

New Tactics for College Essay Brainstorming

By Sheree Gravely, IECA (OH); Stephanie Klein Wassink, MBA, IECA (CT); Qing (Shirley) Xian, MBA, CEP, IECA (MN); and Diane Steiger, MEd, IECA Associate (OH)

We have all been there, meeting with a student and hoping they will actually have something, anything to write about. At the IECA 2023 Fall Conference in Tampa, four independent educational consultants (IECs) with different clientele offered a panel discussion about college essay brainstorming with clients. Here follows a summary of their discussion.

Do you engage parents and others, and, if so, how?

Stephanie Wassink: Parents are important to my process because they often have great essay ideas. I take notes on parent comments in the consultation, but I also set up separate meetings in which I interview parents alone before I begin working with the students.

Sheree Gravely: When parents fill out our “Let’s Start” intakes, we ask them what they consider their student’s two to three most outstanding accomplishments and why. We also ask them to give us three adjectives that describe their student with an anecdote about it. Toward the end of the writing process, we encourage students to share their essays, but that decision is left up to the student and parent.

Shirley Xian: I do, but not necessarily. Typically, I start to work with my students no later than the beginning of their 11th grade, sometimes much earlier. On an ongoing basis, I interact only with my students. But once I reach a judgment of my student’s profile, I

do share it with both my students and their parents to get everybody on the same page, which then serves as the foundation for college selection and a guide to the content of their applications, with essays as one component. Sometimes, when I feel that the materials and stories the students come up with are too limited, I reach out to their parents, host families, peers, or anybody who knows them well to get additional stories and details. I share these additional inputs with my students and discuss with them directly.



Diane Steiger: In an initial parent questionnaire, I ask parents for information about their student: What are your child’s biggest accomplishments in high school, what makes your child unique, and what values are important to your child? Later, if a student agrees, I sometimes ask parents for help during specific parts of the process. If a student is having a hard time brainstorming, for example, parents can help recall positive stories about their child, often in great detail. Once the personal essay is in a final round of revisions, I offer students the option of inviting someone they trust to give a content review.

When and how do you kick off essay writing with students? How do you start?

Stephanie: Besides pre-work, I have a two-hour in-person or Zoom essay brainstorming meeting. It is a lot of time, but it ensures the student walks away with one or more long essay ideas. I ask the student to turn around the long essay in 24 hours or less.

Sheree: We start writing as early as we can with our students. Our approach is to have them write “essay skeletons” early in the process, both to get them thinking about college issues as well as to have possible content for the future. These essay skeletons are two- to three-paragraphs, casual writing exercises, and the topic depends on the student and where we are in the process. For many, it starts with YouScience findings, after which they write their

skeleton essays about three to four careers or majors they are interested in. They might also be asked to write about a favorite activity. And we love our new prompt where they write about their two most unique characteristics or experiences. This is often a great start for a Common App essay, which we kick off in spring of junior year.

Shirley: I typically kick off the essay work with my students midway into the second semester of their junior year. For the main essay, before the fall semester starts, I



Sheree Gravely, Gravely Group College Advising, can be reached at Sheree@GravelyGroupCA.com.



Stephanie Klein Wassink, Winning Applications, LLC, can be reached at SKW@WinningApplications.com.



Qing (Shirley) Xian, Soar in USA Counseling & Consulting, LLC, can be reached at SoarInUSA@gmail.com.



Diane Steiger, Matrix College Consulting, can be reached at Diane@MatrixCollegeConsulting.com.

continued on page M14

Essay Brainstorming, from page M11

hope to have a version that we are comfortable submitting while we continue to work to refine it. I will leverage both UC essay prompts and Common Application essay prompts to facilitate the process. Typically we start with UC prompts, given they are character oriented, involving leadership, creativity, community building, and so on. The #3 prompt about their greatest talent or skill helps students to think deeper about themselves as well. It is a useful tool to help students comb through and identify their key characteristics. We then go through the list of main essay prompts. We never dwell on any one prompt. If the student doesn't resonate with a prompt, we simply move on. At the end of the day, the prompts are only there to help them tell their stories. We are not seeking correct answers to questions. Ultimately, each student needs only one main essay. We may settle with two as well. Given that different colleges have various styles, we may end up using different main essays.

Diane: I like to start with younger high school students by assigning short responses to several writing prompts from supplemental essays. That can offer them a preview of the types of questions they're likely to see later on. I also like to ask get-to-know-you questions. I answer these too, to begin to build a relationship with the student.

How specifically do you ensure a great Common App essay?

Sheree: A great essay is not the same for every student. The essay that works for one student would be entirely inappropriate for another student. It's one reason we discourage students from following a formula or reading other essays as examples, although we know they, their parents, and their teachers do it! We urge them to follow our process and see where it takes them. Often, they've also written an essay for a high school class assignment, but almost always they prefer what they write using our process.

Shirley: A good essay, in my view, is one that truly showcases the key characteristics of a given student in a trustworthy way. So, specifically for the main essay, before starting, I ask the students to come up with a few words to describe themselves that they wish their readers would take away about them after reading the essays. Then after the essays are written, I ask them to show these essays to a few people and see what conclusion these readers draw and whether the descriptive words match between writers and readers.

Diane: I give each student an essay rubric. It's a simple set of questions about the components of an essay that make it great: showcasing values, demonstrating growth, and so on. We revisit this rubric throughout the writing process, ensuring they can answer yes to most of the questions.

What tools do you use in your process?

Stephanie: I change the tools I use depending on the student. It is always good to have many options up your sleeve. I try to get the students talking and writing with the College Essay Guy's "Values

and Objects" exercises, free writes, and *TheMoth.org*. Before I meet with the student, I revisit the notes I took during the initial consultation and parent meeting(s), so I come to the brainstorming meeting with ideas. Helping the student brainstorm the long essay and supplemental essays is a part of every conversation and email.

Sheree: Here's a shout-out to the WOW Writing Workshop program. Although we don't use their process specifically, I love their "New Openings" exercise, which we do with students toward the end of the process.

Diane: I give students several brainstorming exercises, including some techniques from Ethan Sawyer, and they can choose which ones speak to them.

What pre-work do you ask the student to do?

Sheree: In the spring of junior year, we kick off our Common App essay writing work. First, the student completes our brainstorm homework— with no one-word answers. In addition, the student reads through the seven Common App essay prompts but is told not to write anything. After the brainstorm homework is completed, the student and advisor meet for a one-on-one review of each prompt. As the advisor reads each prompt, the student writes down ideas of how they might answer it or says, "Move on." Their homework is to choose two to three of those ideas and do a 10-minute free write for each. We tell them to not write an essay or follow any format but turn on their timer and write about everything they can think of related to the prompt.

What do you do when nothing works and the student has no ideas?

Stephanie: I get curious. I am a firm believer that every student has something interesting to write about, and it is a matter of asking the right question. I keep the questions coming, and I pick away at a topic with phrases like, "I am trying to understand why you knew ABC." There is always a gem underneath.

Diane: I will interview a student and ask them follow-up questions when they tell their stories. "Then what," "So what," and "Why does that matter?" I scribble notes as fast as possible to try to capture their exact language, then give them a copy of those notes.

Are there taboos in essay writing or not?

Sheree: I don't believe there are taboos, although the parents and students think there are! But what I know is that if the essay doesn't reflect who you are today and how you've changed, then you need to be cautious about writing about it.

Shirley: It depends. My general rule of thumb is to try not to rule out topics or materials too quickly or too easily. For example, we may hear people say, "Don't write about activities that you have already covered in

continued on page M15

The “I” Designation: Your Ticket to Global Symposia

By the IECA 2024 Regional Symposium-Madrid, Spain Planning Committee

When is it right to study abroad, and what options are available to English-speaking students? How do you go about getting the experience to advise students in this capacity?

Attending an IECA global symposium is the first step toward answering these questions.

IECA's Global Committee and European Regional Group are proud to present the IECA Regional Symposium-Madrid, Spain, to be held February 22-23, 2024. One of the many benefits of being an IECA member is its global professional network. Our members, as well as our clientele, span the globe. The families we serve are multicultural, multilingual, and face different needs. IECA is dedicated to facilitating educational access for families across continents.

Praise for the inaugural IECA regional symposium, held at the Università Bocconi in Milan, Italy in 2023, poured in from IECA members and partners alike, establishing this as an indispensable annual professional development event. One independent educational consultant (IEC)



valued the regional focus of the gathering: “Being an IEC based in Europe, networking with my colleagues in this same region was priceless, and the targeted session content helped me confidently advise students and families on several destination countries in the region.”

The volunteer committee of IECA members, IECA staff, and Saint Louis University-Madrid (SLU) are proud to bring you this second global professional experience. Our host, SLU-Madrid, is eager to open its doors to IECA members and valued educational institutions and partners for two days of networking, learning, and fun: “We were sponsors at the first global symposium at Bocconi, so we are thrilled to be the hosts this year. Education and service to others are pillars of our university mission, and we're happy to host an event that supports IECs learning with and from each other on our global campus.”

This February, 80 IECA members and IEC colleagues will live like *Madridños* for a few days. They'll discover a vibrant, international

continued on page M16

Essay Brainstorming, from page M14

the activity section.” Even for the same topic, there are always different angles and perspectives. Once I had a student who had extensive activities related to Shanghai's local culture in her activity section. She also chose to write her main essay about Shanghai local culture. Yet her main essay was a completely different personal growth story, sharing her journey of discovering and preserving local culture in Shanghai. One admission officer of a leading liberal arts college wrote her an email to tell her how much she loved reading her essay. I would have a similar suggestion about topics that appear to be cliché or not unique. Many boys love to play basketball. This fact alone doesn't get their essays about basketball into the category of cliché. One student of mine had written an essay about how he used his engineering skills to design a training board for his teammates, while another student wrote an essay about how he found new ways to add value when he suddenly became the shortest person in his class and could no longer score as a breakthrough player. His basketball essay then became a complete showcase of his growth mindset.

Finally, how do you encourage students' essay writing efforts?

Diane: Positivity and support go a long way. Students need to be heard and valued wherever they are as a writer.

Sheree: Many times before we talk about an essay, I thank the student for writing it and sharing it with me. I want them to realize that being vulnerable and truthful in essay writing is okay and appreciated by me and hopefully by admissions offices.

Stephanie: Ultimately, I view the brainstorming aspect of my job as a way of helping students get interested, curious, proud of, and inspired by their own stories. When I note that they have done or said something that is differentiating, it often surprises them and makes them reflect with pride about who they are—and that is what I most like about being a college consultant.

Shirley: At the end of the day, preparing and writing essays is a journey of self-discovery. After completing all these essays, main and supplemental, these students will know themselves much better and more deeply. I often share with my students that life is the culmination of all the decisions that we have made. The more we know about ourselves, the higher the chance that we will make decisions truly following our heart and leveraging our strength. As a student of mine put it, “Like a touchstone, it helped me see clearly which colleges are the true matches for me, truly understand me, and appreciate me.”

We got to enjoy the ride of this “good fight.” 