

# Stories of Self: A College Essay Workshop

## Based on Affirmation and Joy



### What Is This?

This is a curriculum for writing the college admissions essay, designed to lead you from reflection and prewriting all the way through to a final draft.

A curriculum means that it is a series of lessons and activities that build on each other and are meant to be completed sequentially, to take you fully through each step of the workshop.

It is designed to be fully self-guided, so that students can complete all of these steps on their own (or with a friend or two) and at their own pace. But it is also available for teachers, tutors, counselors, and parents to use in both individual sessions with students and in the classroom.

It is completely open-access, meaning that anyone can use this curriculum free of charge.

The purpose of this curriculum is to help students discover meaning, joy, and affirmation in the process of writing a personal narrative essay that expresses the best of who you are. This process is about so much more than getting into college.

### How is This Workshop Different?

This curriculum is innovative -- a different approach to the college essay. It is built around the concept of the college essay as a **“story of self”** -- a creative work of nonfiction that expresses the writer’s essential qualities, values, and passions. It locates the college essay within the diverse and beautiful tradition of stories of self, connecting it to a range of other texts that celebrate the identities, experiences, and relationships that shape who we are and what we most care about.

More traditional or typical approaches to writing the college essay, though they are very well-intentioned, focus heavily on “what colleges are looking for.” Students who possess minority and marginalized identities or have faced significant adversity in their lives are often coached by well-meaning adults to capitalize on their minority status or trauma, since “colleges love that stuff.”

The (unintended) result is that students are urged to relinquish ownership over their own experiences and their own voice in an effort to follow a pretty rigid college essay formula and produce a piece of writing that will (supposedly) please admissions officers. It can become a deeply stressful, isolating experience that feels compromising and “icky” -- as if you’re exploiting yourself or even your family or community in an effort to win the favor of people with great power over your future whom you will likely never meet.

That’s not how it should be, and it is not how it has to be. This workshop curriculum doesn’t ignore the demands of the college essay -- it sticks to the parameters of what a college essay needs to be and is attentive to who’s reading it and for what purposes. But it is designed to push that imaginary admissions officer way, way into the background -- to clear away the anxiety of other people’s judgment and focus on you in a way that is meaningful, joyful, and affirming. You should feel good about yourself, good about your writing, and good about the story you’re telling in your essay. Most of all, it should be yours.

I’ve used this approach and these materials with dozens of students both in the classroom and in one-on-one essay coaching sessions, and it has always been a joyful, affirming experience. I wanted to make it more widely available: something teachers and tutors could use, but also something students could access and use all by themselves. This self-guided online workshop has been tested by four real high school students from Austin, Texas: Maria, Faiza, Gayatri, and Gabriel. Each of them completed the entire curriculum -- ALL of the activities -- on their own, from start to finish. These four curriculum reviewers both confirmed that this approach works as a self-guided workshop and made it even better with their suggestions for improvement.

The curriculum reviewers also contributed all the work they did as writing samples, meaning that every stage of this workshop has sample work by four real students that you can reference. This is part of what makes this curriculum special, too -- while most college essay guides might include a couple sample essays, maybe even a rough draft or two, this workshop provides the start-to-finish journey of not one but four different students. You can see their thinking and writing develop across the different stages, as they each go from analyzing stories of self to freewriting to outlining to drafting to revising. And again -- no one guided or graded them through this. We didn’t change a word of their writing. They did it on their own, and they fully owned their stories. You can, too.

Let’s get started!

## What Is The College Essay?

Let's say a few words about what the college essay is and is for.

The college essay is one of the fundamental elements that you are required to submit as part of your application to almost every four-year college or university in the United States, along with your resume, transcripts, test scores, and letters of recommendation. Most community colleges and vocational programs (for example, cosmetology school) don't require an essay as part of the application.

The college essay is a personal narrative essay, designed to tell a story that illustrates your essential qualities, values, and passions. It's not an academic, argumentative, or informational essay. It's a story of self.

In many other countries throughout the world, students are not required to write a narrative essay in order to be accepted into college. Often, test scores and grades alone determine university admission in other countries. The college essay is a uniquely American tradition, and a unique opportunity to show your "real self" -- the person who exists behind the grades, the test scores, and the extracurricular activities.

Usually, the length is between 500-750 words, or about one to one-and-a-half typed pages, single spaced.

Though prompts for the college essay may vary a little bit between colleges or college application systems (like the Common App or Apply Texas), they are generally VERY broad, typically asking you to address a defining experience, identity, or person in your life. Prompts are so very broad that most of the time, people write one core essay and adapt it slightly if they need to for different colleges.

In this curriculum, you'll write a personal narrative that can serve as your core college essay. The curriculum contains exercises and guidance for interpreting a prompt and adapting your essay to fit new prompts, if necessary. (Go to Flex --> Retrofitting Guide.)

## How Do I Use These Materials?

These 5 stages should all be completed, and they should be completed in **order**. You can access the stages from the menu at the top of this homepage. For each stage, there is an Introduction explaining what you will be doing in that stage and why, as well as links to reflection exercises and writing activities.

This workshop is fully available online at **StoriesofSelfworkshop.com**. You can work directly from the website on documents you create yourself. You can also download PDF

files for each element of the workshop, which are linked in the upper right-hand corner of each page. These PDFs are fillable templates, meaning you can type directly into the documents and save them. Or you can print them out and hand-write your work into each document.

However you choose to complete the workshop, it's a good idea to create a folder (digital or physical) to collect and organize all your files in one place.

Here's a quick description of each stage of the workshop. Note that the time each stage takes is an estimated range based on what real students have reported about their experience, but might vary a lot according to your own pace.

### **Stage 1. Stories of Self**

**Purpose:** Awaken your thinking around selfhood and self-expression by analyzing personal narratives created by a diverse group of writers. Begin to reflect on your own selfhood. Explore your voice by experimenting with different forms of expressing yourself.

**Product(s):** Analysis of 3-4 stories of self + Write-alikes for 3-4 stories of self

**Time:** 1-4 hours

### **Stage 2. Prewriting**

**Purpose:** Determine the story you will tell in your personal narrative through a process of reflecting and writing about who you are, how you got that way, and what stories you have to tell.

**Product(s):** 4 Exercises, culminating in a topic & basic outline for the essay

**Time:** 1-3 hours

### **Stage 3. Shaping Draft 1**

**Purpose:** Get your story down on paper.

**Product(s):** Draft 1

**Time:** 1-3 hours

#### **Stage 4.** Reshaping into Draft 2

**Purpose:** Perform a “macro” review of what is working in your first draft and what you want to change about its structure, organization, and content. Reshape Draft 1 into Draft 2.

**Product(s):** Revision plan for Draft 2 + Draft 2

**Time:** 1-3 hours

#### **Stage 5.** Refining into the Final Draft

**Purpose:** Perform several rounds of “micro” review focused on what is working in your second draft and what you want to change regarding style, tone, and mechanics. Refine Draft 2 into your final draft.

**Product(s):** Final Draft!

**Time:** 1-3 hours

There are also a few “flex” elements that are optional and can be referred to at different points throughout the process!

#### **Flex Element:** Anticipation Guide

**What it is:** An activity to activate prior knowledge and stimulate thinking about selfhood

**When to do it:** Before starting the curriculum (or introducing it, if you are a teacher!)

#### **Flex Element:** Journey to College Video

**What it is:** A 12-minute video featuring six college students discussing their experiences in applying and transitioning to college + accompanying reflection activities.

**When to do it:** At any point during the curriculum!

**Flex Element:** Retrofitting Guide

**What it is:** Exercises to practice interpreting an essay prompt and adapting a pre-existing story to fit a new prompt + achieving a required word count

**When to do it:** At any point after you've finished at least one complete draft + you know where you're applying

**Flex Element:** Writing Samples

**What it is:** Writing by four real people who have done this workshop from start to finish. Not just finished essays, but also drafts, revision plans, prewriting exercises, and write-alikes.

**When to do it:** Sample writing is linked to whenever relevant in the curriculum

## Timing

This curriculum is designed to be self-guided, so that you can work through each stage on your own, if you wish or need to. Ultimately, you are in control of the pace.

Below are two suggested timelines for working your way through the curriculum and producing an essay during different timeframes. These different timelines are organized as a checklist -- you can either print the checklist and hang it on the wall to manually check off completed tasks or digitally track your progress as you go.

Note that a shorter timeline doesn't mean "less work" -- the elements of the curriculum remain the same no matter what. It just means you do more work in less time, versus spreading that work out over a longer period. It also means less time to engage with really useful flex elements, like the "Journey to College" video.

Are you someone who tends to work well under pressure, who procrastinates but turns out their best work under a tight deadline? Or do you just not have a lot of time to turn this around?

**In that case, try the 1 Week Plan.**

[www.StoriesofSelfworkshop.com/1weekplan.html](http://www.StoriesofSelfworkshop.com/1weekplan.html)

Are you someone who needs time to think about what you're going to write, to reflect, to let a draft breathe before returning to it? Do you get really anxious under a lot of pressure and tend to produce lower-quality work when rushed? Are you starting this process with some time to spare? Would you like to get the maximum benefit from this curriculum?

**In that case, try the 4 Week Plan. (Recommended!)**

[www.Storiesofselfworkshop.com/4weekplan.html](http://www.Storiesofselfworkshop.com/4weekplan.html)

## **If You Are A Teacher**

Teachers, parents, tutors, and counselors: This is a resource for you, too! Whether you are recommending this to a young person, providing encouragement and accountability as they work through it on their own, or using these materials to teach a college essay workshop, please read through the introductions to each stage. They illuminate the philosophy behind this approach as well as preview and break down the rationale behind each activity.

**Teachers:** I recognize that the amount of time you, and your student(s), get to spend on this workshop together in class or tutoring sessions will vary wildly. However, here is a suggested mini scope-and-sequence that presents one possible approach for a one-to-two-week college essay unit, based on 5-8 total class periods of 45 minutes each. The plan highlights which elements I suggest doing an in-class lesson on and what can be assigned as homework. It also includes some notes for each lesson with teaching suggestions and ways to condense or extend lessons, depending on how many sessions you have to devote to the workshop.

- **Stories of Self Unit Plan** [www.Storiesofselfworkshop.com/unitplan.html](http://www.Storiesofselfworkshop.com/unitplan.html)

If you adapt and flesh this basic plan out further into full lesson plans, with objectives aligned to state standards and more precise timing -- add or adapt activities -- or have feedback on which activities worked particularly well and which ones didn't -- I would love for you to share it, so that others can make use of it as well. Please contact me directly at [sarah.ropp@gmail.com](mailto:sarah.ropp@gmail.com). I will make sure you are credited in exactly the manner you prefer (from using your full name and affiliation to remaining totally anonymous, or anything in between).

**Tutors:** The teaching plan above can easily be adapted for use with a single student or small group. It can also be adapted based on how many sessions you have to work with a student and what point a student is at in the process of writing their essay. If you are meeting with a student just once, I recommend first assessing where they are at, and then referring to the most appropriate stage of the curriculum. Work on that stage together and

then make sure the student knows how to access the rest of the curriculum by giving them the address to this website. If you know you'll have two, three, or four more sessions with that student, make a rough plan together of what you'll work on together each session and what they will complete independently between sessions.

## **What Others Have Said**

*I realized that I do have stories to tell about my life.*

*You have really helped show me what's important in life, lowered my stress about applying to college, and showed me it's not as scary as I thought.*

*I enjoyed all of these activities so much. I love how affirming the guide is. I think this will help a lot of people.*

*This helped to ease my anxiety about the college essay process. I feel as if I was able to get a better overall understanding of the story I want to tell and that it's okay to just write and get my ideas out without feeling like everything has to be perfect and set in stone. It gave me more confidence in my writing.*

*This gave me less stress and helped my mind flow with ideas.*

*It was nice to know that it is not so much just about writing an essay, because those are boring, but it was also about how we are supposed to talk about ourselves and our background and experiences.*

*This won't just be helpful for essays, but for life.*

## **Who Made This Curriculum?**

My name is Dr. Sarah Ropp. I am

- a public school-educated, nontraditional, low-income student
- a public high school English teacher
- a professional college essay coach
- a published writer of personal narrative essays
- and a PhD in Comparative Literature who currently teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.



This curriculum is the result of a collaboration between me and a number of partners in and beyond Austin, Texas, whose support, guidance, and wisdom I am so grateful for.

**Austin Bat Cave**, a not-for-profit organization dedicated to building community through creative writing. ABC has connected me to incredible students, teachers, and volunteers throughout Austin and provided me the opportunity to develop this curriculum through teaching multiple college essay writing workshops in different formats over the past two years. I sincerely thank the ABC volunteers who brought their warmth, their love for students and for writing, and their diverse experiences to help me deliver these workshops. I give my deepest thanks to Heather Jones, ABC Program Director and my closest collaborator in this project, for all of the logistical and organizational labor, for providing such valuable feedback and such good ideas, for finding our four wonderful test-drivers, and for trusting me with this work. Heather, you are a true force for good, and I am inspired by your example and honored by your partnership.

**Test-Drivers:** This curriculum has benefited enormously from the input of four talented, thoughtful, and generous young people who took on the role of paid Austin Bat Cave “test-drivers” of the self-guided online workshop over a month-long period in summer 2021. We knew this approach worked in the classroom, with guidance from a teacher; now, thanks to the fabulous four, we know it works as an independent workshop, too. Endless thanks to the phenomenal Maria Ortega, Faiza Rahhali, Gayatri Rajamony, and Gabriel Parra-Montesdeoca for completing the entire workshop from start to finish, meticulously recording the time each activity took and everything you liked and didn’t so that it could be made better for other students. And thank you from my heart for agreeing to publish your beautiful work as sample writing. The people using this curriculum will benefit at least as much, if not much more, from the opportunity to see how you each interpreted each activity as they will the activities themselves. Thanks to you four, this workshop curriculum has exceeded my wildest dreams of what it might be.

**Crockett High School**, in particular the eleventh-grade AVID program students and their phenomenal teachers, Ms. Kelsey Ogg and Mr. Ben Broddle, as well as Crockett College Adviser Ms. Michelle Snyder. Austin Bat Cave and the Crockett team gave me the incredible honor of taking over Ms. Ogg’s and Mr. Broddle’s classrooms for three weeks in spring 2021 to facilitate an intensive six-session college essay workshop for five AVID classes. Thank you so much to Kelsey and Ben for the support, love, and trust you showed to this curriculum and to me, and thank you so much to the AVID students of Crockett High School, Class of 2022, for your incredibly valuable feedback on our workshop, your engagement with me and this work, and your kindness. Your lights shone through the Zoom void. Thanks so much, too, to the Crockett students who participated in our much smaller fall 2020 college essay workshop.

The **Mellon Engaged Scholar Initiative Fellowship** (ESI) at the University of Texas at Austin. This curriculum was funded by the ESI, which creates a space of community support and empowerment for both undergraduate and graduate scholars who believe that scholarship should be about humility, mutuality, and sharing power. Big, big thanks to the formidable Agnes Savich, Administrative Program Coordinator, for all of your labor and endless kindness in moving money around, placing orders, and setting up vendors. Agnes, you are amazing. Forever thanks to Dr. Mia Carter, Program Director, for including me in your vision and being such an important link in the chain of my ongoing education.

**Estefania Rodriguez and Friends.** Estefania, a 2020-2021 undergraduate fellow in the Engaged Scholar Initiative at UT-Austin, created an essential part of this curriculum: the “Journey to College” video featuring six current and recently-graduated college students, as well as a transcript of the video and related activities. She also volunteered during six sessions with the AVID classes at Crockett High School and provided feedback and affirmation on crucial parts of the curriculum. Estefania, you are incredible and your contribution to this curriculum is of incalculable value. Shout-out and deep thanks to Luis Alatorre, Sasha Davy, Luis Garcia, Sonia Singh, Jessica Tifase, and André Williams for sharing your time, experiences, and wisdom in the video.

**Joseph Guilin** is the extremely talented designer who took a pile of unappealing Google docs in Arial font and turned them into this gorgeous website. He is responsible for the beautiful Stories of Self logo and all of the images, documents, and formatting in the curriculum. I wanted an aesthetic that felt bright and cozy and, above all, not intimidating -- something that would harken back to elementary school days, when writing was fun and learning was play. Joseph, you delivered beyond what I could have hoped (and way beyond anything I could have come up with myself). Thank you so much for understanding the heart of this project and expressing it visually. You have elevated this curriculum to unimaginable heights, and it will travel so much farther than it ever could have without you.