

# HEARN CONSULTING

## **The College**

### **Essay Toolkit**

Everything you need to brainstorm, draft, revise, and submit compelling personal statements, Common App essays, UC PIQs, and supplemental essays.

### **STUDENT PLAYBOOK**

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### **WHAT'S INSIDE**

<b>01</b>	<b>Principles That Matter</b> <b>What separates forgettable essays from unforgettable ones</b>
<b>02</b>	Mine Your Life Prompts to surface stories you didn't know you had
<b>03</b>	Look for Patterns How to identify themes worth writing about
<b>04</b>	Test Your Topic A filter for knowing if your idea will hold
<b>05</b>	The Common App Personal Statement All seven prompts, decoded
<b>06</b>	UC Personal Insight Questions Strategy for all eight PIQs
<b>07</b>	From Topic to Draft Structuring, opening, and finding your voice
<b>08</b>	The Paragraph Workshop Sentence-level craft for personal essays
<b>09</b>	What to Avoid Common pitfalls that weaken even good stories
<b>10</b>	Revision Prompts Questions to sharpen every draft
<b>11</b>	How Supplementals Work What they're for, how to plan across applications
<b>12</b>	The "Why This School?" Essay Writing a fit essay that can't be swapped

<b>13</b>	The Community Essay Showing where you belong and how you show up
<b>14</b>	The Activity Depth Essay Going beyond the 150-character description
<b>15</b>	The Curiosity Essay What you think about when you're free to think
<b>16</b>	The Perspective / Identity Essay What you bring to a campus
<b>17</b>	The Challenge / Failure Essay Showing resilience without performing it
<b>18</b>	Short and Quirky Prompts The 50–150 word questions that still matter
<b>19</b>	Recycling and Adapting How to reuse ideas without being lazy
<b>20</b>	The Supplemental Audit A final checklist before you submit

**01**

- Principles That Matter

Before you write a single word, internalize these principles. They're the difference between an essay that gets skimmed and one that gets read twice. Every piece of advice in this toolkit connects back to them.

## THE CORE IDEA

Your essay is not a summary of achievements or a list of qualities. It is a window into how you think, what you care about, and who you're becoming. Admissions officers read thousands of essays. The ones they remember are specific, honest, and alive with the writer's real voice.

## SHOW, DON'T TELL

- Rather than stating qualities, illustrate them through specific moments, sensory details, and actions. When you show, readers experience the story with you. "I am determined" tells. "My fingers hovered over the piano keys as my heart thudded louder than the music" shows.

## BE AUTHENTICALLY YOU

- Your essay should sound like you talking to someone you trust — not like a thesaurus, not like your English teacher. Authenticity means choosing stories you'd actually tell a friend, in language that feels natural.

## BE CONCISE AND PURPOSEFUL

- Every sentence should earn its place. With 650 words (Common App) or 350 words (UC PIQs), there's no room for throat-clearing or filler. If a sentence doesn't advance the story or deepen the reflection, cut it.

## STRUCTURE WITH INTENTION

- A strong essay feels inevitable — each paragraph builds on the one before it, creating momentum. Readers should never wonder why a paragraph is there.

### REFLECT DEEPLY

- Recounting what happened is not enough. The reader needs to understand what it meant to you — how it changed your thinking, revealed something you hadn't seen, or shifted how you move through the world.

### USE SPECIFICS TO ADD DEPTH

- Generalities flatten essays. Details bring them alive. Not “my grandmother’s cooking” but “the cumin and garlic filling our Sunday kitchen.” The more specific, the more universal.

### CHOOSE WORDS WITH CARE

- Strong word choice reflects your personality and controls tone. Avoid jargon, overblown vocabulary, and phrases that don't sound like you. Aim for precision: the right word in the right place.

### LOOK FORWARD WITH PURPOSE

- Your essay isn't just a record of who you are — it's a glimpse of who you're becoming. The strongest endings connect backward to the story and forward to what's next.

### 02

- Mine Your Life

The hardest part of writing a personal statement isn't the writing — it's figuring out what to write about. Most students get stuck looking for the “perfect” topic or trying to guess what admissions officers want. The best essays come from stories that genuinely matter to you.

Grab a notebook or open a blank document. Don't edit yourself — just get ideas down. Quantity over quality at this stage. You're mining for raw material, not drafting an essay.

**Defining Moments**

<b>What's a moment that changed how you see the world — or yourself?</b>

<b>When did you realize something important that you hadn't understood before?</b>

<b>What's a decision you made that felt significant, even if no one else noticed?</b>

<b>What's something difficult you went through that you've come out the other side of?</b>

**Who You Are**

**What do people who know you well say about you? What would surprise them?**


**What do you do when no one's watching — the stuff that's just for you?**


**What makes you lose track of time?**


**What's something you believe that not everyone agrees with?**


**Where You Come From**

**What's something about your family, culture, or background that's shaped who you are?**


**What community do you belong to that outsiders might not understand?**


**What's a tradition, ritual, or habit in your life that means something to you?**


**Passions and Curiosity**

**What subjects, questions, or problems spark your curiosity? When did that start?**


**Is there something you love doing that's unique or unexpected? What does it reveal about you?**


**Have you ever pursued knowledge on your own, outside of school? Why, and what did it teach you?**


**Challenges and Resilience**

**What's a challenge you've faced — big or small — that taught you a lasting lesson?**

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**When was a time things didn't go as planned? How did you adapt?**

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**When did you feel most out of your comfort zone, and how did you handle it?**

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**03**

- Look for Patterns

Now step back and look for themes. The best essay topics often sit at the intersection of multiple answers. You're not looking for the most impressive thing you've done — you're looking for the truest thing you can say about yourself.

**Pattern Recognition**

**What keeps coming up across your answers? A value? A trait? A tension?**


**Which responses surprised you — or felt the most honest?**


**What do you keep wanting to say more about?**


**If you had to describe yourself in three words, what would they be — and what stories prove them?**


**A NOTE ON “IMPRESSIVE” TOPICS**

Admissions officers don't need you to cure a disease or win a national championship. They need to understand how you think, what you care about, and how you make sense of the world. The most compelling essays are almost always about small, specific moments — not grand achievements.

- Test Your Topic

Not every meaningful experience makes a good essay. Before you commit to a topic, run it through this filter. If it doesn't pass, it doesn't mean the experience doesn't matter — it just means it might not be the right vehicle for this format.

### The Topic Filter

<b>Is it specific enough?</b>	<b>A single moment or experience works better than a broad theme.</b>
<b>Can you reflect on it?</b>	If you can only describe what happened but not what it meant, it's not ready.
<b>Is it yours?</b>	The essay should be about you — not a parent, friend, or public figure.
<b>Does it show growth?</b>	The reader should learn something about how you think.
<b>Is it already elsewhere?</b>	If your activity list or transcript tells this story, choose something else.
<b>Can you be honest?</b>	If you're performing rather than reflecting, the reader will feel it.

### Topic Shortlist

Narrow down to 2–3 possible topics. Write a one-sentence summary of each.

<b>Topic A:</b>

**Topic B:**


**Topic C:**


**IF YOU'RE TORN**

Pick the one where you have the most specific material: concrete details, a clear moment, a genuine reaction. You can always come back to the others for supplementals or PIQs.

**05**

- The Common App Personal Statement

The Common App essay is 250–650 words and goes to every school on your Common App list. You choose one of seven prompts, but here's what most students don't realize: the prompt is a starting point, not a cage. Admissions readers care about what the essay reveals about you, not which prompt you picked.

**KEY STRATEGY**

Don't pick a prompt and then hunt for a story. Pick your strongest story from the brainstorming you've already done, then find the prompt that fits it best. Prompt 7 ("Topic of your choice") is always available if nothing else fits cleanly.

**Prompt 1: Background, Identity, Interest, or Talent**

• 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.

Best for: Students whose identity, culture, family, or a defining interest is central to who they are.

Approach: Go specific. “My Mexican heritage” is too broad. “The morning my grandmother taught me to make tamales and told me why she left Oaxaca” is a story. Ground the big idea in a concrete moment.

<b>What background, identity, or interest feels essential to your story? What specific moment captures it?</b>

**Prompt 2: Setback, Failure, or Challenge**

• 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?

Best for: Students who have a genuine experience of failure or difficulty that led to real growth — not a humble brag.

Approach: Spend 30% describing what happened and 70% on how you processed it, what changed in you, and what you carry forward. Avoid ending with a tidy lesson — real growth is messy.

**What challenge or failure genuinely changed how you operate? What did it reveal about you?**

### **Prompt 3: Questioning a Belief or Idea**

- Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

Best for: Students who are intellectually curious and willing to show genuine evolution in their thinking.

Approach: Show a belief you actually held, not one you set up as a straw man. Show the discomfort of questioning yourself. The outcome doesn't have to be neat.

**What belief did you genuinely hold that changed? What triggered the shift?**

### **Prompt 4: Gratitude**

- 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?

Best for: Students who can write with emotional depth without sentimentality.

Approach: Keep the focus on you: how did this moment reshape something in how you see the world?

**What unexpected kindness or gesture shaped you?**

**Prompt 5: Personal Growth**

- Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.

Best for: Students with a clear before-and-after story. The realization matters more than the accomplishment.

Approach: This isn't about winning the award — it's about what shifted in how you understand yourself.

**What realization or event marked a turning point in how you understand yourself?**

**Prompt 6: What Captivates You**

- Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you?

Best for: Students with a genuine intellectual passion or unusual interest they can write about with energy.

Approach: Let the reader feel your obsession. Not “I love biology” but “I spent three weeks reading about tardigrades because I couldn't accept that anything could survive the vacuum of space.”

**What topic or question makes you lose track of time?**

**Prompt 7: Topic of Your Choice**

- 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.

Best for: Everyone. If you have a strong story that doesn't fit prompts 1–6, this is yours.

Approach: Same principles apply. The open prompt doesn't give you a free pass on structure or specificity.

**If none of the other prompts fit, what story do you most want to tell?**

06

- UC Personal Insight Questions

The University of California system uses eight Personal Insight Questions (PIQs). You choose four to answer, each in 350 words max. These are fundamentally different from the Common App essay. PIQs are shorter, more direct, and less narrative. They want to hear you think, not just tell a story.

	<p><b>PIQ STRATEGY</b></p> <p>Don't repeat yourself across your four responses. Each PIQ should illuminate a different dimension of who you are. Before you start writing, map which four questions let you cover the most ground. Think of your four PIQs as a portfolio.</p>
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**How PIQs Differ from Common App Essays**

<b>Element</b>	<b>PIQs vs. Common App</b>
<b>Length</b>	350 words max (vs. 650). Every word counts more.
<b>Tone</b>	Direct and conversational. Less narrative arc, more insight.
<b>Structure</b>	Get to the point fast. No long scene-setting.
<b>Purpose</b>	Each PIQ shows one specific quality, experience, or value.
<b>Strategy</b>	Your four answers together should paint a full picture of you.

**PIQ 1: Leadership**

- Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.

This isn't about titles. The UCs want to see how you lead in practice — organizing a study group counts as much as being team captain.

<b>When have you stepped up to lead or organize, even informally?</b>

## PIQ 2: Creative Side

- Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original or inventive thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.

Creativity here is broad — it doesn't mean art. It means how you think differently.

<b>How do you express creativity — in art, problem-solving, building, or something else?</b>

## PIQ 3: Greatest Talent or Skill

- What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?

The “over time” is key — show progression, not just current ability.

<b>What are you best at, and how has that ability grown?</b>

**PIQ 4: Educational Opportunity or Barrier**

- Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

If you've had access to special programs, explain what you did with it. If you've faced barriers, show how you navigated them. Be matter-of-fact, not pitying.

<b>What educational opportunity or barrier has most shaped your academic path?</b>

**PIQ 5: Significant Challenge**

- Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?

Be specific about the challenge and even more specific about what you did about it. The UCs want to see agency.

<b>What challenge have you actively worked to overcome?</b>

**PIQ 6: Academic Subject**

- Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.

Go beyond “I like biology.” Show what you’ve done with that interest.

<b>What academic subject excites you, and what have you done to go deeper?</b>

**PIQ 7: Community Contribution**

- What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?

This is about impact, not resume padding. Small, genuine contributions beat inflated claims.

<b>What have you done to improve your school or community? What motivated you?</b>

**PIQ 8: Beyond Academics**

- Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

This is your wild card. Surface something that hasn't come through elsewhere.

<b>What's something important about you that isn't captured anywhere else?</b>

### PIQ Selection Planner

Map which four PIQs you'll answer and what quality each one highlights. Avoid overlap.

PIQ #	Topic / Story	Quality It Shows
PIQ __:		
PIQ __:		
PIQ __:		
PIQ __:		

07

- From Topic to Draft

You've got your topic. Now you need to build it into an essay. This section walks you through the structural and voice decisions that turn a good idea into a compelling read.

### Starting the Draft

Do not start by writing your opening line. Start by writing the scene. Get the core of the story down first — the moment, the details, the feeling. Your opening will reveal itself once you know what the essay is actually about.

	<p><b>ON OPENING LINES</b></p> <p>The best openings drop the reader into a specific moment. They don't announce what the essay is about. They don't start with a quote or a dictionary definition. They make the reader want to know what happens next. If your first sentence could begin anyone's essay, it's not specific enough.</p>
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## Structural Options

There's no single correct structure for a personal essay, but most strong essays follow one of these patterns:

<b>Narrative Arc</b>	<b>A single story told chronologically with reflection woven in. Best when you have one clear, contained experience.</b>
<b>Montage</b>	Multiple scenes or moments connected by a theme. Best when your idea spans different times or contexts.
<b>Reflection-Driven</b>	Start with a current moment, then move between present reflection and past events. Best for growth stories.
<b>Contrast</b>	Set up a tension between two ideas, experiences, or identities, then resolve or explore it. Best for complexity.

## Finding Your Voice

Read your draft out loud. If it sounds like a college brochure, rewrite it. If it sounds like you explaining something to a friend over coffee, you're close.

	<p><b>THE VOICE TEST</b></p> <p>Write two paragraphs about your topic: one as if you're writing a formal English paper, and one as if you're telling a friend. The essay voice should be closer to the second — honest, specific, and natural — but polished.</p>
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This section is about sentence-level craft. Once you have a draft, these tools help you sharpen individual paragraphs until every line earns its place.

### **Drafting Vs. Revising**

Drafting is getting words on the page. Your goal is speed and volume, not polish. You're exploring ideas, finding your story, discovering what you actually think.

Revising is asking hard questions about what you wrote. Does this sentence serve the essay? Is this paragraph earning its place? Am I being honest, or performing? Revision is slow, intentional, and essential.

## Why Essays Get Rejected (Hint: It's Not Typos)

- The essay doesn't answer the prompt. You got so caught up in a great story that you forgot to address what was actually asked.

- The essay tries to sound impressive instead of being honest. Admissions officers read thousands of essays. They know the difference between a real voice and a performed one.

- The essay is vague. "I learned to work harder" is not an essay. "Until my tenth grade soccer season, I'd always coasted" is the beginning of an essay.

- The essay is passive. Things happen to the writer instead of the writer taking action. You're a character in your own story.

- The essay doesn't reflect. It tells a story without exploring what the story means. What did you learn? How do you see yourself differently?

09

- What to Avoid

These are the patterns that weaken even well-written essays. If you see any of these in your draft, revise.

- The Resume Essay
- Listing accomplishments with no reflection. “I was captain, I volunteered, I got an A.” The activities section already covers this. Your essay needs to go deeper.

- The Tragedy Essay (Performed)
- Using difficulty for sympathy rather than insight. If the essay is more about what happened to you than what you did with it, it’s not ready.

- The Savior Essay
- Volunteering abroad and “changing your perspective.” This almost always centers you in someone else’s story. Proceed with extreme caution.

- The Thesaurus Essay
- Replacing simple words with complex ones to sound smart. “Utilize” instead of “use.” “Facilitate” instead of “help.” Admissions officers see through this instantly.

- The Safe Essay
- Writing what you think they want to hear. If your essay could be anyone’s essay with the nouns swapped, it’s too safe.

- The Kitchen Sink Essay
- Trying to cover everything: your sport, your family, your job, your academics. Pick one thread and follow it deep.

10

- Revision Prompts

Use these questions after every draft. Not all at once — pick 3–4 per pass and go deep.

### The Meaning Check

Rewrite your essay in three sentences: What happened? What did it mean? How does it shape who you are now?

<b>What happened (the story)?</b>

<b>What did it mean (the insight)?</b>

<b>How does it shape you now?</b>

If you can't answer all three clearly, your essay needs work on macro revision.

### **The Read-Aloud Test**

Read your essay out loud. Not silently. Actually speak the words. You'll hear where the language is stiff, where you're showing off, where you sound like yourself.

<b>What 3 sentences feel most like you when you read them aloud?</b>

<b>What 3 sentences feel most like you're performing?</b>

### **Structural Analysis**

A well-structured essay pulls the reader forward without them noticing. A poorly structured one makes them re-read sentences or wonder where you're going.

<b>Write one sentence summarizing what each paragraph does. Does each one earn its place?</b>

<b>Could you rearrange your paragraphs without losing anything? If yes, the structure needs work.</b>

## The Specificity Pass

Circle every noun and verb in your essay. How many are generic? Replace them.

### SPECIFICITY RULE

Not “my grandmother’s cooking” but “the cumin and garlic filling our Sunday kitchen.” Not “a beautiful place” but “ankle-deep in cold river mud, reaching for the first water sample.”

11

- How Supplementals Work

Supplemental essays are school-specific. They range from 50 to 650 words and serve a different purpose than your personal statement. Your Common App essay shows who you are. Supplementals show why you belong at this specific school.

### THE SUPPLEMENTAL RULE

If you can swap one school’s name for another and the essay still works, you haven’t written a real supplemental. These essays require genuine research into each school.

## Planning Across Applications

Most students apply to 8–15 schools. That’s potentially dozens of supplemental essays. The key is to plan strategically: identify the common types, draft core responses, then customize for each school.

## The Six Supplemental Types

<b>“Why This School?”</b>	<b>The most common. Requires specific research into programs, culture, and opportunities.</b>
<b>Community</b>	How you contribute to a group. What you bring to campus life.
<b>Activity Depth</b>	Going deeper on an extracurricular. More than the 150-character description.
<b>Curiosity / Intellectual</b>	What you think about. Your academic interests beyond the classroom.
<b>Perspective / Identity</b>	What makes your viewpoint unique. What you’d add to the class.
<b>Challenge / Failure</b>	Resilience, problem-solving, growth through difficulty.

**12**

- The “Why This School?” Essay

This is the most common supplemental and the one students get wrong most often. It’s not “Why do you want to go to college?” It’s “Why here, specifically?”

	<p><b>APPROACH</b></p> <p>Do real research. Visit the department pages, not just the admissions page. Find specific courses, professors, programs, clubs, or traditions that connect to your interests. Then explain the connection — why this particular thing matters to you and what you’d do with it.</p>
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<b>What specific programs, courses, or opportunities at this school connect to your interests — and why?</b>

13

- The Community Essay

Schools want to know how you'll contribute to campus life. This isn't about listing clubs you'd join. It's about showing how you engage with the people around you.

APPROACH

Think about the communities you already belong to. What role do you play? How do you show up for people? The best community essays show a pattern of engagement, not a single grand gesture.

**What community do you belong to, and how do you contribute to it?**


14

- The Activity Depth Essay

Your activity list gives 150 characters. This essay gives you room to go deeper on something that matters to you.

APPROACH

Don't just describe what you do. Show why it matters, what you've learned, how you've grown within it. The best versions show the activity revealing something about your character.

**What activity would you want an admissions officer to understand more deeply?**


15

- The Curiosity Essay

What do you think about when you're free to think? This essay is about genuine intellectual curiosity — not academic achievement.

**APPROACH**

Show the rabbit holes. The weird questions. The books you read because you wanted to, not because they were assigned. This essay should make the reader feel your enthusiasm.

**What question or topic do you keep coming back to?**


16

- The Perspective / Identity Essay

What do you bring to a campus that no one else can? This is about your unique viewpoint — shaped by your background, experiences, and values.

APPROACH

Avoid generalizing your identity. Instead, show a specific moment or pattern where your perspective shaped how you engaged with the world.

**What perspective do you hold that comes from your specific lived experience?**

17

- The Challenge / Failure Essay

Similar to Common App Prompt 2, but usually shorter and more focused. The key: show resilience without performing it.

APPROACH

Be honest about what was hard. Don't rush to the lesson. Show the process of working through it, not just the result.

**What failure or challenge taught you something you couldn't have learned any other way?**

18

- Short and Quirky Prompts

The 50–150 word prompts that still matter. These are deceptively hard because you have almost no room. Every word has to work.

	<p><b>THE SHORT-FORM RULE</b></p> <p>Don't try to tell a story in 100 words. Give a sharp, specific answer that reveals personality. Lists can work here. One vivid detail can work. Voice matters more than narrative.</p>
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### Common Short Prompts

<b>Favorite book/movie/song</b>	<b>Pick something real, not strategic. Then say why in one sentence that reveals how you think.</b>
<b>Describe yourself in 3 words</b>	Choose unexpected words. Then briefly prove each one with a specific detail.
<b>Letter to your roommate</b>	Be yourself. This is the most casual prompt you'll get. Let your personality come through.
<b>What brings you joy?</b>	Go specific. Not "spending time with friends" but "the moment right before a thunderstorm when the air changes."

19

- Recycling and Adapting

You will reuse ideas across applications. That's not lazy — it's strategic. But reusing an idea and copying an essay are different things.

### How to Recycle Well

Start with the core idea, then rewrite for the specific prompt and word count. Adjust the angle, emphasis, and details for each school. A leadership story for one school's community prompt might become a growth story for another school's challenge prompt.

	<p><b>RECYCLING CHECKLIST</b></p> <p>Does this essay actually answer this school's prompt? Have I removed any references to another school? Is the tone and length right for this application? Does it add something new to my overall application at this school?</p>
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**20**

- The Supplemental Audit

Before you submit, run every supplemental essay through this final checklist.

<b>Prompt answered?</b>	<b>Does the essay directly address what was asked — not a related topic?</b>
<b>School-specific?</b>	Could you swap in another school's name? If yes, revise.
<b>No overlap?</b>	Does this essay show something new that your other essays don't cover?
<b>Word count?</b>	Within the stated range. Not one word over.
<b>Voice consistent?</b>	Does it sound like the same person who wrote your personal statement?
<b>Proofread?</b>	Spelling, grammar, school name correct. Read it out loud one last time.
<b>No recycled school names?</b>	Triple-check you haven't left another school's name in this essay.

	<p><b>FINAL THOUGHT</b></p> <p>The best college essays aren't written. They're rewritten. If your first draft feels perfect, you probably haven't pushed hard enough. Real writing is revision — cutting, sharpening, finding the honest version underneath the safe one. Trust the process.</p>
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