

Four Essential Steps to Create an Amazing College Essay and Application Dr. Maggie Wray interviews Ethan Sawyer

Ethan Sawyer is a nationally recognized college essay expert and sought-after speaker. Each year he helps thousands of students and counselors through his online courses, workshops, articles, products, and books, and works privately with a small number of students.



Raised in Spain, Ecuador, and Colombia, Ethan has studied at seventeen different schools and has worked as a teacher, curriculum writer, voice actor, motivational speaker, community organizer, and truck driver. He is a certified Myers-Briggs® specialist, and his type (ENFJ) will tell you that he will show up on time, that he'll be excited to meet you, and that, more than anything, he is committed to—and an expert in—helping you realize your potential.

A graduate of Northwestern University, Ethan holds an MFA from UC Irvine and two counseling certificates. He lives in Los Angeles with his beautiful wife, Veronica, and their amazing daughter, Zola. You can connect with Ethan at <https://www.collegeessayguy.com/>



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Dr. Wray: HI, everyone. I'm Dr. Wray here with Creating Positive Futures, where we help students develop the organization, time management, and study skills they need to thrive. A big piece of what we're always trying to work on is helping students manage their stress. College is such a huge piece of this stress that so many students are experiences. That's the goal of this interview series is really to help give you all tools and strategies to help reduce the stress associated with the college process.

What I have found from a lot of my students is that the college essay is an enormous component of the stress that they feel. It feels like a lot of pressure. It's something where they have to write in a way they've never written before. They don't know how to approach it. They don't know what to do. They end up procrastinating on it. That's why I'm so, so excited to be here today with the college essay guy, Ethan Sawyer, who is going to be talking with us about Four Ways to Create an Amazing College Essay and Application. He's such an expert at this and has so much expertise in helping students through the process in a way that they can actually almost enjoy. I'm excited to get a chance to share some of his techniques and strategies with you all today. Thanks, Ethan, for being here.

Ethan: I'm so glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

Dr. Wray: My pleasure. Like I said, I just think this is such a big part of the stress that students experience about the college application process because a lot of what they're putting in the application, they've already done. It's their activities that they already have participated in. It's the grades that they've already earned. But, the essay is a real-time performance. It's something they have to create now that's going to impact their chance of getting in and it's really different from the kind of writing that they've done before, so I think a lot of students struggle with it almost don't even know what they're supposed to do. I think there's some confusion about: how do I even write a good essay? What is a good essay, exactly? What do you share with your students to help them understand what they're even supposed to be aiming for here?

Ethan: Well, to zoom it back for just a second, sometimes I think students think they have to pack it all into what we call the essay, the main personal statement. I think it's really important for students to know that they don't have to fit absolutely every single part of themselves into that statement, that they've got a whole application which we'll talk about in a few minutes that they can use.

One nice framing device that I think is useful for thinking about the whole application – I'm going to reference Aristotle here in the first minute. I don't know how you feel about that.

Dr. Wray: Great! I love that.

Ethan: Cool. Aristotle three methods of persuasion where basically appealing to pathos. So, if you want to convince somebody of something, you appeal to pathos, which is appealing to their emotions. You can appeal to those logos, which is like appealing to reason and logic. And then appealing to ethos, which is basically establishing your credibility as a speaker.

So, in terms of your ethos, establishing your credibility as a college applicant, that's going to be taken care of in your activities list and your GPA and test scores. You don't have to prove yourself in your main personal statement. Hopefully, you're doing that elsewhere.

In terms of pathos, appealing to emotions, I think that's where students can really use the personal statement. Sorry, this is a long, roundabout way of answering your question, but I want to put it in context.

Dr. Wray: It's great. I love it!

Ethan: Pathos and getting into making the personal statement truly personal, so that you are appealing to the reader's emotions can be a good thing to do. In terms of logos, appealing to folks' reason and logic, that's something you can do in the main, personal statement.

So, to answer your question, how do you do it? When it comes to the main personal statement, I feel like there are some things that set apart what will feel like an awesome essay from an essay that's just okay. There are three things. For folks who like to take notes can write these three things down. It's pretty simple.

I think a standout essay chooses, when possible, an uncommon topic, makes uncommon connections – and I'll explain what I mean by that in just a second – and uses uncommon language. Whereas, a just okay essay uses a common topic, makes common connections, and uses common language.

Let me give the bad example first. Let's say a student decides that they want to write about common topics. Sports or instruments.

Dr. Wray: My summer trip or something like that.

Ethan: The mission trip, right. Let's take basketball as an example. Let's say they choose basketball as a common topic and they make common connections, which is to say they think about the common things. What would people normally talk about with basketball?

Dr. Wray: I worked hard and we did well, or we had a game, we lost, and then I recovered and I used it as fuel to get better.

Ethan: Exactly. I give students this values exercise. Give me the common values. This is actually a great way to brainstorm. Brainstorm the crappy version of the essay. So, hard work, perseverance, team work, and then common language is teamwork is essential for success or something that you would see in the success posters.

So, I have students brainstorm. If you're going to write about something like violin, piano, basketball, or mission trip, what is somebody going to say about these things? Then, don't do that.

I'm not telling students to not write about basketball. I'm saying if you are going to write about basketball, if you are using a common topic, it's all the more important to make uncommon connections. Again, the way I do this is give them a values exercise and ask: what are some uncommon things that you normally wouldn't associate with basketball? How did basketball teach you about your boundaries, about healthy boundaries? Or, how did basketball teach you about spirituality? What is the Zen of basketball for you? A student a couple of weeks ago in a workshop was saying – I think it was volleyball that we were brainstorming and I said let's help the student come up with something unusual for volleyball. Someone raised their hand and said, "Rhythm." I was like, "What?" Volleyball helped me find my rhythm. That's more interesting to me than volleyball is essential, teamwork is essential for success.

So, when students can choose an uncommon topic ... A student I worked with once had the santoor, which is this ancient Persian musical instrument. That already sets them apart. A student I worked with last year was writing on indoor skydiving. There's an uncommon topic, but don't get lazy with it and make common connections like you would make with any other sports.

Dr. Wray: Right, how it was scary and now I conquered my fear and did it anyway or something like that.

Ethan: Right. What are the uncommon connections? How has it helped you basically reach into deeper corners of yourself? I tell students that your topic for your main personal statement isn't actually your topic. They're like, "What?" Your topic is not your topic. Your topic is you. The thing you're writing about is you and the topic is – a bunch of different metaphors. The focus that we're using is a keyhole to peer into different parts of you. The wider, the more elastic the lens is – I'm mixing the metaphors here.

Dr. Wray: That's okay.

Ethan: The wider it is, the more corners it's going to allow us to poke into and find out more about you, and the more common the topic, the harder it is to stand out, so I think the more uncommon the connections need to be. The thing that I say is better ingredients, better pizza. The ingredients of your essay is not your topic, volleyball. It's actually those connections that you're making, and if you can up-level your ingredients, which is to say your connections, those are the ingredients that are going to make it a higher quality essay and a higher quality pizza.

Dr. Wray: I'm so glad you shared that, actually, about making it about you and this is just a lens you're using to view yourself because it's not just students, but I hear parents make that mistake all the time where they'll say, "Oh, yes, she needs to work on her essay over the summer. I think she should really write about basketball because she's done so well with it." It's almost like they're looking for an accomplishment to showcase, or an event or achievement that they're going to highlight to prove how good they are. I feel like that's somewhat the wrong way to look at it. I'm curious, do you see families taking that approach a lot where they're looking for something like an event than about them?

Ethan: Yeah. There's this weird ... Maybe it's a contradiction. There's this weird two things to have in mind. On the one hand, we don't want to leave money on the table. In other words, if you've spent 16 years playing basketball, you came out of the womb with a basketball in your hand and that's your jam, in the application somewhere, that should be there. But, if that's your main essay and you write about basketball, then when these colleges are asking about, "So, what else you got? Tell us something else about yourself," in a supplemental essay. And for folks who aren't aware of this, a supplemental essay, generally you will write a main essay which is 650 words (about a page) and that single essay will go out to a lot of different schools and then many schools ask for additional essays. Why do you want to attend our school? What's an extracurricular activity that you've spent a lot of time on?

So, if I'm the basketball player and I've used up my basketball for my main essay, then what am I going to write about here? Maybe I've got something else, but maybe basketball is actually something that would make a really amazing extracurricular essay, and then I've got this space to do something else and be something else.

One of the first advice I give is consider that if it is an extracurricular activity, that you might save that for your supplemental essay. And you do want to talk about it. Just because it's obvious to you, don't

not write about it. Make sure that your activities list is full-on bragging and there should be all your awards and stuff in there. But, when it comes to the main essay, I really want to encourage students ...

This is the back and forth on it. On the one hand, it's like, yes, you have to kind of prove yourself in different parts of the application, but in the main personal statement, I really want students to be coming from a place of enoughness. You don't have to prove yourself. The way students can do this is by making sure that any other parts of the application that they have done the ethos part where they are proving themselves, and in that main personal statement they're focusing on things like core values. I should be able to read your personal statement and name four to five of your core values.

Opportunities for vulnerability. It's hard to be vulnerable in your activities list, but in your personal statement, there's an opportunity there to come from a place of, "Hey, here's something that was tough for me that I worked through, a challenge that I overcame."

Insight is also really hard to do elsewhere in the application. By insight, I mean are you sharing perspectives on yourself and on your world that I make sense of in a different way? In other words, are you saying things that I wouldn't expect you necessarily to say? Because that's when I'm really getting your world, your perspective.

The fourth quality that I think is important is craft. I feel like it's important for your main personal statement for a reader to be able to tell that it's been edited over several drafts.

Again, for the people taking notes, the four qualities are core values, vulnerability, insight, and craft. Those are the four things. I've spent some time thinking about what makes a great essay. When I look at great essays, I can look and find those four qualities at a really high level.

Dr. Wray: That's really fantastic and I think that's not normally the way that students would go about writing an essay and any other context. When they're writing an essay for school, when they're writing an AP Lit essay, whatever they're doing, they're not doing this kind of writing where it's baring your soul, showing your vulnerabilities, talking about your core values. It sounds like the kind of thing that students would be very uncomfortable doing if they're not used to it.

Do you find that they're able to once they know what they're aiming for or is that a challenge for some of them?

Ethan: It depends on the question that they're asked. One thing that makes these essays different from academic essays is where you put the thesis. I think that in AP Lit or AP Lang, putting the thesis at the first is a totally legit and good thing to do. It's important to be like, "Here's the thing that I'm arguing and here's my evidence." So, thesis first and then evidence.

I think in a college essay, it goes like this. Tell me a story and then tell me why it matters. In other words, so what? That insight piece often comes at the end, but oftentimes students are in that mode where they put their thesis first. "I went through this experience of going on this trip and I learned a lot from it." If you say I learned a lot from it at the start, then we know what this essay is going to be about. It's about all the stuff you learned on this trip and it's kind of like ruining the ending of the movie. I say save the moral for the ending.

Let me hear your story and start to dream and make up my own ideas about what it means, and then give me your take on it, because I'm going to be more surprised at the end if your take is a little bit

uncommon. It's got some version of, "Oh, that's kind of what I was thinking, but you said it better. I like the way you said it and I like your perspective on it." So, flipping that I think is an important thing.

In terms of starting an essay, I think students often get overwhelmed if they start to think about what they want, when they start to think about imagine all of the admissions readers everywhere and they think, "How could I fix my hair and put on a shirt that everybody is going to like?" That's maddening. I encourage students to not go there, to actually go here.

There are two ways I like to do that. One is this little exercise, which I'm actually going to do a mini version of with you really quick.

Dr. Wray: Great! Let's do it.

Ethan: Folks who are listening, you can do this exercise as well. Imagine a box and in this box is a set of what we'll call essence objects. Someone is like, "What does that even mean?" It's this term that I made up for an object that actually represents something deeper for who you are. An essence object, looking around my room, this is an essence object for me. I've got these meditation beads that, for me, represent my groundedness. They remind me to meditate because I sometimes will forget. A worn North Carolina basketball, because when growing up, my dad and I played basketball a lot, so that represents his love and care for me. That represents my relationship with my dad, this basketball, and I could tell you a story about that. There's this Bible that my grandmother gave me when I was like seven years old and it has my name stitched on it in gold and it represents being raised as a missionary kid, as a pastor's kid, Wednesday night dinners, eating ambrosia, that weird fruit salad in the south with marshmallows. That would be another essence object.

Hopefully, I've stalled enough to give you enough time to come up with one of yours. Have you got one?

Dr. Wray: I don't even know. Oh, gosh, I was thinking you were letting me off the hook by doing yours.

Ethan: No, I was just trying to give you time to think of yours.

Dr. Wray: Oh, man. Can it be a photo?

Ethan: For sure.

Dr. Wray: Okay. I have a picture of me with my favorite horse. When I was growing up, I always wanted a horse. That was a dream of mine and we didn't have money for a horse, so I worked at barns for years all the way through high school and a lot of middle school, actually, which is probably illegal. But, they let me hang out and work at the barn. That was a huge part of my life and I think it shaped me in a lot of ways to have that kind of responsibility. So, probably that picture of me with the horse that I loved the most through all my time growing up would be my object.

Ethan: What was its name? Did the horse have a name?

Dr. Wray: Yes, his name was Snickers.

Ethan: Cool. So, if we were playing this game, you would write down, "The picture of me with Snickers." That would mean nothing to me initially, but it means a lot to you, and through this exercise which takes about ten minutes, we walk through. I ask a bunch of questions. What's a place you feel safe? What's a secret that you have? What's an object that reminds you of a challenge that you've been through in your life?

What students do in this exercise is they start to, first of all, track through experiences they've had and start to convertize them, like put them into an object or image that kind of exists on its own that the reader will then ascribe meaning to, but really for the writer, it's unpacking. What is that? How is that connected to my other values?

The second exercise that I do takes three or four minutes. Here's a list of values. Give me your top ten values. Once you've got ten, give me your top five of those and down to three and down to one. I really want students to be like ... I want to situate themselves in that arena.

There's this phrase that somebody said at a workshop I was at last weekend. She said something and someone asked, "Why did you say that?" She said, "I think I wanted to let God in the room." Some people were like, "What does that even mean?" She said, "I don't mean this in the religious sense. It's just allowing more space, more awareness." I thought, wow, that's a really cool way of saying that.

So, I think by doing that values exercise, when students are in the place of here's some experiences that I've had in the past and here are some images that represent some of those experiences, they're starting to cook on possibilities on stories that they may have.

Then, when they start to talk about their values and they start to make connections between Snickers and that relationship or my relationship to my meditation beads and we get down to the level of values, I think that's when we're letting God in the room. We're bringing the student to an awareness of how these things have really shaped me.

Then, the process is figuring out, to curate, which of these are the few that I want to choose? Or, is there a particular story that I want to choose or not? Do I want to go, oh, here are some different essences that connect in this particular way? Or, here's a thing that happened to me that led to this, that led to this, that created the new me.

Dr. Wray: There's a lot of self-awareness that goes into that process which I think most students haven't really given themselves the time and space to do, which is part of what I think is really cool about the essay if done well. It's really a self-awareness building tool and it creates a lot of insight and maturity. It's much bigger than getting an essay on paper to send to a college. I think it shifts who you are and how you see yourself if you do it the right way.

Ethan: Thank you. I feel so happy hearing you say that. I wouldn't be doing it if it wasn't about that.

Dr. Wray: That's why I love what you do, because I think you encourage students to approach it that way. Most students I think are not approaching it that way and they should be because it's such a gift. It's such a wonderful thing to be able to offer your students.

So, let's go there into the structure. If students understand what they're aiming for structure-wise or what the options are structure-wise, I think that might help them narrow down their potential avenues they could go with the essay.

Ethan: Sure. I want to offer two questions that students can ask that can set them off on a potential frame. Just different paths. I want to offer the frame and then I want to question the frame. The two questions are – and I'll ask you these questions. They're simple questions.

Number one, have you faced challenges in your life, Maggie, or not?

Dr. Wray: Yes.

Ethan: Okay, cool. I'm not going to ask you what they are right now. It's a yes or no. Second, Maggie, do you know what you want to be when you grow up, what you want to do in the future, or is it a little bit murky?

Dr. Wray: Yes, and I'm open to it changing.

Ethan: Cool. Thank you for that. There's you feeling another question, which I really like. The answers to those two questions split into four different types of essays.

So, in the Type A essay, we've got students who have faced challenges and who want to write about them and who have some sense of what they want to do in the future. So, that might be a potential option for you. But, you have to decide for yourself. Do I definitely want to write about the challenges and do I definitely want to write about what I want to do in the future? It could be that you've faced challenges, but you just don't want to write about them. So, this is for students who not only have faced challenges, but are choosing to write about them and know what they want to study.

Then, Type B, we've got students who have not faced challenges, but do know what they want to do in the future. I'm kind of using study, be in the future, do interchangeably as a sense of I have some vision for my future.

Type C is, yes, I've been through challenges, but I don't have a really clear vision for my future.

Then, Type D, students who have not faced challenges and don't have a clear vision for their future.

That's a frame, but I want to acknowledge that it's kind of a faulty frame because, like I said, even if you have faced challenges or do know what you want to do in the future, you do not have to write about those in your college essay.

Sometimes when I meet a student for the first time, I'll ask them those questions and that will take us on a conversation in a particular way. It's a simple structural thing that I offer. I won't get too much into the weeds.

But, for students who have faced challenges (the A and C), or I should say and want to write about them, there's something called the narrative structure that goes back to my studying screenwriting at Northwestern. My best friend got into USC for screenwriting, so I kind of stole his USC screenwriting education. This is a mini bio origin story. I was helping students with their college essays. This was 2003, 15 years ago, right after college. I was helping them figure out how to tell their story, and I was studying screenwriting and I was realizing we're doing the same thing. This is the hero's journey.

So, that structure – the narrative structure – of beginning with an inciting incident and making sure that whatever the question of the story, whether it's a movie or whether it's like Finding Nemo or whether it's a student's essay is really clear. So, Finding Nemo, will they find Nemo? We need that question to be super clear for us to be engaged in the story. For a student writing an essay about being shy, we need to know at the beginning this is the problem you were dealing with.

So, in the narrative structure – and again, I don't need to get too much in the weeds – but, the question of the essay is the thing that's going to keep us interested throughout. Then, once we've answered the question, either the story is over or you better have something there ready for them. Desert needs to

come in right away. That's a weird metaphor I've never used in this context. Or else people are going to be sitting there looking around. Are we waiting for the check? There better be something else. Usually, it's an insight that comes in at the end of it that satisfies us, as it were.

Dr. Wray: Would that be like your thesis where you were saying story first, then thesis last?

Ethan: Yes. And it doesn't have to come in. The thesis could be somehow implied. In other words, for example, the student I mentioned who was super shy and then she joined debate, and the joining debate moment was her inciting incident, which is the moment that flips her world upside-down. She goes through all kinds of stuff and realizes at the end of her ... Actually, two-thirds of the way through she realized, hey, I used to be this really shy person and now look at me. I'm the kid at the whiteboard. The kid leading discussions. The kid standing up for her beliefs. The implied thesis is going through this experience of joining debate, even though I was afraid at first, actually helped me develop certain qualities and values that will serve me in college and beyond.

Now, that's all implied. She doesn't need to explicitly state that, because colleges are going to be aware of that, but the implied thesis is somehow I think should be related to "and that's how I developed qualities and values that will serve me in college in beyond." And somewhere in the narrative structure, probably in the Rocky montage moment, whatever the challenge is when you're deciding that I'm not going to roll over; I'm going to do something about this, whether it's punching a punching bag or babysitting more at home or deciding you are going to run for vice president, even though you really wanted to be president. Those moments. Or, staying up late night and researching. Whatever those moments are, that's oftentimes when students are developing those qualities, so those need to be in there somewhere I think.

Then, by the end, we need some sense that you've clearly changed and that's called the new status quo. So, status quo is, "I was like this," and all this stuff happened and then I became like this. That's the new status quo, and that's what make that challenges structure really satisfying.

There's the other montage structure. I don't know how much you want me to get into it.

Dr. Wray: I think this is really helpful to understand because students have no idea how to structure this, I think. It's such a different kind of writing. So, if you're okay to share it, I think that would be great.

Ethan: Cool. What I want to say to students is even though I'm talking about this challenge and structure, you do not have to write about a challenge to have an awesome essay. Students often feel pressured or they'll try to artificially construct one or they'll write about something like a bad grade they got and how that made them feel, and I just want to say to anybody listening that's not a better essay. A challenging essay is not a better essay.

The other option – and I think more essays end up in this category – is a montage. A montage is basically a series of moments, images, that are disconnected in space and time but that, combined together, create some sort of collage of you-ness.

If I were writing a montage essay, some of the things that I would want to include in that would be ... One of the things that's core to me is helping people realize their potential, whether that's through my writing or my counseling work or my conversations, the questions that I ask people. That would be in my montage. I would probably also put in there something about vulnerability. I know that's kind of connected, but it feels like that's a core value for me and it's so important to me.

I grew up moving around a lot, and I think that the way I made myself safe in new situations was by connecting with people, and oftentimes the way I connected was by asking probing questions. Questions that I was legit interested in, because I felt like that brought us closer. It was a way that I felt safe, honestly. When we shared vulnerability, then it was like, “Okay, here’s my exposed under belly. Please don’t hurt me.” But, there was a thing that happened. I’m just giving ideas about what would go in my montage.

Part of the brainstorming process for students, whether it’s through this essence objects exercise or another exercise I love called the 21 Details exercise where you just list 21 random facts about yourself. Maybe we could do this together for a second. Some random details about myself, then I’m actually going to ask you to give two random details about yourself, Maggie. So, some random details about myself. And I’m trying not to overthink this. I would definitely put this in an essay. But, a random detail about myself would be I mentioned meditation. I love the part of me that loves to meditate, but I’m so bad at it. I forget to do it. That’s something that I really struggle with on a daily basis. Another random detail about me would be the award that I’m most proud of is getting second place in the fourth grade spelling be. Actually, it was fourth and sixth grade and I was in fourth grade. What I especially remember about that is staying up really late one night with my grandfather who would end up passing away two years later and connecting with him over spelling words. But, also, I’m really competitive, so it kind of points to that.

What’s a random fact or detail about you off the top of your head? I know I’m putting you on the spot again.

Dr. Wray: Oh, goodness. Yeah, you’re really good at that. Let’s see. See, I don’t have such good stories built up around them, but I played flute in marching band in high school. I actually enjoyed doing pushups for punishment if we didn’t march correctly. I would turn it into a competition. I’m going to do more pushups than the person next to me. That’s a totally random fact.

Ethan: That’s awesome and I just feel like I learned something about you, your competitive side and how you turned a thing that was disciplinary into something that was, “No, I’m going to do this,” and taking that on. What I’m getting from you as you share that is an acceptance of a challenge and also I’m really present to the empowerment in that moment and that choice to take this thing on and really own your experience and make it something that could be not only good for you, but kind of fun.

Dr. Wray: Yeah. Thanks.

Ethan: I see something really empowered in that. If I asked you to do 21 of these, some of these are bound to pop. Sometimes what I’ll do in brainstorming is I’ll share back, “Here’s what I see in that. How does that land for you?” If we were brainstorming essay topics, I’d be like, “So, tell me, Maggie, are there other ways in life that you’re turning pushups into a competition for better and for worse?” and see what that looks like as a metaphor. That seems like a cool thing. I’m always on the alert for metaphors.

So, as students are brainstorming this montage style, which is to say just give me a bunch of random stuff, we start to look for patterns and connections. Part of what I try and do is teach students to recognize the patterns and connections for themselves, but sometimes it helps to have somebody help them curate. “Oh, this seems really cool,” like I just did with you. I kind of act as a mirror and say, “Oh, here’s what I’m seeing in that little detail. Do you see that, too? What does that do for you?” Sometimes

students say, “I don’t see that.” And sometimes they say, “Oh, my gosh, that’s like a metaphor for my life.” Then, we have a little ding-ding-ding moment and we go, “Okay, are there other ways that you do this in life? Could this be a cool trampoline?” We’d start with that and bounce around to other parts of you and other bits.

It’s an unpredictable process in that sense of how that actually happens, but what students need very simply is a bunch of stuff and a way to organize the stuff. Whereas narrative structure is events that are casually link, so A led to B led to C, which is I was shy, I joined debate, I became less shy. Montage structure is here’s A and Q and purple and koala bear. All of these things connect because they’re all ways in which I am in some deeper sense turning pushups into a competition. So, there’s some common thematic thread that’s connecting A, B, Q, and koala bear or whatever I said.

Dr. Wray: Do you find when students are doing that, do they pull in what it all means at the end?

Ethan: It could be this. Let’s say we’re brainstorming your essay for a second. You give this cool story, like you played flute in high school and I found that we would be assign pushups and what I did is first I was resistant, but then I decided I’m going to do this and I’m going to, in fact, turn it into a competition. It’s not the only way that I’ve turned pushups into a competition in my life. That might raise a question for us at the start, like I was saying with narrative structure, that goes, “Oh! In what other ways is this ...” Or, you could say something like, “I realize this is actually a metaphor for my life, which kind of raises the question.” We would probably need in the next couple of paragraphs other connections and other vignettes that would show us this quality in you because now we decided to focus on this quality, and by the end, I think the reader is hungry for a “so what?” moment, an insight at the end. I encourage students to ask themselves, “So what?” again and again.

Katie Sweeny from Reed College, who is an awesome rep, said that the way that she knows that a student is college ready is if in their main essay they’ve answered the question, “So what?” Just to cross reference with Ira Glass, he does this great little thing. A series of YouTube videos on storytelling. He talks about how we need a narrative which is like this, this, this and then we need a “so what?” that tells us why what you’ve just shared with us is important.

Dr. Wray: That’s fantastic. That’s great that you point out that there are those two options. Basically, if you faced a challenge, you would do the narrative structure, hero’s journey type thing. Or, if you haven’t faced a challenge or you just don’t want to talk about your challenge, you would do more the montage where you’re kicking off this theme or this way of seeing the world or this metaphor or something like that and then you’ve got all these little vignettes that are going to pull that together.

It sounds like what you’re describing is you’re still storytelling. You’re not narrating the whole thing. I also served as advisor on this board, and then also I did this other thing where I also showed persistence. Then, I did this other thing. That’s not what we’re going for, right?

Ethan: There are sneaky ways of doing that. If that’s really what you want to do and you feel like you need to do that, then find the metaphor. In your pile of stuff, serving on the board of this and getting your gold award, and also let’s say doing peer tutoring, if those are parts of your stuff, here’s how you hide them. Ask yourself which value you could show that would bring the value forward and background the brag. What you’d often do is foreground the brag, so we’re just looking at the thing you did. It’s like I’m not really learning about you. I’m just seeing your résumé.

Instead, if you can kind of let that thing recede, be confident that that's going to be in your activities list and just mentioning it all is going to be like reminding them, but foreground the value. Sometimes people say, "I want to know what it meant to you," but that's vague. I want to know the specific value that you gained from that. If it's peer tutoring, if the value that you gained from that is learning that helping others is nice, that's kind of a common connection.

If your insight from peer tutoring is helping people is nice, then the reader is going to kind of shrug. If, however, you take something uncommon about it, and say for example what I learned about tutoring is the importance of not knowing the right answer. I thought that I needed to know the answer all the way through, and actually, getting into a situation with my student where neither one of us knew the answer and I would actually say to them, "I don't know the answer," but we'd figure it out together taught me something about my leadership. I'm just riffing, but that's an insight that is more interesting and unusual and tells me more about you than the common connection.

Dr. Wray: Absolutely. It's such a perfect example, the one you gave of the fourth-grade spelling bee. That was in your random set of facts. But, the way you told it was it wasn't about the spelling bee. If you wrote the essay saying, "I won the fourth-grade spelling bee. Yay! Go me!" that's a totally different essay versus, "Hey, second in the spelling bee was really to me about the relationship with my grandfather." That's a totally different story. I just love your examples because they make it so real as to how you would go from showcasing, bragging about yourself to maybe putting the values in the front.

Ethan: Yeah. To underscore that in just a phrase, the best way to brag without bragging is by connecting the brag to a value, telling us how you got from one value to the next. You'll see essays that do this really well, where you'll realize at the end of it, "Oh, I actually did learn about some brag-worthy things, but I wasn't feeling the brag was forward."

Dr. Wray: It's more like you're learning about them and then the brags are kind of in there as a side note. I know we're running short on time, but I did want to ask you, too, because you briefly alluded to it at the beginning about the supplements and the role that those play because there's this main essay that's the feature, but then there's also these side ... The supplements are often shorter and they're often different from school to school. How do those fit into the process?

Ethan: To answer that question of how they fit in the process, some schools say, "Our why us essay," which is to say why you want to attend the school, "Is actually more important to us than your main essay." Now that I just gave a lot of time and attention to this personal statement, here's another thing that's also really super important.

The "why us" essay is probably the most well-known one. My quick tip on this is most students write about the school size, location, faculty, the student to faculty ratio, and the weather. Please do not write about those things. When you're doing your research, because it really is a research essay, what are 10-15 things about the school that I really love and – this is really important – don't just talk about why the school is so awesome. Give me 10-12 reasons why they connect back to you specifically. That "why us" essay, which sometimes is just as long – it can be 650 words – you're probably not going to spend quite as much time as you spent on the personal statement, but it is a research essay. It's not something that you can kind of dream up, and it's more important to pack it full of really good, concrete information and reasons, rather than kind of doing a creative take in my personal opinion. Sometimes students will want to do a poetic take, but there aren't really specific reasons that connect to the school. That's the "why us".

Some of the other essays that are pretty popular is the extracurricular essay, and because we're short on time, I don't have time to get into the how of writing that. But, in short, here's one tip. Make sure that whatever your main statement is – let's say it's the color red, just to use a metaphor – make sure your extracurricular essay isn't dark red, that it's blue, that it's clearly showing another side to you.

There are short answers as well. Students oftentimes just work really quickly on their short answers, but each one of those is a little almost like an advent calendar where they're opening up a little window into you. Each one of those is an opportunity to give one more little bit of awesomeness, of youness, in the application. I tell students also to think about the activities list as a supplemental essay in some sense because it is doing important work. Your résumé, basically.

Finally, the additional information section, which is like a big box of, "Is there anything else you want us to know?" There are a lot of different things that students could put in there to advocate for themselves whether it's explaining why they dropped volleyball after their freshman year to why they got that C in physics their sophomore year. Those kinds of things can help the reader connect the dots and see a fuller picture. That's the three-minute version of the supplemental essays.

Dr. Wray: That's really helpful, especially your point to this isn't something that you want to just dash off quickly. This can actually be as important as the main essay in some cases, especially for that "why us" essay. I think students underestimate. I would go so far as to say they underestimate how much effort they need to put into the essays in general, vastly.

Ethan: A tip for that. I have this system of helping students organize their supplemental essay topics because when they first get the essay, when they create their list of I say eight to ten schools but sometimes students are ambitious at the start, and they're like, "I'm going to do 20 schools," and then they see the list of supplemental essays. I have them put them on a spreadsheet and they see the list and it just keeps going and going and going, and they're like, "Oh." So, that can inspire students to get more focused with their college list research work.

Then, in terms of being smart, you can actually, once you get all the topics, which are usually released in August, but you can kind of work ahead a little bit because they don't often change the prompts – some schools don't change their prompts – you can kind of work ahead and go, "Oh, this topic could actually work for this essay and this one and this one." My tip for that is put the prompt at the top of the doc, whatever doc you're writing on, and make sure when you're writing your essay that you're answering all three of the questions. That's going to save you 20 hours of time right there.

Dr. Wray: Right. How much time should students be planning to spend on their essay? I know this is going to vary wildly from student to student. I'm just kind of going big picture ballpark here.

Ethan: Yeah, and it's a question that people ask. And the answer is of course 10,000 hours. No. You've got to be a genius for that to be the right number. I find that students on the low end, students who are super smart and great writers and know their topic, can do it in four or five drafts. And you can write a pretty good essay in four or five drafts. Anybody could write a pretty good essay in four or five drafts. I find that the students who really are trying to go next level and write an essay that has all four of those qualities well-integrated end up somewhere in the eight to twelve drafts range, and some students can write those in a few weeks, and some students take longer. I think that it does at least take a couple of weeks to really process this. It's not the kind of thing that a student wants to write in a night.

Having said that, there are exceptions to all of it. Some students have written their essays in a night and it turned out pretty well for them, but I find that it usually takes a few weeks. But, here's the thing. I don't want to say that ... I don't want this to be another stressor and, "Oh, my gosh." I want everybody to know that there's another thing that's happening. I am college essay guy, but I'm actually personal growth, vulnerability, and development guy. That's really what this is about, and this college essay guy thing or the college essay is the way that that process happens for a lot of students.

One way that I think of this process is some people think I'm writing my essay, but I like to say that your essay is writing you, which is to say that rather than thinking of this process of I am looking back on my accomplishments and I'm offering you a report, it's more like, given who I've been, here's who I am discovering myself to be and some hints that I have about my future. It's not a process of reporting. It's a process of discovery. It's this huge status update. "Here's where I think I'm at, guys. Here's some stuff I think I've figured out, but here's some other stuff that I'm still trying to figure out." That, to me, is that liminal in between vibrant space is where I want students to situate themselves, not only at the beginning of the process where they're writing about things they're not sure about, but at the end of the process. I still want students to be in process with it.

Certainly, we have to end in a way that feels satisfying to the reader and there are lots of technical ways to do that, but I want students to feel like, "This is me becoming," rather than, "This is who I've been."

Dr. Wray: That's a great way to think about it and way to frame the process, and I think also speak to why you want to give yourself those several weeks to maybe even a couple months to work your way through all of these because you can't grow in flowers dashing off an essay really quickly at night. There's not space for that. You can't self-reflect. You can't grow the way that we're talking about. Definitely start early and give yourself that space and time, and be patient with yourself and not trying to rush through the process is really important.

Ethan: Totally.

Dr. Wray: Thank you so much. This has been so insightful and I think just gives a whole shift in the way to think about the essay and a way to frame the essay and a way to approach to the essay hopefully in a much more fun and insight-driven, self-discovery type process versus an "Oh, my gosh, am I saying all the right things that all of the people all want to here? Am I doing it the right way?" So, thank you so much. It's been really interesting.

Ethan: Of course.

Dr. Wray: I know, too, there's so much more we didn't even get to touch on, so if people want to follow-up with you and get more information, I know you had something you wanted to share with them as a resource. Do you want to talk a bit more about what that is?

Ethan: Yeah. On my website, which is just CollegeEssayGuy.com, I've got this free guide to the personal statement, which is basically the exercises that we started to do, that essence objects exercise and values exercise, those are the beginnings of it. Then, it walks students through the four different paths, the four different types of essays that we talked about and it offers a sample essay and a little bit of analysis and a little step-by-step approach of how to write those types of essays. That's something that you'll link to that I find when people see that they're like, "Oh, my gosh, I can't believe you're giving all this away." One of my core values is access and affordability. That's free and I want students to be able

to turn. A smart student should look at that and start to be able to cook and think, “Okay, I’ve got some ideas.”

Then, there’s this Why Us Guide. Should I mention that as well?

Dr. Wray: Sure. Yes. That’s something we’re going to do for people who get the lifetime access to the series and that’s something that you all are welcome to do. Just go to YourTeenReadyForCollege.com/event. I know a lot of families are busy. They can’t come to all of the interviews or they don’t have time to watch all the interviews, or it’s just not the right time. You might be listening to this now, but you want to go back and listen in August when you’re actually working on your essay and get a quick refresh on how to think about all of these things. So, if you get the lifetime access, we’ve got several bonuses that are going to be special for you all, and the Why Us Guide is part of that. So, yes, Ethan, if you could tell us a little bit more about it, that would be great.

Ethan: Totally. The thing that we just touched on for 60 seconds is this “why us” essay, which is basically why you want to attend a particular college. I put together this 20-page guide that has eight or so examples and it analyzes them, whether it’s a really long one, like 500 or 650 words, to one that’s how you do it in 150 words.

I think the benefit of this is sometimes when the students are trying to think of a topic, they like, “Well, which topics have already been written about? What are those common connections? What are those clichés?” I think that the Why Us Guide does a good job of giving you a sense of what’s already out there, so that you can go, “Okay, here’s the deeper work that I need to do in order to help myself stand out.” Then, there’s one at the end that here’s how to do a next-level “why us” essay, which kind of goes against common wisdom. You’ll have to check it out. I’ll just leave it as a cliffhanger.

Dr. Wray: That’s a little teaser for you all. Go check that out again. Go to YourTeenReadyReadyForCollege.com/event. It’s \$100 off right now during this series. You can grab a copy of that there.

I’m so appreciative, Ethan, of all the time you spent with us today and how much you’ve shared with us. I can tell that connecting with people and sharing and giving back are definitely values of yours. I so appreciate you and all the work you’re doing. Thank you.

Ethan: Thank you so much.

Dr. Wray: Have a great day, everyone. See you soon!