

Brainstorming & Selecting an Essay Topic

For most people, the hardest part of the college essay is getting started. Some struggle with picking a topic, others are paralyzed with how to structure the essay or write the opening sentences. The truth is, if you spend a little time organizing your thoughts before you start to write, the writing will come easily.

To get started on the college essay, try the following steps:

Step one: Self-reflection

Since the purpose of the essay or personal statement is to allow the college admissions office to learn more about you as a person, the first step is self-reflection. To get started, answer the following questions honestly:

What are my strengths?
What are my weaknesses?
What is special about me?
What kind of person am I?
What do I care about/believe in/ value most?
How do I stretch my mind and learn?
What words best describe me?

You can use the self-concept map on the last two pages for this process. If you have trouble, ask the people who know you best what they think to get ideas. However, in the end your answers should reflect what YOU think.

Step Two: Brainstorming

The next step is brainstorming essay topics. This is the process of gathering ideas and getting them onto paper. To start brainstorming, use the information you've uncovered about yourself in the first step to complete each of the following prompts. At this stage, you are writing detailed bullet points, a brief outline or a paragraph to address each topic. Again, don't worry about sentence structure or grammar. There will be time to edit later.

- An achievement that made me feel terrific...
- Something I have struggled to overcome or change about myself or my life...
- An event or experience that taught me something special...
- A "real drag" of an experience that I had to get past...
- Someone's act of strength or courage that affected me...
- A family experience that influenced me in some powerful way...
- A lesson, class project, activity or job that had an impact on my academic or career goals...
- A time that I blew it, failed, made bad choices, and how I got past it...
- Some memorable event or advice involving an older person...
- An event that helps to define me, in terms of my background...

Step Three: Expanding your ideas

Look at your self-concept map or your responses to each of the previous questions. Choose two or three of your favorite responses from the list above. If there are common themes or patterns, you can also combine a few responses. Write a more about each topic. Fully describe the event and its impact on you. Make sure your written description answers the following three questions. If it doesn't, add more details.

1. Does your writing clearly describe the events so that the reader can picture them?
2. Will the reader understand what were the key moments of the event and how you reacted to it?
3. Is it clear what you learned from this event or how you were changed as a person?

Step Four: Identifying your essay theme

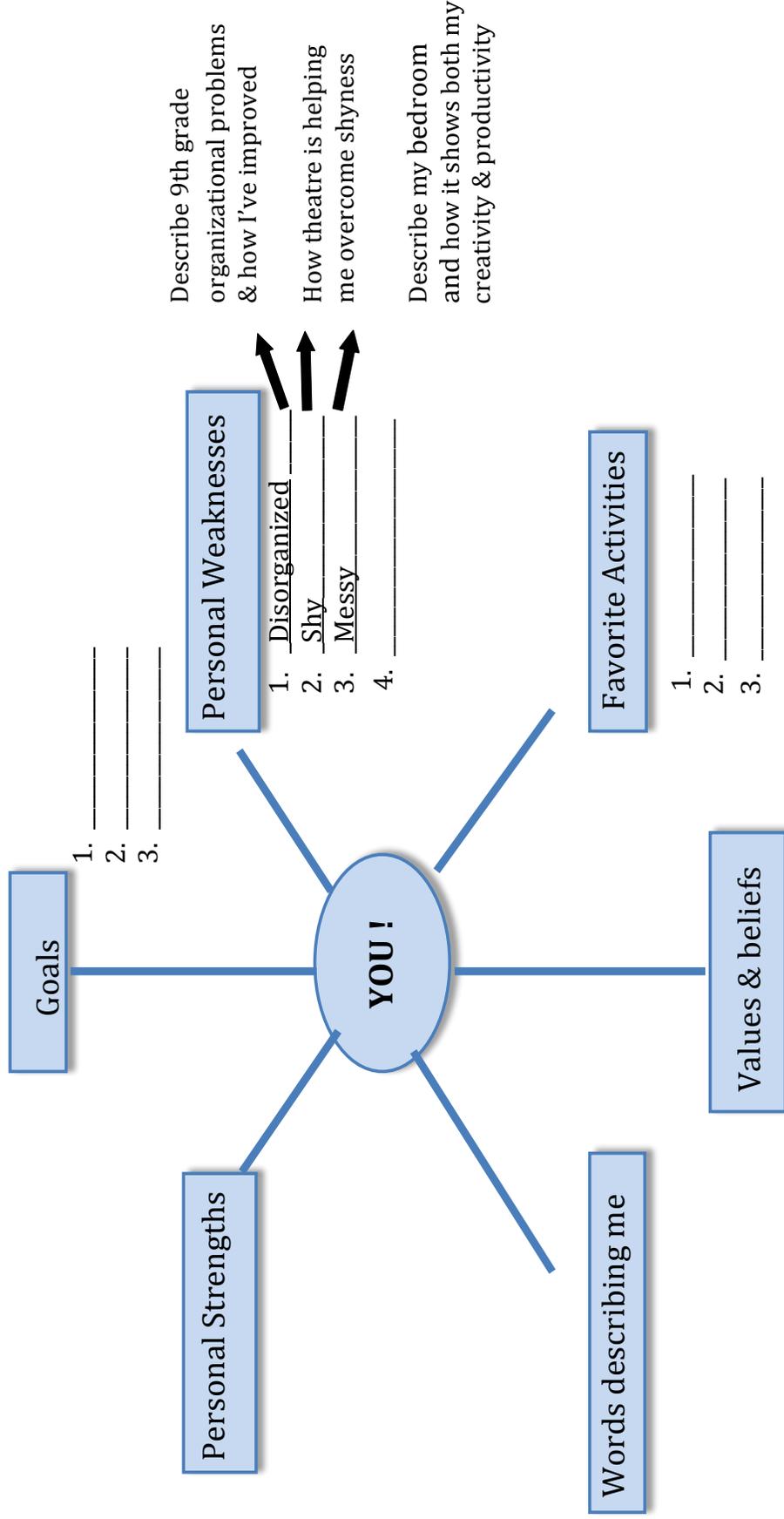
Reread your expanded responses. To pick the essay theme, consider the following questions about each essay:

- What does this event reveal about me?
- Why was this event significant to me?
- How does this event make me special or make me stand out?
- What truth about me is revealed through this event?

Answering this questions will make obvious which essay theme is best for your personal statement. Other essay ideas can be used for colleges that require multiple essays.

Self Concept Map

1. Put your name in the center
2. For each extension off your name, list 3 - 4 examples. If you need help, ask your family & friends.
3. For each example in the list, give at least one illustrating example or event.
4. For each example explain how this impacts who you are as a person and/or how you feel about this event/trait.
5. When you are finished you will have a variety of essay topics that illustrate different elements of your personality



Self Concept Web

