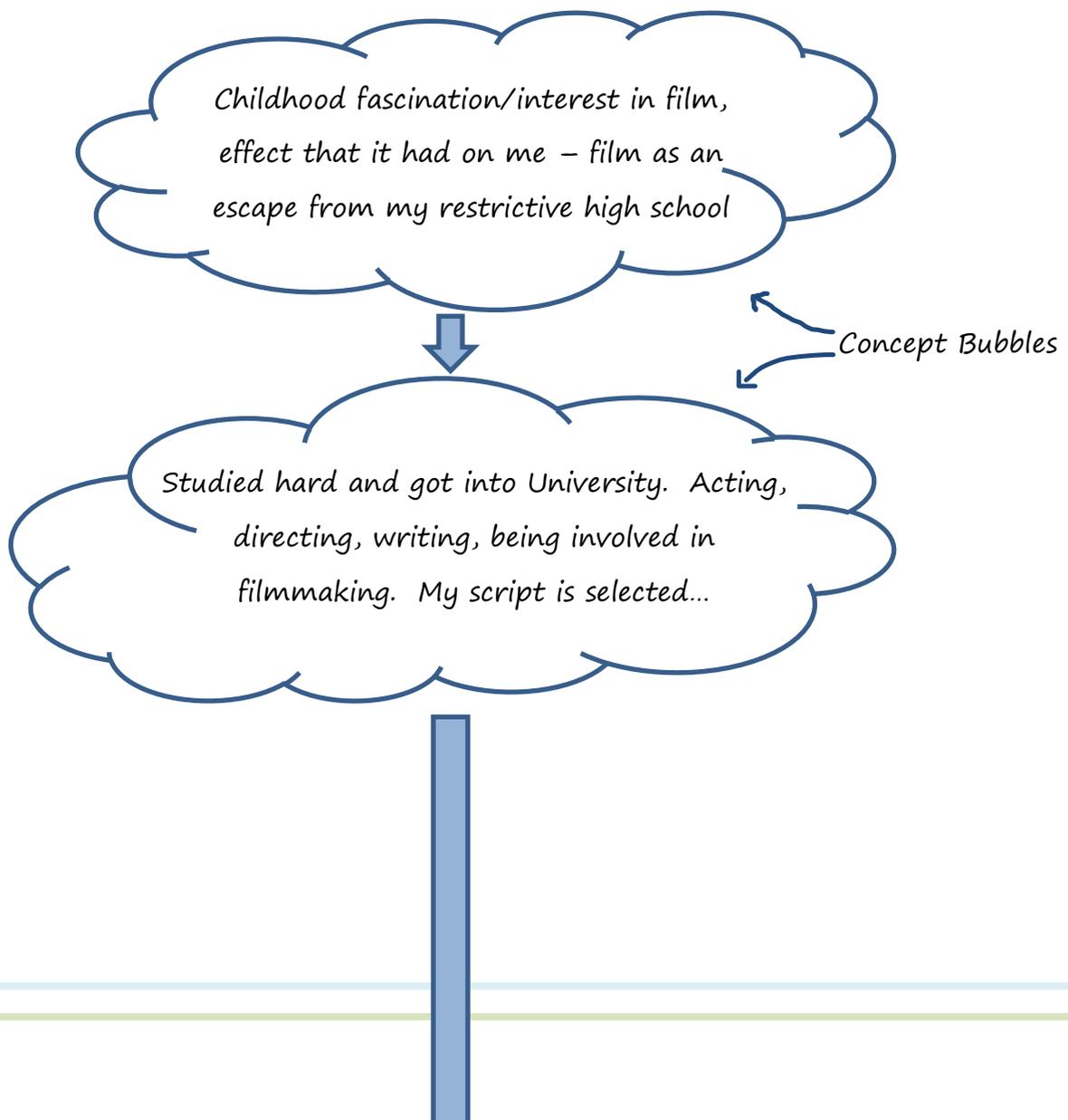
But the purpose of the admissions essay is not to argue a particular point; it's to win over the admissions committee. The Five Paragraph Essay is therefore a poor structure to use in this context. You cannot hope to win someone over through a proof. Something more personal, more natural is required.

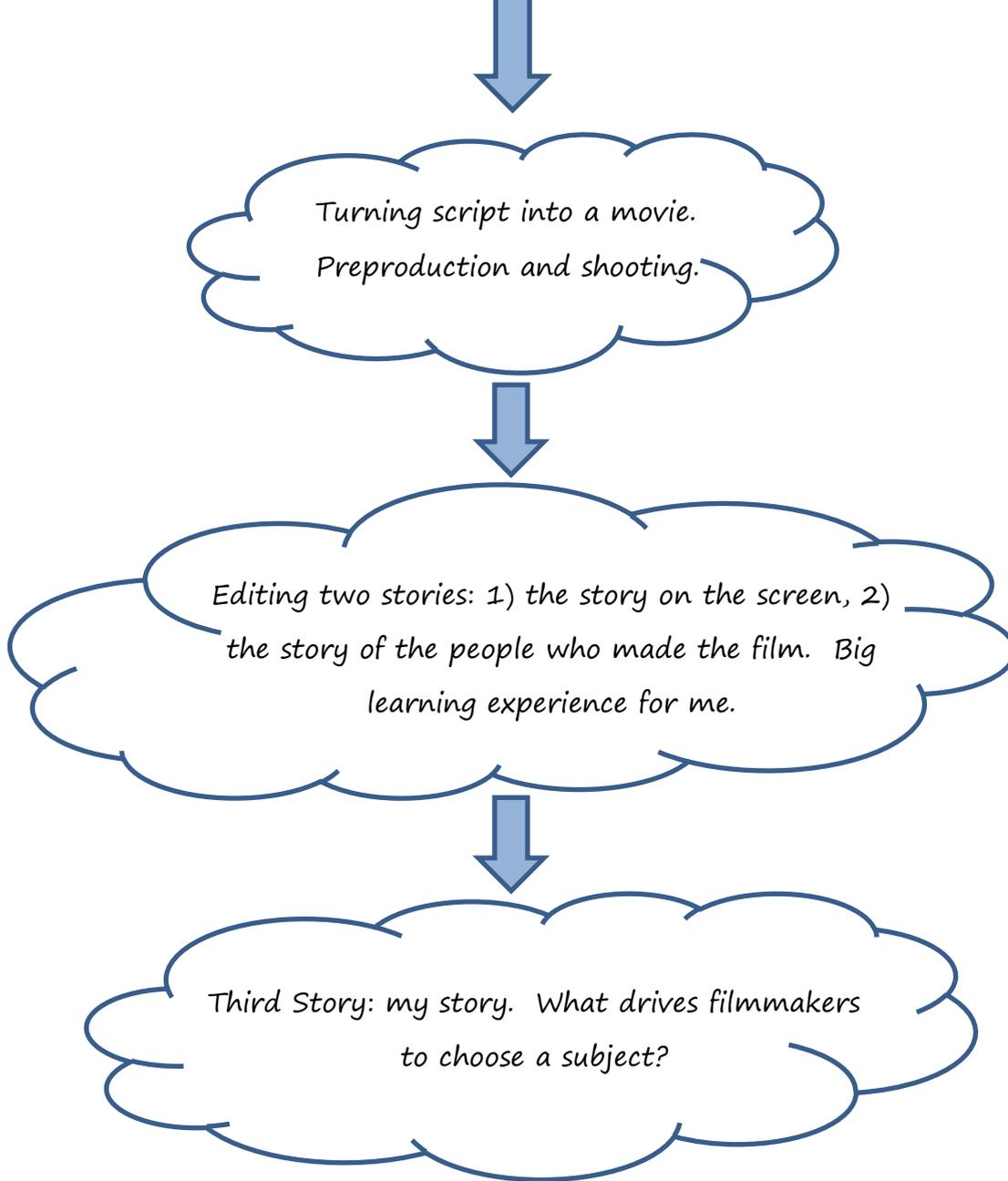
Of course, the Five Paragraph Essay is just one type of essay structure. But because the term "outline" seems to carry with it so much baggage, I use another term that better describes the process of shaping ideas into an essay: **Concept Map**.

As the name implies, a **Concept Map** is more concerned with concepts than structure. These concepts are linked together in a sequence, providing a kind of map for the first draft.

Outline	Concept Map
Emphasis on form	Emphasis on substance
Shows how paragraphs are structured	Shows how ideas flow
Uses headings, subordination, bullet points	Uses concept bubbles
Focuses on charting each sentence	Focus on concepts/high-level analysis

Here is an example of a **Concept Map** for an essay about a student's interest in film:





One of the first things you might notice about the example above is that it is not very text heavy. It doesn't include lengthy descriptions; everything is reduced to core concepts. This makes it easy to understand what the essay is really about.

The **Concept Map** is an incredibly powerful tool for thinking critically about your essay. It forces you to work directly with the building blocks of your writing. Without the distractions of traditional outlines – “topic sentences,” “summaries,” and

the like – it will be easier for you to focus on shaping your ideas into a unique, stand-out essay.

Before using your **Concept Map** to write your first draft, ask yourself the following questions:

Concept Map Questions:	
1.	Are the concepts authentic/genuine?
2.	What message will the essay convey about me?
3.	Are the concepts interesting/engaging?
4.	Will the essay be responsive to the prompt?
5.	Is the flow of ideas logical? (If you read it to a stranger could he/she follow you?)
6.	What additions, subtractions, or revisions would improve clarity?
7.	Can the flow of ideas be reordered? How?

Use your answers to these questions to revise your **Concept Map** or create a new one. If you have time, try a second, third, fourth version. Tap into your creative side. Take chances. Now is the time to explore different concepts for your essay.

Let's return for a moment to the example above. The first concept bubbles are a chronological survey of the author's interest in film, ending with a description of a specific experience. The fourth bubble analyzes that experience. The fifth makes a broader observation about the interaction between a filmmaker's life and the films he makes, using a personal experience to illustrate the point. So in essence, this **Concept Map** shows that the essay will describe the author's interest in film over time and use a specific experience to present some of his observations about the nature of filmmaking.

Turning to our list of questions, are the concepts “authentic”? Yes, they are drawn from the author’s personal experiences and reflect his unique viewpoints regarding film. What message will the essay convey? The author has a longstanding connection to film and has contemplated what role film plays in his life. By focusing on his relationship to film, the author comes off as intelligent and reflective. Are the concepts interesting/engaging? Yes, the reader will not only get a sense of what the author has done but how he thinks. Will the essay be responsive to the prompt? Yes, the **Concept Map** lays out the author’s interest in film and discusses some of his filmmaking activities. Although it doesn’t directly state what he has gained from his involvement, it suggests how the author’s life has been enriched through film. Is the flow of ideas logical? Yes, the first three paragraphs describe a chronological development and are logically connected. The fourth paragraph builds on the third. The fifth paragraph builds on the fourth. What additions, subtractions, revisions would improve clarity? The author should clarify how the idea of a restrictive high school environment fits in. Can the flow of ideas be reordered? Yes, they can always be reordered!

Let’s see what happens if you use the fourth concept bubble as the opening. The map now begins

After the shoot in the editing room. Two stories: the plot on the screen and the back story of how the movie was made. Hostel scene: searching forever for that location!  
Another example here. Big learning experience.

This reordered **Concept Map** will require a few other revisions (the following is one of many ways the first concept bubble can be revised so that it will later make sense as an opening paragraph):

Realization in the editing room. Every film is about two stories: the plot on the screen and the back story of how the movie was made.

---

---

The next bubble should explain what the author means here. We can use his experience shooting the script he wrote. Now we have:

Realization in the editing room. Every film is about two stories: the plot on the screen and the back story of how the movie was made.

How my script was selected. Turning script into a movie – preproduction and shooting. Backstory: searching forever in the heat for a location for the hostel scene! Another example here. Big learning experience.

Now that the author has explained what he means, he can go on and make the point about how a filmmaker's art reflects his life:

Realization in the editing room. Every film is about two stories: the plot on the screen and the backstory of how the movie was made.

How my script was selected. Turning script into a movie – preproduction and shooting. Backstory: searching forever in the heat for a location for the hostel scene! Another example here. Big learning experience.

Third story: my story. What drives filmmakers to choose a particular subject. Discovering the connection between my childhood friend and the short story I recently wrote.

Our revised **Concept Map** looks okay so far, but we're missing the discussion of the author's early interest in the subject, as well as the film activities he has participated in, both of which make the essay responsive to the prompt. Can we reincorporate those ideas? How about:

Realization in the editing room. Every film is about two stories: the plot on the screen and the back story of how the movie was made.

How my script was selected. Turning script into a movie – preproduction and shooting. Backstory: searching forever in the heat for a location for the hostel scene! Another example here. Big learning experience.

Third story: my story. Reasons I got into film, my upbringing, film stuff I did in college. Our experiences shape the artist we become, the obsessions we have, etc.

---

---

Example from my life: discovering the connection between my childhood friend and the short story I recently wrote.

And now we have another **Concept Map** to think about. Which version do you like better? Why? (A finished essay based on the first Concept Map above is presented on pages 68, 69).

The best **Concept Maps** are like short but sweet “elevator pitches.” Imagine you have a great idea that you’re trying to sell to an investor. The investor is a busy person and can only give you the time it takes for her to ride the elevator from ground level to her office on the 63rd floor. What do you want her to walk away with? Well, your explanation needs to be short but also clear enough so she understands exactly what you’re talking about. That means selecting and presenting only the core concepts of your idea. Those concepts need to be organized in a way that makes sense. And your pitch needs to be interesting enough to capture her attention.

When you have a few **Concept Maps** you are comfortable with, consider reading them to someone you trust (a favorite teacher, an academic counselor, or an admissions consultant, for example). Are they able to follow your ideas? Are they interested? Did they have any questions? Their reactions might give you clues about ways to improve your Concept Map.



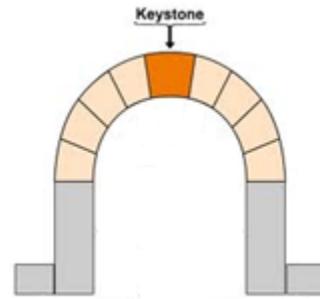
By now you are hopefully feeling a bit more certain, a bit more confident in your approach to the admissions essay. In this chapter we explored a system for brainstorming that focuses on generating and developing your ideas. We also

---

---

explored how those ideas can be shaped into a Concept Map that will serve as the foundation of your essay.

There is however one important point that I've left out. It is a keystone of sorts for the conceptual framework presented here. For those who aren't familiar with the term, a keystone is a single stone or brick that holds an arch together. Without the keystone, the arch will crumble.



That point is: **in all stages of essay writing, be mindful.** Cultivate an awareness of the sensations, emotions, and thoughts that arise as you think about your essay. Strive to put that awareness at the center of all your admissions-essay efforts.



## DRAFTING

---

Imagine being surrounded by a thousand pieces of clear glass. Your task is to sort these pieces into three piles. The first pile will contain the glass that, for one reason or another, you're not interested in keeping. The second pile will have the really nice glass that you definitely want to keep. The third pile is reserved for those pieces that you're not sure about.

As you begin sorting, you realize that it's actually pretty hard to make distinctions among the different pieces. Some stand out – maybe because of a crack or a fancy detail like a bevel – but most are similar in many respects. Holding each piece in the air, you observe that the light simply passes through. There is nothing particularly memorable about most of these pieces.

Every once in a while however, you discover a piece that is not just clear glass but is instead a prism. As you hold it in the air it throws off a beautiful array of color that commands your attention. You can't help sitting for a moment to admire the display. Even if a prism doesn't make it to the "keep" pile, you feel compelled to put it in the "maybe" pile to revisit later. The fact that a piece of glass is a prism draws your attention away from the other flaws that it might have. You *want* to keep these prisms, regardless of any defects.

The story of the glass sifter is of course a metaphor for the application-review process from the perspective of an admissions officer. Like the pieces of clear glass, most applications have a flat, indistinctive quality. Standardized test scores and GPAs can serve as a starting point for making distinctions, but they do little to bring an application to life. The admissions essay, however, is an opportunity to distinguish yourself. It's a chance to demonstrate the color and nuance of your character.

---

---

We've arrived at the second phase of the essay-writing process: Drafting. Our goal during drafting is to use all of the tools at our disposal – word pallet, tone, syntax, structure, etc. – to transform your application from a piece of clear glass into a unique crystal prism.

Drafting is primarily about decisions. How will you phrase a particular point? What adjectives will you use to describe something? How will you connect two different ideas? What tone will you adopt? Taken together, these decisions become your writing style. It is important to recognize that writing is a series of decisions because the ability to stop and think “wait, I have a choice here...how do I want to do this?” is the first step toward effective writing. I refer to each decision in the series as a “decision point.”



## Readability

The quality of writing that makes it easy to read and understand is called “readability.” Good readability lays the foundation for a successful essay. Poor readability can undermine an essay. Why? Because admissions officers usually don't have time or patience to sift your sentences for meaning; they will simply conclude that you are a weak writer and move on to the next essay. Your sentences and paragraphs should therefore be written in a way that makes it easy for admissions officers to understand what you are trying to say.

Over the years I've noticed that a lot of the same readability problems tend to crop up in students' writing. Some of the most common problems are related to “flow,” subject-verb separation, run-ons, and excessive punctuation.

i. Flow

“Flow” refers to how ideas are presented from sentence to sentence. The flow of ideas should be logical, meaning that each sentence is connected to the one that precedes it. To accomplish this, part of the sentence usually needs to be linked to the previous sentence and part of the sentence needs to present the new idea. In general, the backward-linking part should be near the beginning of a sentence; the new idea should be toward the end. Take a moment to read through the following example:

**One aspect of music theory that I find interesting is harmony. The study of vertical sonorities in music is what defines harmony. Pitches that occur together define vertical sonorities.**

Confusing? Yes, because the information in each sentence is not where we expect to find it. By rearranging the order of ideas, the excerpt becomes much more readable:

**One aspect of music theory that I find interesting is harmony. Harmony is the study of vertical sonorities in music. Vertical sonority refers to the relationships between pitches that occur together.**

Same ideas, different order. But what a difference it makes! The reason for this difference has to do with the way we think. Before new information is introduced, we need to have some idea of where to place that new information within our existing perceptual framework. For example, if I am introducing the idea of black holes to someone who has never heard of them, I shouldn't launch immediately into a discussion of the Tolman–Oppenheimer–Volkoff limit. Instead, I should start with a general discussion of stars and gravity.

Our brains need context to understand something new or interesting. In writing, context is almost always more helpful if it is provided at the beginning of

the sentence, rather than the end. This is especially true in the example above, which is basically a series of definitions (i.e., a series of sentences that provide new information).

Here's another example. Imagine you have been asked to chart the relationship between time and the number of kernels of corn that are popped. How would you organize your chart? Here's one option:

Kernels Popped	Time (seconds)
5	30
8	60
15	90
18	120
10	150
4	180

And here's a second option:

Time (seconds)	Kernels Popped
30	5
60	8
90	15
120	18
150	10
180	4

Which chart is easier to understand? Most people prefer the second. The reason is that "time" provides more of a sense of context than "kernels popped." We are all familiar with the idea that things change over time. So when "time" is presented on the left side of the chart, where we read it first, we become anchored in a familiar

---

---

context. It then becomes much easier to see that as time passes, the number of kernels popped rises, peaks, and then decreases (like a bell curve).

Context first, new information second.

## ii. Subject-verb

Readability is also affected by excessive separation between subject and verb. The subject is the part of the sentence that indicates what it is about. You might think of it as the person, place, or thing that is doing something. The verb indicates what the subject is doing. For example, in the sentence “trees grow well in the sun,” the subject is “trees” and the verb is “grow.”

Too much distance between the subject and verb makes a sentence difficult to read:

**Trees, perennial woody plants that, unlike animals – which feed directly or indirectly on other living things – depend on energy in the form of light, grow well in the sun.**

The solution to this kind of problem is usually pretty straightforward. Simply shorten the distance between the subject and verb. This may involve splitting a sentence into two or more sentences, depending on how long and convoluted the original is. For example:

**Trees are perennial woody plants that grow well in the sun. Unlike animals – which feed directly or indirectly on other living things – trees depend on energy in the form of light.**

## iii. Run-ons

Sentences are a bit like breathing. At the beginning of a sentence you take a deep breath. When you get to the main point at the end, you exhale. Don't make

your reader hold her breath for too long; it's an unpleasant feeling. Instead, use appropriate punctuation to divide your sentences and create a sense of rhythm.

#### iv. Excessive Punctuation

Excessive punctuation can also disrupt the rhythm of an essay. This often manifests itself, in the form of too many commas, resulting, in a choppy, fragmented, read (okay, it's never this bad, but you get the point). Easy enough to fix. Simply eliminate the extra punctuation and streamline your sentences a bit if necessary. Shoot for an easy, relaxed cadence. The only exception is when you want to create or enhance a particular effect.

## Pace of Drafting

The pace of your writing should be “comfortable,” meaning whatever pace suits you. Some writers sit and think for a long time before writing a sentence. Others write paragraphs at a time. Pace is really a matter of personal preference and is important only to the extent that it affects your ability to at least recognize when you are at a decision point. And of course it shouldn't be so slow that you get stuck.

There are some folks who advocate a “spit-it-out” approach to drafting. For example, Harry Bauld, author of “On Writing the College Application Essay,” writes:

In the early stages, write everything fast, without stopping. Don't worry about coherence yet, or about where to start – just get your thoughts out in whatever crazy pattern they occur.



The spit-it-out approach is premised on the idea that our conscious minds are actually an impediment to writing. Writing as quickly as possible is thought to be a way to circumvent the limitations of our restrained, conscious minds, which – according to spit-it-out writers – lack the spontaneity of our unconscious minds.

It's probably not a huge surprise to you that I don't favor this approach. It tends to produce a sloppy result. And then you have a lot of slop on the page to pick through. Becoming a mindful writer is of course much more difficult, but it leads to better writing.

You have already spent a substantial amount of time collecting and analyzing your ideas. You have used your creativity as a guide. You have shaped the best of your raw ideas into a Concept Map or outline. If you “write everything fast,” you run the risk of converting all of that precious thought into a thoughtless essay. And once our ideas become fixed in writing, we tend to become attached to them.

## **Word Palette/Tone**

I use the term “word palette” to describe the distinctive vocabulary that a writer incorporates into a piece of writing. (A “palette” is, among other things, the range of colors used by an artist).

Your choice of words affects the tone of your essay, which in turn affects how the reader perceives you. Formal words can give a serious impression. Breezy words might come off as light-hearted or in some cases flippant. Unnecessarily technical words reflect a pedantic personality. And of course, the way a particular word is interpreted depends on the context in which it is used.

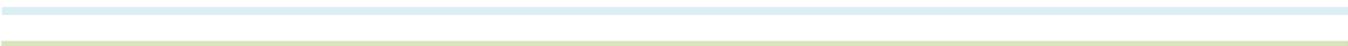
Be mindful of the words you use and their potential effect on the reader. As a starting point, you should be confident that you fully understand the meaning of

the words in your word palette. Dictionaries are a great way to increase your vocabulary, but you should also see how words are used in sentences before you try them out in your essay. Avoid relying too heavily on a thesaurus for synonyms. Students often use a thesaurus to pick words that make them appear intelligent. The problem is that words are rarely perfectly synonymous. This means that they are rarely perfectly interchangeable. Take the example of “happy.” Thesaurus.com lists the following as synonyms for happy: convivial, intoxicated, lively, and perky. None of these “synonyms” really mean “happy.”

In the third chapter of this book I introduced the idea of “personality disconnect,” or the disparity between the author’s real personality and his personality on paper. Word palette problems can act as a wedge that widens that disparity. Admissions officers usually pick up on these issues immediately, prompting them to wonder who the real you is. Put another way, that fancy word you found in your word processor’s thesaurus might actually hurt your essay rather than make you appear intelligent.

Try to achieve some sort of balance in your word palette. For most essays, it is a good idea to use “extreme” words sparingly. That is, limit the number of overly technical, emotionally-charged, exotic, or archaic words in your essay. Too much of any of these kinds of words can make the essay feel like...too much.

Finally, don’t be afraid to be creative. Foreign words, made-up words, and onomatopoeia can work well in the right context.

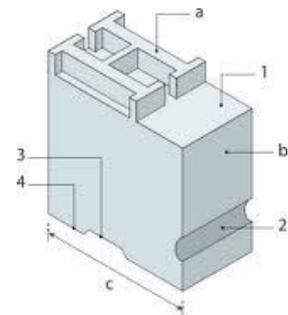


## DRAFTING II

This chapter is dedicated to clichés.

You will be hard-pressed to find an admissions officer, teacher, counselor, or consultant who *doesn't* advise against using clichés. But this advice is usually generic and doesn't go much further than a short definition and a few examples. In my experience, that sort of explanation is not particularly helpful. Even students who agree with the “experts” on this point have trouble when they begin writing their essays.

“Cliché” has its origins in the printing industry. Before the arrival of modern printing machines, professional printers would arrange individual letters to form the words, sentences, and paragraphs to be stamped onto a page. As you might imagine, this was a time-intensive process. To save time, a phrase that was used repeatedly would be cast as a single piece, or cliché. A cliché would thus save printers the time it would take to set the individual letters in a particular phrase.



**Cast metal letter used for printing**

The modern meaning of cliché echoes its origins in the world of early printing. Merriam Webster offers three definitions:

- cli-ché **1**: a trite phrase or expression; *also* : the idea expressed by it;  
**2**: a hackneyed<sup>1</sup> theme, characterization, or situation; **3**: something (as a menu item) that has become overly familiar or commonplace.

What was originally a tool for saving printers time is now a phrase or expression that has become trite because of overuse.

<sup>1</sup> “Hackneyed” is defined as “lacking in freshness or originality.” Merriam Webster.

Why should you care about all of this? Because the historical definition can help us understand why clichés don't work. Clichés don't work because unlike books, we are not identical copies of each other. We are expected to express ourselves in a unique way that reflects our individual personality and temperament. That personality and temperament is masked – perhaps even diminished – when a cliché is presented in place of a genuine thought. We become just another piece of indistinguishable glass that the admissions committee has to sift through.

So, if you have to remember one thing about this section, remember the following: **Clichés are essay destroyers because they mask individuality.**

Okay, now that I've impressed upon you how important it is to avoid clichés, let's discuss ways to avoid them, starting with identification.

The definitions above are a good starting point. You'll notice that they share a theme of overuse. The first definition addresses phrases and the ideas expressed by phrases. "What goes around comes around," a commonplace phrase that refers to the consequences of one's actions, is an example. The idea expressed by this phrase – that the way one acts toward others is reflected in the way others act toward one – is also common. The second definition is addressed to themes, characterizations, or situations. Hollywood is like a factory for these sorts of clichés. Split-personality serial killers, characterizing two opposing forces as a struggle between good and evil, and a lover who discovers her partner's infidelity by smelling another woman's perfume on his shirt are examples. The third definition is a bit like a catch-all for the concept of overuse.

The following questions will help you identify clichés in your writing:

1. What themes am I using? How common are they? Overused admissions essay themes include *all of my hard work paid off* and *the hardships I experienced made me a better person*.
2. What idioms am I using? Idioms are phrases that have a figurative (as opposed to literal) meaning. Examples of common idioms are: “the devil is in the details,” “blessing in disguise,” and “cost an arm and a leg.” How common are my idioms?
3. What allusions am I using? Are they common literary allusions? “Achilles heel” is an example of a common allusion to the Greek myth of Achilles. The phrase refers to a critical weakness.
4. What metaphors and similes am I using? How common are they? Common metaphors include “stone” to describe something’s hardness (“heart of stone”) or “light” to describe clarification or demystification (“shine the light on”). Examples of common similes include “hard as nails” and “dry as a bone.”
5. What popular catchphrases am I using?

**If you find yourself writing a cliché, take a moment to think about it.** This is a decision point! Consider whether it is a particularly overused or tired cliché. If so, find another way to write what you are trying to say.

Not all clichés are created equal; use your intuition to figure out whether a particular cliché will detract from your essay. Clichés such as “long in the tooth” (describes someone who is old) or “between Scylla and Charybdis” (describing a choice between two unpleasant options) are not as overused as “judge a book by its cover” or “stop to smell the roses.” And of course the use of a cliché as a cliché – for comedic effect, for example – is different from the use of a cliché as a stand-in for your authentic voice.

Creativity is like an antidote to clichés. For every cliché that finds its way into your essay, ask yourself whether the idea you are trying to communicate could be expressed in a fresh, creative way. Instead of “it was like an oven outside” you might write “it was so hot that the air seemed to be glowing, as if we were living in the middle of a star.” Or perhaps “so hot the tar melted off the rooftops in smoking mounds by the sides of the houses.” Or “something other than the sun must have

caused the heat. Maybe microwaves? And I was the hot dog that someone had forgotten to poke a hole in, ready to explode at any second.” These are just examples. Your writing need not include elaborate similes and metaphors. Sometimes a simple approach is best, in which case something like “it was unbearably hot” would work well.

There is always an original way to express something. Your only limitation in this regard is your own creativity.



There is a special class of clichés that appear often in admissions essays and other application materials. I will call them “admissions essay clichés.” They should be avoided at all costs.

Imagine a student who has just finished describing a close relative’s illness. She starts to think about ways to explain why her experience is relevant to her. Struggling to distill what she has described into a meaningful point, she writes:

**It taught me the important lesson of lending a hand to those who cannot help themselves.**

Later, as she reads over her draft, she gets the feeling that there’s something off about her essay. It doesn’t feel like her voice. But she’s a bit stuck as to how to fix it. After struggling for a few more days or weeks, she gives me a call and explains that she’s having trouble.

She’s right of course about the essay not being in her voice. Sentences like the one above are so generic, so trite that they convey little if anything about the author.

Another problem with this kind of cliché is that it is often inaccurate. The example above is a nice case in point. People don't really think about a family member's illness in terms of lessons, do they? The experience of caring for a family member and being with her through a period of convalescence or decline is so much more complex than that. For example, a caregiver often experiences emotions that pull him in different directions. He might feel guilty about his desire to free himself of the burdens of being a caregiver. He might wonder if he is wasting his life. There are reflections about what the sick person was like before she got sick, about what would happen to the caregiver if he got sick, and about the eventuality of death, to name a few. And all of this is colored by the unique histories and experiences of everyone involved.



Admissions essay clichés are like shortcuts for the difficult work of processing and analyzing our experiences. Like many shortcuts, they come with disadvantages. In this case, they make you appear like a generic student, rather than a distinct individual. The following list provides an idea of the kind of clichés I am referring to:

- I learned...
  - ...the value of [hard work, determination, etc.]
  - ...not to take [X] for granted
  - ...to enjoy life to the fullest

...to not regret my choices

- ...taught me the value/lesson of [insert important quality]
- ...experience...made me a stronger person...
- ...made me realize the importance of...
- All of a sudden it all clicked...
- Struggled to overcome...

Let's get to work. In our discussion I'll focus on the following four important categories: themes, subjects, characterizations, and conclusions.

Examples of clichéd themes are “perseverance pays off,” “overcoming obstacles,” “life lessons,” and “personal transformation.” Don't worry too much about theme. There are plenty of great essays on common themes. A clichéd theme only becomes problematic when other aspects of the essay are also clichéd. So although you should be aware of your theme, you don't need to dwell on the question of whether it is a cliché.

Clichéd subjects include sports, music, student government, volunteer activities, family, and other typical student activities. If you have chosen to write about a subject that many other students might also write about, try to find unique ways to explore it. **Approach common subjects from an unusual angle.** Admissions officers understand that many students engage in similar activities. But the way that you interpret your experiences, observations, and insights should be unique.

That brings us to characterization. As you convert your Concept Map or outline into full sentences and paragraphs, you will encounter a series of decision points about how to characterize or portray people and events. Characterization is about choosing certain facts or qualities to present to the reader. The way you characterize people and events in your essay reveals a lot about the way you think. In some ways it is like a window into your worldview.

---

---

Let's explore the concept of characterization through the concrete example of a "freestyle" rap contest. You may already be familiar with how it works: pairs of contestants recite improvised rhymes in front of an audience; the audience then decides who the winner is. The winner of each round proceeds to the next round.

There are many different ways you could characterize the contest. Here are a few:

- **"Battle."** Rap contests of this kind are often called "battles," a characterization that focuses on the combative and confrontational aspects of the event.
- **Performance.** The contest is a public performance for the benefit of an audience. This characterization highlights the artistic, cultural, and entertainment-related aspects of the contest.
- **Modern version of historical practice.** The contest is the modern version of a longstanding historical practice of competing through improvised rhyme schemes. This characterization focuses on putting the event into historical context.
- **Mastery of craft.** The differences among individual contestants reflect differences in innate ability, as well as the amount of time each contestant dedicates to mastering her craft. This characterization focuses on the individual contestant's relationship with her craft.
- **"Voice of the street."** The contest gives a voice to people from underserved, underprivileged backgrounds and provides a way for them to transform their experience into art. This characterization focuses on the competition's role as a mode of artistic expression for a specific subset of society.
- **Adrenaline rush.** For both contestants and audience the competition is an exciting, highly charged event. This characterization focuses on atmosphere and emotions.

Can you see how an author's choice to present one of the six characterizations above says something about the kind of person he is?

There is no such thing as a "wrong" characterization. Some characterizations, however, are more effective than others at communicating the

---

---

attractive qualities of the author. And some characterizations have become tired from overuse. Many of the more lackluster characterizations share a common theme: they are an attempt by writers to mold themselves into the kind of student the admissions committee is after. Although it would be impossible to catalog all of the clichéd characterizations that show up in admissions essays, a few readily come to mind:

- i. **Overt characterizations of the author as hard-working, persistent, generous, kind, motivated, passionate, etc.** The author basically tells the reader that she possesses a particular quality, rather than showing the reader by example.  
*Solution: refrain from overtly characterizing yourself in glowing terms.*
- ii. **Characterizations of the author as persevering – no matter what – in the face of obstacles.**  
*Solution: think about a more nuanced approach, perhaps something that reveals your insecurities, doubts, and misgivings. This helps show that you are a real person with real struggles.*
- iii. **Characterizations of a moment of epiphany that led to a personal change.** Students sometimes write about a moment of epiphany. This can come across as an inelegant attempt to create a sense of drama.  
*Solution: develop your ideas more naturally. Revise your Concept Map if necessary.*

Keep in mind that the list above is just a sampling. As you write, remain mindful of your thoughts. Try to develop an awareness of when your thoughts are being pulled toward “what the admissions committee wants to hear.” After some practice, you’ll develop a cliché radar that will help you avoid clichéd characterizations.

The last category of admissions essay clichés is “conclusions.” I use this category to describe takeaway points, morals, lessons, messages, principles, insights, observations, and of course, conclusions. The following is a short list of the kind of “conclusions” I am referring to:

## Conclusion Cliché Examples:

This demonstrates that I would be a great addition to [X]

After careful consideration, I am confident that [X] program is the right one for me.

My life-changing experience with [X] made me firmly committed to medicine.

The skills I acquired doing [X] will help me succeed in my chosen path.

Hard work and dedication will allow me to become successful in law.

Without [X] I would not have come as far as I have.

By learning from my mistakes I was able to transform a setback into a success.

I learned the importance of organization and leadership.

My finishing place didn't matter, what mattered was that I was part of a team.

[X] experience made me realize that I truly wanted to become a doctor.

Conclusion clichés are the worst kind of admissions essay cliché. Why? Because they tend to leave a lasting impression that the author lacks character and personality. And then darkness descends upon your application.

You see, despite my comments about how admissions staff scrutinize application essays for evidence of character, personality, reasoning skills, and other qualities – an approach that might seem highly critical – the truth is that most admissions officers are on your side. They want nothing more than to be pleasantly surprised by a great essay. So when they come across yet another conclusion cliché, it is a bit of a disappointment. They have invested time waiting for the author to get to the main point. A main point that sounds like ten thousand other main points is not a main point at all, it's a letdown.

Fortunately, these clichés occur at an easily identifiable point – the point at which you summarize or distill the importance of your experience(s). That is your decision point.

**The easiest way to avoid conclusion clichés is to avoid conclusions.** This might sound like strange advice. But let's think critically about it for a moment. Do admissions essays have to have explicit conclusions? What function do they serve? In an academic setting, conclusions usually summarize evidence in support of a point. Unlike the typical academic essay, admissions essays are not about assembling evidence to prove something. A formal conclusion is therefore not necessary in all cases.

Let's look at an example. The following essay is based on the sample Concept Map discussed in the seventh chapter. The essay prompt asks the student to identify his intended major, discuss how his interest in the subject developed, describe activities relevant to that interest, and discuss what he has gained from his involvement.

My intended major is film. This interest dates back to high school.

I started devouring movies during my time as a boarding student at Guangdong Experimental High School (in southern China), probably because they made me feel better. On weekends I would sneak in the classroom and use the computer to watch movies even though it was forbidden. That old, scratched, 13-inch monitor screen became my rabbit hole – a way to escape the rote study and routine life of school. Unforgettable images from movies like *Fitzcarraldo* and *2001:A Space Odyssey* became engraved in my mind. Sometimes I even felt like Fitzcarraldo (without the fancy haircut – my school's disciplinarian would not have liked it), pursuing an obsession with a weird hobby.

Although my interest in movies grew steadily, I also studied hard, graduating with honors. I looked forward to breathing the fresh air of college life, and after earning a high enough score to enroll in a first-tier university away from home, I took advantage of the freedom to do everything I could. I started acting, doing backstage work in student plays, and learning about directing.

When the city's TV network created a fund for student films, the script I co-wrote was selected to be made.

This turned out to be a challenging project. The film was required to be twenty to thirty minutes long – too long for beginners – but most of the students on the crew did not have any experience filming. Our script was a trilogy that ran about thirty minutes in total, so our main challenge boiled down to making three short but cohesive videos. As the director, I put a lot of effort into the preproduction and tried to do it as professionally as possible.

It was not until after the intense four-day shooting and two-week editing that I got a chance to reflect on the experience. During the group screening, it hit me that there were two stories going on simultaneously: the story being shown, and the story of us working on the project. Seeing the long panning shot, I recalled how I worked on the script for the whole evening to think of that idea, and how we had to try that shot again and again on the following day to make my vision come true. Seeing the hostel scene, I recalled how my producer and I searched around the whole area in the steamy hot summer days to find a suitable location. Seeing the seashore scene, I recalled how a student left our crew because he thought I was too picky. Every minute of the film represented our effort, collaboration, compromise, and mistakes. The project was not perfect, not even close to professional, but I learned a lot.

Apart from the story shown on the screen and the one about how it was made, a movie also tells a third story – the filmmaker's personal story, or the experiences and obsessions that have driven him or her to make the film. Years ago, when I was in middle school in the small town in which I grew up, I found myself drawn to one of the girls in my class. We became friends later. Back then my major hobby was reading, and although she didn't read much, we enjoyed the secret, quiet time being close together. Eventually, we drifted apart and I left for a different high school. Recently, I wrote a short story that I felt especially strong about. It starts with a man thinking about becoming a monk while frequently visiting a girl. The girl works in a bookstore but probably doesn't read much. I remember the night I wrote the script; the story came to me spontaneously. It had been so many years since I had thought about that girl that it took me a long time to figure out what my story was all about.

Did the author capture your interest? Why or why not?

---

---

This essay is a great example of how you can do everything you need to do – respond to the prompt, engage the reader, demonstrate character/individuality – without a formal conclusion. Rather than building to an admissions essay cliché about his commitment to film or how his experiences have made him a better filmmaker, he simply lets the story unfold organically. He focuses on what's important to him – his relationship to his art. And the essay comes together beautifully, even without a neat ending. It's not surprising that this student was accepted at NYU, UC Berkeley, and other top-ranked programs.

Now some of you may have noticed that the essay above does not *directly* respond to the part of the prompt that asks students to discuss what they have gained. Shouldn't that count against him? Probably not, because those gains are so strongly implied. The reader gets the sense that at every stage of the evolution of his interest, his life has become more enriched, more profoundly intertwined with his art, than it was before. We don't need a formal conclusion to understand that.

So that sums up the first way to avoid conclusion clichés. The far more difficult way is to draft original conclusions. There are no hard and fast rules to help you. There are only your experiences, your insights, and the relationships that you perceive among them.

Original conclusions tend to share the following characteristics:

**Specificity** – conclusion is specific to the author's experience and would be difficult to understand if viewed apart from the essay.

**Authenticity** – conclusion reflects the author's personality/character.

**Distinctiveness** – conclusion presents or explores a distinctive/unusual point.

The table below contains examples of conclusion clichés that were reworked into original conclusions.

---

---

Original Draft w/Conclusion Cliché(s)	Revised Draft	Editor's Comments
<p>As I begin applying to law schools I can't help but think about how incredible my undergraduate career has been, and how thankful I am for all of the opportunities that [X University] presented me. Most of all it gave me the opportunity to pursue my passion to limitless potential, an opportunity I did my best to take full advantage of. I am applying to [X] law school for the very same reason, I see in [X] an opportunity to pursue my passion in an institution that understands the value of dedication, hard work, and vision.</p>	<p>That brings me to this application. It feels like I'm halfway up a sheer face. My hands are raw from the cold, rough rock wall. My whole body feels the strain. But as I take a break and look around, I can see the landscape stretch out for hundreds of miles in each direction, filling me with excitement and optimism about the path ahead.</p>	<p>Creative approach based on hobby (author was a rock climber).</p>
<p>From this experience, I learned that it is better to tell the difficult truth rather than an easy lie. While someone might not be happy in the short run, the truth will better guide them for the long run. Leaders often face challenging situations and difficult interpersonal interactions, but it is important to be able to handle them properly and do the right thing.</p>	<p>There is always an impulse to delay, rather than to address an issue head-on. Sometimes, the better path may indeed be to revisit a problem at a later time. But unlike loans or buildings, a "deferred maintenance" approach to interpersonal relationships can turn a minor challenge into an unfixable problem.</p>	<p>Refocuses on common tendency rather than "lesson learned." Uses unusual metaphor in a clever way.</p>
<p>In the end, my finishing place did not matter to me; what mattered was that I had become a part of the team and that I had pushed past my own personal barriers. Each practice, each race, was an opportunity for learning and contributing, not only to my individual success, but to the success of the group. By opening</p>	<p>My finishing place did not matter. What mattered was that I had put myself out there despite my own hesitations and fears. How could I know what I am willing to sacrifice, what I can tolerate, and what my priorities are, without testing my limits? How else could I discover that I am far more capable than I once thought I was?</p>	<p>Uses a series of rhetorical questions to analyze/digest an experience.</p>

<p>myself to new experiences in this way, I have discovered what I am willing to sacrifice, what I can tolerate, and what my priorities are. I have learned that I am far more capable than I once thought I was, and that my greatest opponent is sometimes myself.</p>		
<p>One of the many things my dad taught me about exemplary work is that it takes drive, determination, and the belief in one's self. While riding in the car with him, my dad would always give me mathematical problems to solve. I remember being as young as four years old trying to interpret math and logic problems while out on a drive with my father. On one of our drives, he gave me a problem that was too difficult. I said "Daddy, I can't answer it. I don't know how". That was definitely the wrong thing for me to say. I had never felt his sense of disappointment until that moment. He looked at me and said, "Caitlin, NEVER say that again. How do you expect any ships to come into your harbor if you don't send any out? I just want you to try baby, and never give up." At the time, I was utterly bewildered. How did ships have anything to do with me giving up? Now, it is a quote I do my best to live by. Applying to dental school is my ship. It's one that I have strived to sail for many years. I know that believing in myself, my drive, and my ability will allow me</p>	<p>During my preparation for this application, I found myself thinking often about my dad. One memory sticks out. When I was young my father would often challenge me with mathematical/reasoning problems. On one of our drives, he gave me a problem that was too difficult. I said "Daddy, I can't answer it. I don't know how." He looked at me and said, "Caitlin, NEVER say that again. How do you expect any ships to come into your harbor if you don't send any out?" At the time, I had no idea what he meant. Now I know that he was trying to teach me to push myself. When you set a goal, it's easy to let the difficulties that come your way deter you from that goal. At some level, I have come to appreciate these difficulties. They remind me of who I am and what I am striving for.</p>	<p>Revised version still contains clichés but incorporates enough fresh perspective to make it interesting and engaging.</p>

to set sail into my future.		
<p>The world I come from is global. From the streets of New Delhi to the shanty neighborhoods near downtown LA, the same theme resonated. Fight for justice, help [the] less fortunate, and get involved in [the] public system to make positive changes, big and small.</p>	<p>Ultimately, the doctor in me lost to the politician in me. I learned that I am not actually very comfortable around blood and disease, so being a doctor is not a good choice for me. But I can still do what I want to do in public policy and governance.</p> <p>From the streets of New Delhi to the shanty neighborhoods near downtown LA, similar themes resonate. By getting involved in the public system, I'll be able to work toward improving medical services for the people who need it the most.</p>	<p>Completely different approach that outlines specific interests rather than generalized ideals.</p>

Still with me? There's a lot of information in this chapter. Hopefully some of this information is helpful to you. It's such an important topic that I didn't want to cut the discussion short.

Let's end the chapter with a final example. Remember the student who wrote about a close relative's illness? Here are two drafts of her essay. The second draft represents a revision in which the student focused primarily on reworking clichés.

### First Draft

Parents seem like they will live forever. I remember being a little girl and looking up to my mom, trying to conceive what it would be like to be so strong, so wise, and self-reliant. I also remember the day that everything changed because I was finally old enough to understand that my mom was sick.

My mother was diagnosed with Multiple Sclerosis before I was born, and that meant as her disease progressed, I would have to take on more responsibility than most children my age. My mom needs assistance with everything from getting dressed, cooking, along with all aspects of daily living.

Although at times it was difficult, I have always been happy to provide the support for her. The result of not being able to rely on my mom for basic things meant that I had to learn self-reliance at an early age, and the importance of helping other people. Whether I was helping my brother get ready for school in the morning, taking my mom to various doctor's appointments or handling my own appointments and schedules, my mother's illness meant that I became more self-reliant and productive than the average teenager. It also taught me the important lesson of lending a hand to those who cannot help themselves. This concept is prominent in my life and therefore, I'll pay it forward on a day-to-day basis.

The Make a Wish Foundation allows sick children's wishes and dreams to come true. I was inspired to volunteer for this organization because of its compassion and love for terminally ill children. I watched these children suffer in the same respects as my mother and that only pushed me to work harder to raise money to grant their wish.

My mother and my involvement with National Charity League for the past 6 years has encompassed making placemats and sandwiches for Dorothy's Kitchen, to reading books to underprivileged children at Community Partnership for Youth to walking dogs at the SPCA. At one of the cancer society's events, I was able to engage in a deep conversation with one survivor who told me all about her life story. She helped me to realize by giving back and that my simple actions by volunteering for programs like NCL and Make A Wish make a much bigger difference in the world than I realized. I have always worked summers and holidays, which always gave me a strong work ethic. This past school year, after school twice a week, I would tutor an elementary student in Math, Science, and History. After two weeks of working together, she came to me with her math test in hand and enthusiastically bragged about receiving a 92 percent. I had never had a greater feeling of accomplishment, and sense of pride watching her grow.

By the ninth grade I learned that my learning style is different than most of my peers. I was diagnosed with central auditory processing and ADHD. I had never been on the receiving end of charity, and I found out how just a small act of kindness from a few of my teachers made such a difference in my life.

After working with these different organizations and volunteering as a tutor, and I have always been passionate about school, and I am beginning to have a clearer sense of what I want to do with my life and career. Maybe I will be a high school math teacher and I will be able to aid those students who

struggle. Maybe I will follow in my father's footsteps and build a Fortune 500 company. Whether I get my degree in education or business, I know that I will be able to use my compassion for others to take me in the right direction.

As children, we are supposed to rely on our parents. I was able to rely on my mother emotionally but not in other ways. I had to become self-reliant and I am really grateful for this. What I have learned from my mom's illness, ie, patience, perseverance, organization of my time, humility, trustworthiness and reliability. These characteristics will live in me forever, even if she will not.

**Revised Draft**

I remember being a little girl and looking up to my mom, trying to conceive what it would be like to be so strong, wise, and self-reliant. I also remember the day that I was finally old enough to understand that my mom was sick.

My mother was diagnosed with multiple sclerosis before I was born, and that meant that as her disease progressed, I would have to take on more responsibility than most children my age. My mom needs assistance with everything from getting dressed to cooking, as well as many other aspects of daily living. Providing support to her taught me self-reliance at an early age. Whether I was helping my brother get ready for school or taking my mom to various doctor's appointments, I had to rely on myself to get things done.

Although my mother's illness meant that as a family we would face certain challenges, my mother always emphasized the importance of helping others. Inspired by her, I volunteered for the Make a Wish Foundation, an organization that helps realize the wishes and dreams of terminally ill children. Watching these children suffer in the same respects as my mother pushed me to work harder to raise money to help make their wishes come true.

I have also had many opportunities to lend a helping hand through my involvement with National Charity League (NCL). During the past six years I participated in a range of projects, from making placemats and sandwiches for Dorothy's Kitchen to reading books to underprivileged children at Community Partnership for Youth to walking dogs at the SPCA. One of my most memorable experiences was at one of the Cancer Society events, when I engaged in a deep conversation with a survivor who told me all about her life story. Talking with

her helped me realize how important programs like NCL and Make a Wish can be to people in need.

This realization was reinforced for me when I was diagnosed with Central Auditory Processing Disorder and ADHD in the ninth grade. I had never been on the receiving end of charity, and I experienced firsthand how small acts of kindness from a few of my teachers made such a difference in my life.

After working with these different organizations and volunteering as a tutor, I am beginning to have a clearer sense of what I want to do with my life and career. Maybe I will be a high school math teacher who focuses on helping struggling students. Maybe I will follow in my father's footsteps and build a Fortune 500 company. Whether I get my degree in education or business, I know that I will be able to use my compassion to take me in the right direction.



# Editing

---

Fresh ink on the page – you've finished your first draft. Time to edit, right? Not exactly. Instead, forget about your essay for a few days. Try to do something fun instead.

The first draft often heralds the arrival of two related challenges: essay fatigue and lack of perspective. Essay fatigue is a particular problem for students who have had a lot of trouble getting to a first draft. You can only take so much writer's block before you start to get tired of the whole process. That feeling tends to dampen creativity, which leads to a dull essay.

Lack of perspective is a related but distinct issue. Even if you've managed to stay fresh throughout brainstorming and drafting, it's nearly impossible to be objective about your own writing unless you get some distance from it.

The solution to these two challenges is to take time off from writing and relax. Hang out with friends, take a trip somewhere new, get back to a hobby...whatever is renewing for you.

Feeling renewed is of course a state of mind. Although a relaxing activity is helpful, it is not necessary. That engaged, creative feeling can be cultivated like any other feeling.



We've arrived at the third part of the essay-writing cycle: Editing. Everyone needs an editor. I'm not just saying this because I have an editing company. Even the most acclaimed authors in the world have editors. The reason is very simple: an author cannot be completely objective about her own work. In order to better

---

---

understand how that work will likely be perceived by a stranger, an editor is needed. That being said, as an author there is still a lot you can do to improve your work.

In the context of admissions essays, **editing is about shaping how the admissions committee perceives you.**

Many people confuse editing and proofreading. They are entirely different. Proofreading is limited to problems like typos and grammatical errors. It is a bit like repairing holes in a wall; the structure of the wall stays intact, all that changes is its aesthetic appearance. Editing involves a far more comprehensive view of the essay. It is like examining the integrity of the wall and taking a wrecking ball to it if necessary.

Like building and finishing a wall, there is a logical order to editing. Start with the fundamentals of the essay, then move on to more specific (and less important) details. This approach not only leads to a better essay, but saves you time in the short and long run.

Here is a general framework for your editing:



I take up each of these in turn below.

---

---

## 1. Big-Picture Analysis

As an editor your most important task is to figure out whether your essay “works.” In the first chapter of this book I observed that an essay’s greatness depends on its capacity to create a favorable emotional response. That response, that feeling, is what the big-picture analysis is about.

Hopefully you’ve taken some time off from writing. When you’re ready to edit, put yourself in the mind frame of someone who has never met you before. Find a quiet place and quickly (but not hurriedly) read through your essay. Try not to focus on individual sentences or words. Instead, read with an eye toward the following questions: Is the author likeable? Is the essay authentic and genuine, or does it seem like the author is trying too hard to cast herself in a particular light? Is the essay unique, interesting, and memorable?

The big-picture analysis is by far the most difficult part of self-editing. Putting oneself in the shoes of a stranger – and maintaining that perspective – is a real challenge. Authors tend to defend their work, even unconsciously. If there is an ambiguity, they give themselves the benefit of the doubt. They underemphasize their essay’s weaknesses and celebrate its strengths, even if the weaknesses overshadow the strengths. Most of us do these things without even thinking about them.

The solution to this challenge is to give your draft to someone you trust. That “someone” should have experience with application essays, be a strong writer, and be willing and capable to give you an honest opinion. English professors, counselors, and legitimate admissions consultants are good choices. Avoid giving your essay to someone who is not familiar with the current admissions landscape.



If you can, get more than one opinion. The reality is that even admissions officers will have different opinions about your essay. By soliciting more than one opinion, you can start to understand the different ways your essay might be interpreted.

It is not uncommon for students to discover a significant problem at this stage. Don't worry, that's a good thing! You're on the road toward improving your essay. For big-picture issues, transition back into brainstorming mode. After you've collected and shaped new ideas, you'll be ready for another round of drafting. And then editing. Repeat.

If you haven't already done so, take a look at the sample essays at the back of the book. Each essay is followed by commentary and analysis that highlights the kind of big-picture issues your readers will focus on.

## 2. Order of Ideas

After you've ironed out big-picture issues, take a closer look at the order in which your ideas are presented. Could you improve the essay by changing the order of ideas or adding/subtracting ideas so that the order makes more sense? The order of ideas was a central theme of the brainstorming chapter, and in particular of the Concept Map. Now that you've converted your Concept Map into an essay, it's time to test how well that map worked. Remember the sample Concept Map about filmmaking? During that exercise we managed to create an alternative by rearranging and revising the ideas in the original. This stage of editing involves a similar approach, except that now you are working with full sentences and paragraphs.

### 3. Phrasing, Flow, Word Palette

Now that you've addressed the structural aspects of the essay, you can shift your attention to the language you've used to fill in that structure. This stage of editing is in many ways a review of the concepts laid out in the chapters on drafting, but through the lens of a disinterested third person.

To be effective, you might have to slow down the pace of your review. Dig into the text. As you read, take conscious note of the way your sentences are constructed. If a sentence seems ambiguous or awkward or does not flow cleanly, take some time to revise it before moving on.

If you are writing your essay on your computer, this is a great time to start using the editing functions of your word-processing software. For example, Word has a "Track Changes" function that allows you to record revisions and add notes. You can also make use of the highlight tool to mark areas that need further attention. The great advantage of using a revision-tracking tool is that you can later compare original and revised versions and decide which changes to keep.

### 4. Grammar, Typos

The final stage of editing involves proofreading for grammatical errors and typos. Typically you should save proofreading for your final draft, or at least a draft that you don't envision changing too much.

A single grammatical error or typo is usually forgiven. However when an essay contains multiple errors, it gives an impression of carelessness or worse, poor writing ability. So you'll need to set aside time to carefully proofread your work.

Don't rely on word processors to do this job. The following sentences demonstrate why:

He found the glitch by *systemically* analyzing available data [*correct*: "systematically"]

---

---

She was a *stanch* supported of the Mayor. [correct: “staunch”]  
The doctor *proscribed* amoxicillin and bed rest. [correct: “prescribed”]  
By *oppressing* her feelings she managed to continue her daily activities uninterrupted, but at a huge cost to her mental health. [correct: “repressing”]

Your spellchecker also won't catch a reference to the wrong college or program. You would be surprised how often this happens.

If you file your application online, always do a final read-through before hitting the “submit” button. This is particularly important when the application requires you to cut and paste your essay into a text box.

If you're interested in reading about common grammar problems, please visit my blog at [www.dearadmissions.com](http://www.dearadmissions.com). You might think about investing in a treatise on style and usage such as *The Chicago Manual of Style*. If you're serious about improving your writing, that investment will pay itself back many times over.



A note about getting help: choose wisely. This is particularly true if you decide to hire an admissions-essay consultant. Some companies, like the ones that charge 6 cents per word, might simply put your essay through a spell-checker. Other companies assign your essay to an editor. **Dear Admissions** (my company) has a two-tiered review system that relies on input from two different Essay Consultants. So there is quite a bit of variation among services. You'll want to learn as much as you can about a company's editors, editing process, and range of services before committing to them.

Finally, and this goes without saying for most students, always remember that you are the author. You have final responsibility for the content of your essay. That responsibility flows both to yourself and to the schools you are applying to. So

don't have someone else write your essay. You'll probably get caught anyway and then you'll have a much bigger problem than not getting into your school of choice.

There is a delicate balance between accepting helpful input and plagiarism. That balance is expressed in the following statement from my company's website:

Our editing philosophy is comprised of an aspirational goal and an ethical constraint. Our aspirational goal is to create flawless marketing pieces that maximize our clients' chances of gaining admission to their chosen schools. In striving to reach this goal, we are constrained by the ethical duty to preserve the voice of the author. This balanced approach allows us to help create compelling, error-free essays while maintaining the unique voices of the people who wrote them.

On a lighter note, Congratulations! You made it through the entire essay-writing cycle. Of course you might have to repeat that cycle several times before you get to a final draft. But now you have all the tools you need to write something truly unique, something that stands apart from the crowd. With a little patience, you'll do great.



# Part IV

# Risk

“Pitiful is the person who is afraid of taking risks. Perhaps this person will never be disappointed or disillusioned; perhaps she won’t suffer the way people do when they have a dream to follow. But when that person looks back – and at some point everyone looks back – she will hear her heart saying, ‘What have you done with the miracles that God planted in your days? What have you done with the talents God bestowed on you? You buried yourself in a cave because you were fearful of losing those talents. So this is your heritage; the certainty that you wasted your life.’” –Paulo Coelho, *By the River Piedra I Sat Down and Wept*

“A ship is safe in harbor, but that's not what ships are for.” –William G.T. Shedd

Risk is inherent in the pursuit of exceptionality. You cannot hope to be exceptional through a path that could easily be taken by another. So it is with the admissions essay. To write a great essay, you must accept a degree of risk.

Risk can take many forms. It might mean revealing something personal, taking an unusual position, or intentionally breaking the rules of grammar. It might mean using humor (after all, sometimes a joke falls flat). Or it might have to do with the way you present your ideas.

The history of admissions essays is studded with spectacular triumphs and ignominious defeats. But mostly it is littered with thousands and thousands of forgettable essays. At some point, you will have to decide how much risk you are willing to accept.

That decision should be shaped by at least three considerations: your inherent risk-tolerance, the strength of your application, and the mix of schools you are applying to. The first of these is easy to understand: we all have a natural response to risk. Some people crave it. Some merely tolerate it. Others are risk-



averse. Knowing your type can help you understand how your natural inclinations shape your approach to the essay.

The strength of your application and the mix of schools you apply to are also important factors. A strong application – i.e., high test scores and GPA – makes your admission more likely, which suggests that you don't need to take on much risk in the essay to accomplish your goal. Candidates with weak applications must do much more in their essays to make up for that weakness, suggesting more risk. And of course the strength or weakness of an application depends on the school under consideration. Some state schools might not even look at your essay if your grades and GPA are high enough. By comparison, highly selective schools like Harvard and Stanford routinely deny applicants with extremely high test scores and GPA's.

But how much risk is it possible to really take in an admissions essay? A lot. Consider the following essay by Hugh Gallagher, which has attained a kind of mythic status in the admissions community:

I am a dynamic figure, often seen scaling walls and crushing ice. I have been known to remodel train stations on my lunch breaks, making them more efficient in the area of heat retention. I translate ethnic slurs for Cuban refugees, I write award-winning operas, I manage time efficiently. Occasionally, I tread water for three days in a row.

I woo women with my sensuous and godlike trombone playing, I can pilot bicycles up severe inclines with unflagging speed, and I cook Thirty-Minute Brownies in twenty minutes. I am an expert in stucco, a veteran in love, and an outlaw in Peru.

Using only a hoe and a large glass of water, I once single-handedly defended a small village in the Amazon Basin from a horde of ferocious army ants. I play bluegrass cello, I was scouted by the Mets, I am the subject of numerous documentaries. When I'm bored, I build large suspension bridges in my yard. I enjoy urban hang gliding. On Wednesdays, after school, I repair electrical appliances free of charge.

I am an abstract artist, a concrete analyst, and a ruthless bookie. Critics worldwide swoon over my original line of corduroy evening wear. I don't perspire. I am a private

citizen, yet I receive fan mail. I have been caller number nine and have won the weekend passes. Last summer I toured New Jersey with a traveling centrifugal-force demonstration. I bat 400. My deft floral arrangements have earned me fame in international botany circles. Children trust me.

I can hurl tennis rackets at small moving objects with deadly accuracy. I once read *Paradise Lost*, *Moby Dick*, and *David Copperfield* in one day and still had time to refurbish an entire dining room that evening. I know the exact location of every food item in the supermarket. I have performed several covert operations for the CIA. I sleep once a week; when I do sleep, I sleep in a chair. While on vacation in Canada, I successfully negotiated with a group of terrorists who had seized a small bakery. The laws of physics do not apply to me.

I balance, I weave, I dodge, I frolic, and my bills are all paid. On weekends, to let off steam, I participate in full-contact origami. Years ago I discovered the meaning of life but forgot to write it down. I have made extraordinary four course meals using only a mouli and a toaster oven. I breed prizewinning clams. I have won bullfights in San Juan, cliff-diving competitions in Sri Lanka, and spelling bees at the Kremlin. I have played Hamlet, I have performed open-heart surgery, and I have spoken with Elvis.

But I have not yet gone to college.

What does this essay say about the author?

The example above is meant to demonstrate the outer bounds of creativity and how even a basic assumption – that the personal statement must be based on fact – can be successfully challenged. This is not meant to serve as an example for your essay! The approach above is risky. Although it might delight some, it will surely turn off others.

The kind of risk most students grapple with is a bit more subtle, as illustrated by the following beautifully-written diversity statement:

Throughout my childhood I lived at the intersection between American and Palestinian cultures. This interplay manifested itself in interesting ways. For example, as a child in my house, you might have heard the same clichéd reprimands as most other children, but with a bilingual taste. Rather than being told “If you want something done right, do it yourself,” I was told the nearest Arabic equivalent – *titaab halek wala titaab*



*insanaak* – which roughly translated means: “Doing it yourself is better than tiring out your teeth.” Meals were another interesting amalgam. At potlucks it was fun to watch the expressions on our neighbors’ faces as they tasted lasagna and hamburgers cooked with nutmeg and a myriad of other Middle Eastern spices.

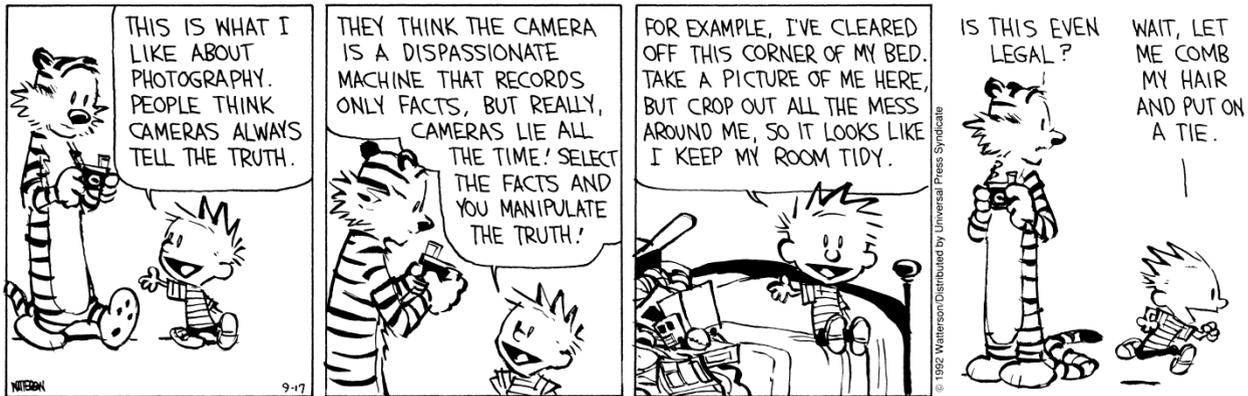
It's hard to put into words what it means to be Palestinian American. If anything, it is complicated. To many, Palestine's culture and politics (and everything else about it) are inseparably intertwined. It is difficult to talk about ethnicity when the word “Palestinian” is controversial in and of itself. It also means that I can't talk about my Israeli friends without people concluding that I am trying to be politically correct, and the devaluation of our friendship can be incredibly frustrating for all of us.

As a Palestinian American the issues that are important to me are among the most publicized issues in the world. But even among Palestinians, political beliefs vary. That is not what unifies us. What connects us is a shared sense of hope; in particular, hope for the future. I recently gave a performance of Suheir Hammad's poem "First Writing Since," which is about her feelings as a Palestinian American, as a New Yorker, shortly after 9/11. The poem ends with hope and a call to affirm life. After the reading an older woman came up to me and said that my reading and the words in the poem embody the true Palestinian identity. Many Palestinians feel they have good reasons to be angry, but to me, that anger is futile. It is enduring hope and the determination to improve our circumstances that encapsulate what it means to be a Palestinian American and motivate us to continue forward. That hope and determination are things that transcend national and political barriers, things that have the potential to bring us together, rather than drive us apart.

How would you describe your feelings toward the author? Those feelings were undoubtedly influenced by his decision to depart from the traditional form of diversity statement and instead bare some of his innermost sentiments about what it means to be Palestinian-American. That was a risk. Not a huge, application-shifting risk, but a risk nonetheless. (The author, a former client of mine, is currently attending Harvard Law School).

Seek out the distinctive, the unusual. As Will Rogers said, “Go out on a limb, that's where the fruit is.”

# Reality/Perception



Most of us keep a handful of personas on us at all times. The persona we happen to inhabit at any moment depends on the situation we find ourselves in.

You know...the “student” persona, the “hanging out with friends” persona, the “son/daughter” persona, and the “Instagram” persona, for example. We act differently in different situations. And the different faces that we present shape how the world views us.

We all make decisions, on a daily basis really, about how to present ourselves. The clothes we wear, the language we use, the cars we drive, and the things we tweet are examples of things we do that broadcast to the world who we are.

In many ways, your admissions essay is the ultimate opportunity to influence the perception of “you.” Your audience has never met you before and doesn’t have any preconceptions about you. Their opinion of you isn’t influenced by body language, eye contact, or any aspect of your physical appearance. They don’t know about your habits, manners, or tendencies. In fact, they don’t know

much about you other than some basic academic information, the opinions of your recommenders, and the information you provide in your essay.

But of course the most exciting aspect of the admissions essay – full creative license – is also the most daunting one. Unlike clothes or music or cars, there is no off-the-shelf brand to associate yourself with. You have to build your message from scratch, word by word. And that message must be a genuine, authentic reflection of you.

Much of this book has been dedicated to exploring how you can use the awareness of your thoughts and emotions to build that message. Those explorations also touched on the relationship between reality and perception, between the flesh-and-blood version of you and the “you” that is reflected in the essay. For example, in the third chapter, I discussed the concept of “Personality Disconnect” – when the written version of you doesn’t accurately reflect who you are. In the seventh chapter, I pointed out that you would have to choose one story of you, that there is simply not enough space to tell the full story. In the eighth chapter, I discussed how clichés affect the reader’s impression of you. Finally, in the tenth chapter, I characterized editing as “shaping how the admissions committee perceives you.”

Now that you’ve had an opportunity to explore mindfulness and the different phases of the essay-writing process, I’ll conclude by revisiting for a moment one of the principles I stated at the beginning of the book: Your application is dynamic; all of your strengths and weaknesses are considered together.

Most of this book has taken a walled-garden approach to the admissions essay. That is, the book treats the essay as if it stands apart from the rest of the application. In some ways it does. But the reality is that your essay will be viewed

---

---

in the context of your full application, including letters of recommendation, extra-curricular activities, prizes/awards, resume, short essay responses, grades, classes, test scores, diversity statements, addenda, social media profiles, and the like. All of these materials provide context and therefore meaning for your essay. They are a kind of backdrop against which your essay is evaluated. The reverse is also true; the rest of your application will be viewed against the backdrop of your essay.

This interrelationship has three important implications:

- **Opportunity for Inconsistency** – Cross-check the various parts of your application to make sure that there are no glaring inconsistencies. Review dates, times, names, and numbers to ensure they are consistent across the board. If you intend to send a resume, compare it carefully with the information you have entered in your form application. Same principle applies to factual/biographical information contained in your essay.
- **Opportunity to Add New Information** – Consistent doesn't necessarily mean identical. If you have more than one opportunity to describe something, try to include at least one piece of new information in each additional description. You might also try to phrase each description differently. This will help maintain the reader's interest and ensure that each part of your application is relevant, rather than redundant.
- **Opportunity to Create a Well-Balanced Application** – What kind of student are you? Are you a nail – only a few interests, but a deep connection to each interest? Or perhaps a bench – many interests, but a more limited relationship with each one? How about a "T" – reasonably varied interests and a fairly substantial connection with a few interests? Whatever "shape" your application takes, the essay provides a unique opportunity to create a sense of balance. For example, if you risk coming across as a jack-of-all-trades, the essay might be used to demonstrate a deep connection to something. If you are worried about being perceived as overly focused on a particular activity, you might use the essay to show a different side of you.

It's impossible to make specific suggestions about how best to use the essay to your advantage; that depends on the particular circumstances of your application.

---

---

Try to get an objective opinion if you can. A trusted teacher, counselor, or admissions professional can give you a sense of how balanced your application is.

As you examine the different parts of your application, ask yourself, *What does the admissions committee know? What don't they know?* The answers to these questions can help you determine whether you've left out something important.

If a part of your application is vague or ambiguous, or if you don't have enough room to adequately describe or explain something important, consider drafting an addendum. Addenda are often used to describe a unique circumstance related to education or employment. Occasionally they are used to explain an incident that might reflect negatively on an applicant's character. But there is no rule limiting their use to these areas.

If you decide to use an addendum, treat it with the same level of attention and care as you would the essay. A poorly drafted or duplicative addendum can hurt your application. Also, keep in mind that admissions officers typically have many, many applications to review. Don't make them do extra work unless you have something important to add.

## And that concludes *The Art of the Personal Statement*.

To obtain the complete version of this book (includes sample essays followed by comment/analysis), please visit our [personal statement book](#) page.

Check back for subsequent editions! This book is intended to evolve over time, and I will continue to add useful content (such as interviews with admissions officers, for example), additional sample materials, and other helpful tips.

Did you like the book? Show it!



I WILL arise and go now, and go to Innisfree,  
And a small cabin build there, of clay and wattles made;  
Nine bean rows will I have there, a hive for the honey bee,  
And live alone in the bee-loud glade.

And I shall have some peace there, for peace comes dropping slow,  
Dropping from the veils of the morning to where the cricket sings;  
There midnight's all a glimmer, and noon a purple glow,  
And evening full of the linnet's wings.

I will arise and go now, for always night and day  
I hear lake water lapping with low sounds by the shore;  
While I stand on the roadway, or on the pavements gray,  
I hear it in the deep heart's core.

“The Lake Isle of Innisfree.” W.B. Yeats, 1865.

---

---

by Martzi Campos



\* grad school is cool but not even close to being as cool as Hogwarts.





**Alex Thaler** has worked in test prep/admissions consulting for a little over a decade. He is the founder and CEO of dearadmissions.com and its sister company allionessay.com. He offers his personal services through [www.alexthalerconsulting.com](http://www.alexthalerconsulting.com).

Alex cut his teeth as an SAT instructor for the Princeton Review shortly after graduating from college in 2002. Within a short time he consistently achieved average student score increases of over 200 points (before the test was restructured in 2005). After earning multiple promotions at the Princeton Review and expanding his repertoire to include LSAT classes he was offered a position at Compass Education, where he immediately distinguished himself by scoring a perfect 2400 on the diagnostic test. In 2007 Alex shifted his focus to admissions essays as an essay consultant for Stacy Blackman Consulting, a boutique MBA application consulting firm. Since 2007, he has worked primarily as an admissions consultant, with a particular emphasis on application essays.

The diversity of Alex's practice is reflected in the diversity of his clients. His clients range in age from 16 to 45 and hail from all over the world. They have gone on to attend schools like Harvard, Stanford, Columbia, NYU, and a variety of other schools across the academic spectrum.

Alex received his B.A. from UC Berkeley and his J.D. from University of Pennsylvania Law School. He currently lives with his wife and daughter in Berkeley, California, about a mile south of campus.

**Ian Marsden** is an illustrator, designer, flash animator, cartoonist, and early-adopter of art technologies. His clients include The New Yorker, Coca Cola, Mercedes Benz, La Toya Jackson, Universal Music Group, Auto Bild, Blick Online, Alex Thaler...the list goes on.

In 1999 Ian became the first artist to draw the so-called 'Google Doodles' for Google.com. He now lives and works in a small village in the South of France with his wife and 3 daughters. Apart from being an illustrator he is also working on graphic novels and his own character-driven illustrated children's books. Examples of his work can be found at [www.marsdencartoons.com](http://www.marsdencartoons.com)

