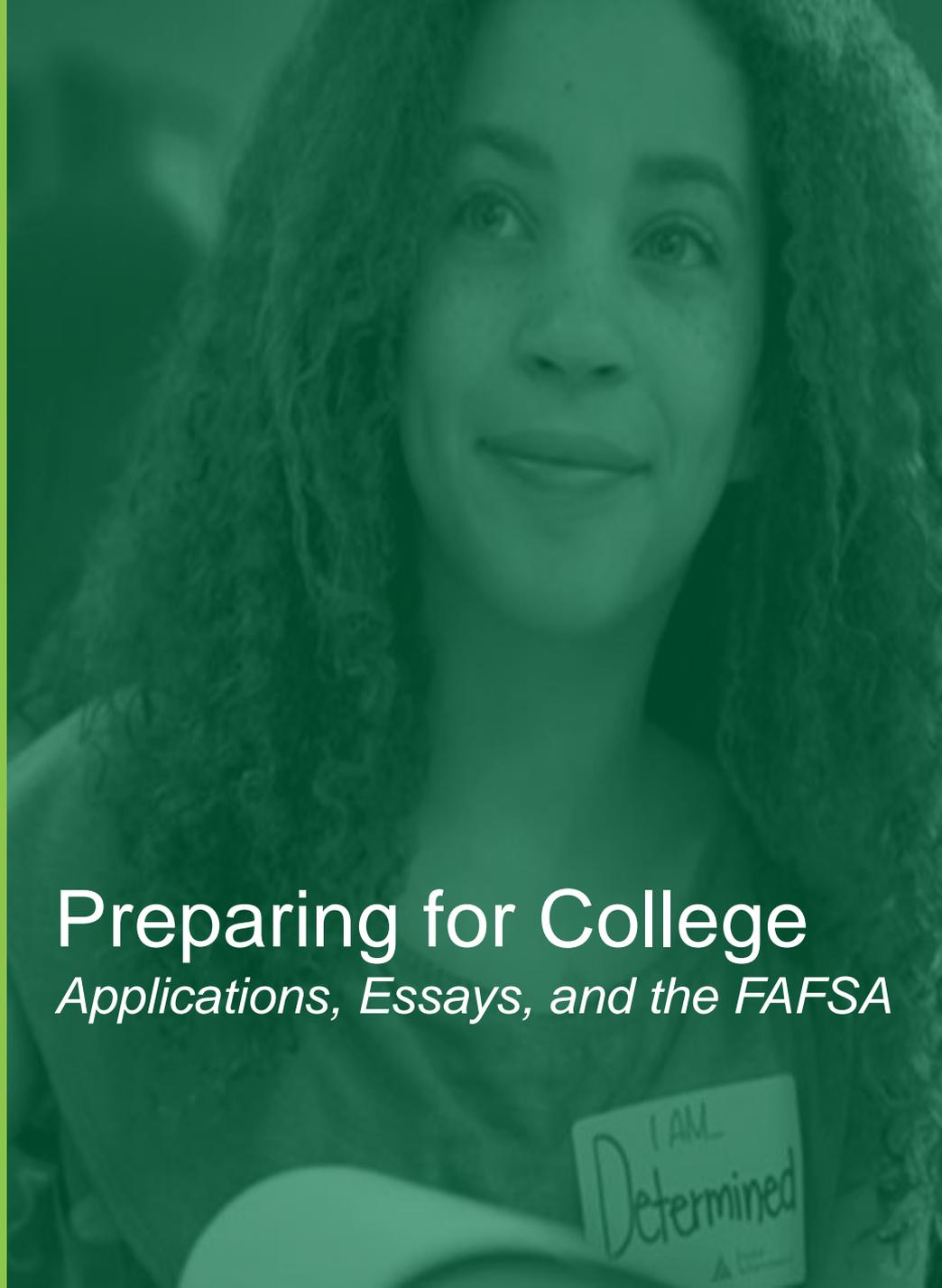




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Preparing for College

Welcome: Christy Biedron, Director of Education, JANJ

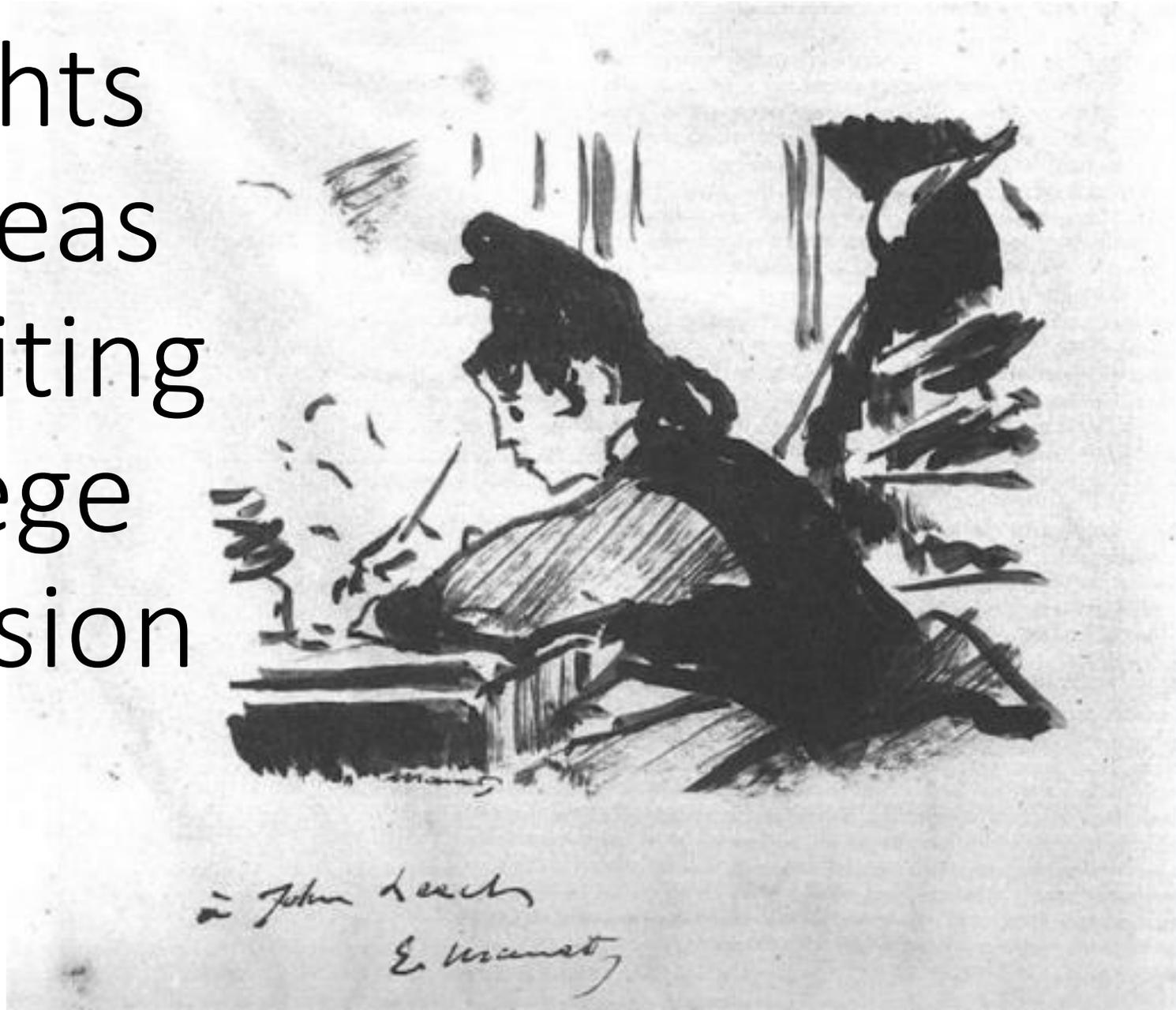
Featured Speaker

Paula Schumacher, ETS

Financial Aid: Completing the FAFSA

Breakout Sessions: Small Group Brainstorming

Thoughts and Ideas on Writing a College Admission Essay



Woman writing (Edouard Manet)

Overview

- Resources on college admission essays
- Do's and Don'ts
- 2021-2022 Common App Essay topics
- Writing*

*This is what we're really going to cover.

Resources

There are a lot of books and websites offering advice on writing a college admission essay. I'm listing a few that look good. If you surf, look at a few to make sure you don't accidentally use a site that is just wrong.

- <https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/how-to-write-a-college-essay>. Good overview. Good links. Heavy on the Common App.
- <https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/>. Good insight into what colleges are looking for.
- <https://xqsuperschool.org/rethinktogether/how-to-write-college-application-essay/>. Written by someone who's been through it.
- https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/education/edlife/college-application-essay-admissions.html?.?mc=aud_dev&ad-keywords=auddevgate&gclid=CjwKCAjwy7CKBhBMEiwA0Eb7ak14jPfcYvm21rkb7MaPoawNz-Dqb2QdP2YYmzNTjZDE7-koGnugLhoCYF4QAvD_BwE&gclsrc=aw.ds.

Do's

- Start early. Give yourself plenty of time.
- Pick a subject that resonates.
- Write your own story (write about yourself).
- Be careful using the same essay for several schools (avoid copy/paste errors).
- Get feedback.
- Revise, rewrite, revise.

Don'ts

- Don't go over the word limit.
- Don't wait to the last minute.
- Don't just write what you think they want to hear.
- Don't just recount a story... reflect about the meaning.
- Don't repeat info from other parts of your application.
- Don't let example essays get to you.

2021-2022 Common App Essay topics

<https://www.commonapp.org/apply/essay-prompts>

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Writing

The boring stuff

- Length. Word count may be as low as 250 (blurb length) to 650 (flash fiction length). Know your word length. If you are submitting to more than one school and they have different word length, you can have different versions of your essay at those lengths.
- Overall outline: opening hook, experience/lesson, impact, conclusion.
- No errors in grammar or spelling.

Writing

The goals.

- Share of yourself, your life, and your thinking. Reveal a bit of yourself.
- Keep it specific, not generalized. A small slice of life.
- Be thoughtful, not glib.
- Show the emotion, the conflict, the complexity of your life.*

*Everyone has emotion, conflict, and complexity.

Writing

The writing part of it.

- There are two types of writers: planners and pantsers.
 - Planners like to research and have an outline before they write.
 - Pantsers like to start writing and figure out things as they go.
- You have your topic. You have an idea of the story you want to tell... Do a brain dump. Write without thinking about anything but telling yourself the story. Dare to be bad. It's going to stink, but you'll get it all down.
- If you are discouraged by your first draft, google "quotes about first drafts." No writer ever likes the first draft.
- Save the first draft. Take a break. Sleep. Eat.
- Write the second draft. Move things around so they are in order, fix typos, add punctuation. Add in missing words. Remove things that don't really belong.
- Save the second draft. Take a break. Sleep. Eat.

Writing

The writing part of it, continued.

- Read your second draft. If it seems decent, show it to someone(s) to get feedback. (Put the essay question at the top so they have context.) If it doesn't seem decent, tweak it a bit more then get feedback.
- Feedback notes:
 - Know yourself. Feedback always throws me into a fowl mood. I always need to step away for a day before I can take it in. If this is you... just know that's part of your process.
 - Be polite but ignore feedback that isn't helpful.
 - Wow! You wrote this??? You're awesome!!! [Say: "Thanks."]
 - What if you put in a worm hole and transported everyone to Pluto? [Say: "Interesting idea. I might use that."]
 - Were you on something when you wrote this? It's weird. [Say: "Weird good or weird bad? And no, it was just me pushing the creativity envelope. First drafts, you know?"]
 - Be curious about feedback you don't like. Ask for specifics.
 - I'm not sure you really answer the question. [Say: "Tell me more about that. What do you see the question as? Do you think I totally miss it—or veer off someplace?"]
 - This part doesn't make sense. [Say: "Where do you get lost?"]

Writing

The writing part of it, continued again.

- You have it wrong about <insert topic: dinosaurs>. [Say: “Hmm. I was going for funny with T Rex picking up stuff.] They say: their arms were vestigial. They couldn’t do much with them at all. If you leave this in, you might get points off. [Say: “Okay I’ll look into that. Do you think if I push it more, then the humor will be obvious and the weak hands thing won’t matter?”]
- Be cautious about feedback you love. Try to get specifics on what works and if anything doesn’t work.
 - Looks good. You really pulled it all together. [Say: “Thanks! What did you think about the T Rex scene?”]
 - This is great! You nailed it! [Say: “Thanks! Did you think the T Rex scene is obviously for comic relief?”]
- Incorporate the feedback
 - Weigh the feedback. If everyone commented on the same thing, you have an issue to address. If only one person commented, then it might not be an issue.
 - Take some time before making changes. Sleep on it. Talk to someone about it. Think about different ways to improve the essay given the feedback.

Writing

The writing part of it, continued yet again.

- Write the third draft. This is for fine tuning.
 - Opening hook.
 - Hooks are hard. Don't worry about the hook in drafts one and two. If you get it, great! If you figure it out later and have to rewrite to fit it in, that's normal.
 - Open with something big, or small, or weird, or totally unexpected.
 - The content of the hook can come from any point in your experience, and then you go from there. Examples:
 - I was always told guns kill people, not people. Today...
 - The police siren wailed louder than my mother. I'll never forget that night...
 - Water is wet. I like that fact. It...
 - I always laugh when someone snorts. When I was a kid...
 - The recipe for disaster is 1 cup...
 - Experience/lesson.
 - Anything goes as long as it really happened, it really impacted you, and you don't make it gory or X-rated.
 - It doesn't have to be wild, crazy, or heart breaking (but it can be).
 - This piece is kind of important, but more importantly, it's how it impacted you. It's how an event--that maybe even happens to many other people who don't think anything of it--for you was impactful.

Writing

The writing part of it, continued yet again—and again.

- Impact.
 - You must show the impact this had to you on a very personal level. This is where you are “digging deep” and possibly sharing something you don’t normally share. Sometimes it helps to believe you’re writing to yourself and not some stranger.
- Conclusion.
 - It shouldn’t be as corny as “and that’s how I became an adult”... but something that indicates how the experience impacted you. “Macaroni will always make me smile.” “Hammers are like shoes.” “I see T Rex, and I breathe.”
- Word issues (count, repetition, weakness, etc.).
 - If you are over count, look for ways to reword using fewer words. Delete sentences that don’t add as much to the story.
 - Read your essay out loud. If you stumble or get lost, try rewriting that area.
 - Look for overused words and replace with synonyms or pronouns.
 - Replace weak words (e.g.: talked, walked) with stronger words that give a better sense of your experience (e.g.: argued, strode).
 - Keep jargon, slang, and accents in quotes. Make all other text “proper.”
 - NO: Watcha goin ta say when dey laugh at how ya speak?
[This is the accent I grew up with.]
 - YES: I grew up with a northern accent that I had to shake when we moved south. Instead of “Hey youse guys” I learned to say “Whatr ya’ll doing?”

Writing

The writing part of it—finally, the end!

- Final review. Have your good feedback people read this draft. If they feel it is worse, you can always go back to draft two or put back in sentences you deleted. It's okay to be over a little in word count—but not by much.
- Note on convictions. Sometimes people will try to convince you to change your topic because it makes them uncomfortable. Treat it like feedback. Are you getting this from more than one person? Why don't they like the topic? And, most importantly: how strongly do you feel this is exactly the right topic?

- Editing

- Have someone (or the software editor) look over the essay for spelling, grammar, etc.
- Make changes as needed.
- Verify your word count.
- Read it one more time to make sure it still flows like you want.

- Send it in!

- Do something nice for yourself!

Completing the FAFSA

(Free Application for Federal Student Aid)

Breakout Sessions:

Group Brainstorming

In your small group, take turns sharing something about yourself that you can write about in a college essay.

- 1. A background, identity, interest, or talent that is meaningful to you.**
- 2. A lesson you took from obstacle you encountered.**
- 3. A belief or idea you've questioned or challenged.**
- 4. An accomplishment, event that you are proud of or helped you grow.**
- 5. A topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time.**