

College Application Essay Brainstorming Workbook

20+ Exercises & Reflection Prompts to Discover Your Best Essay Idea

(12 Page Content Layout)

PAGE 1 – Introduction: How to Use This Workbook

This workbook is designed to help you find a *real, authentic, powerful* topic for your college application essay.

Do NOT try to be impressive here.

Do NOT worry about grammar.

Do NOT write what you “should” write about.

Write the truth.

Your job in this workbook:

- Be specific
- Be honest
- Be imperfect
- Be brave

You are not looking for the “biggest” story. You are looking for the *real* story.

Rules:

- Answer quickly
- No editing while writing
- If something makes you emotional, explore it further
- Small moments > big summaries

Materials needed:

Pen, paper (or notes app), and honesty.

Let’s begin.

PAGE 2 – Exercise 1: The 25-Moment List

Write down **25 specific moments** from your life that stand out.

These should be:

- Specific moments (not “my whole freshman year”)

- 2–10 minutes long (not 3 months)
- Clear snapshots in time

Examples:

- The call when I found out my grandma was in the hospital
- Missing the winning shot and hearing silence
- Teaching my little sister how to tie her shoes
- Sitting alone at lunch on the first day of school
- Fixing my first bike tire

Now list yours:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.

...

25.

Circle:

- 3 that feel emotional
- 3 that feel important
- 3 that still replay in your mind

Those 9 are now your *power moments*.

PAGE 3 – Exercise 2: The Emotion Map

Pick **3 moments** from your list.

For each one:

Moment #1:

- What happened?
- What did you feel? (circle: anger / fear / shame / pride / confusion / relief / excitement / loneliness)
- What were you thinking in that moment?
- What did you *not* say out loud?

Repeat for **Moment #2** and **Moment #3**.

Now answer:

Which moment feels the most powerful when you relive it?
That is a strong essay candidate.

PAGE 4 – Exercise 3: The Values Finder

Write your **top 5 values**:

Examples:

- Loyalty
- Independence
- Curiosity
- Empathy
- Justice
- Faith
- Humor
- Creativity
- Growth
- Resilience

Your 5:

- 1.
- 2.
- 3.
- 4.
- 5.

Now answer:

Which moment from your list best shows each value IN ACTION?

Value Life Moment That Shows It

- 1
- 2
- 3
- 4

Value Life Moment That Shows It

5

The best essays **show values**, not state them.

PAGE 5 – Exercise 4: The Before & After Test

Pick one powerful moment.

BEFORE:

- How did you think?
- Who were you?
- What did you believe?

AFTER:

- How did you change?
- What new perspective do you have?
- What is different about you now?

If there is a clear difference → this is a GREAT essay candidate.

Big change = strong story.

PAGE 6 – Exercise 5: The Hard Truth Exercise

Answer honestly:

- When have you felt like you weren't enough?
- When have you failed?
- When have you hurt someone (even slightly)?
- When have you been misunderstood?
- When have you doubted yourself?

Pick ONE and go deeper:

What happened, exactly?

What did it teach you about yourself?

Vulnerable essays are powerful essays.

PAGE 7 – Exercise 6: The “Small but Meaningful” Moments

Write about:

- A normal day that you secretly loved
- A quiet moment you never forgot
- A routine that matters to you
- Something simple that made you emotional
- A habit that says a lot about you

Examples:

- Washing dishes with my mom at midnight talking about life
- Tying my shoes the same way before every race
- The smell of my dad’s workshop
- Listening to my best friend breathe while she slept on FaceTime

Small moments = BIG emotional power.

PAGE 8 – Exercise 7: The Conflict Map

Every good story needs a conflict.

Choose one moment and answer:

- What was the problem?
- What made it hard?
- Who was involved?
- What was at stake?
- What were you afraid of losing?

Now answer:

How did you respond to the conflict?

- Fight
- Flight
- Freeze
- Change
- Growth

- Understanding

Your response = your character.

PAGE 9 – Exercise 8: The Curiosity Test

Answer these:

- What could you listen to for 3 hours nonstop?
- What makes time disappear for you?
- What topic makes you go “Wait... but WHY?”
- What internet rabbit holes do you fall into?
- What subject makes you argue or light up?

Now reflect:

Why does this **actually** matter to you?

This is perfect for **Prompt 6** topics.

PAGE 10 – Exercise 9: The Point of View Shift

Pick a moment and rewrite it **from 3 perspectives**:

1. You in the moment
2. Someone else watching you
3. You, 5 years older, looking back

What did you realize that you didn’t see before?

This reflection makes essays deep.

PAGE 11 – Exercise 10: The “Only Me” Test

Ask yourself:

Could someone else easily write the same essay?

If YES → Not strong enough yet

If NO → You’re on the right track

Now fill in:

“Only I could write this because...”

Examples:

- Only I grew up translating for my mother in hospitals
- Only I taught myself piano in a closet
- Only I balance two completely different cultures
- Only I was the captain of a team that hated each other

Finish your sentence:

Only I could write this because...

PAGE 12 – Your Final Topic Selection

You should now have 2–3 strong ideas.

Fill in:

Final Topic #1

- Moment:
- Why it matters:
- What it reveals about me:

Final Topic #2

- Moment:
- Why it matters:
- What it reveals about me:

Now circle ONE.

This is your essay.

Next Step:

Write your first paragraph starting with:

- A moment
- A feeling
- Or a specific image