

Stage One: Stories of Self



Stage 1 in the process of writing the college essay is to explore other personal narratives and expressions of selfhood -- what I call “stories of self.”

In this stage, you will get inspiration from how a diverse group of writers approach writing about themselves, their experiences, and their identities by analyzing stories of self in a variety of genres.

You’ll also complete “write-alike” exercises, in which you mimic the format, structure, and themes of a “mentor” story of self to practice telling your own. Write-alikes help you begin to explore and reflect on your own experiences, relationships, and identities. They also let you play around with voice and style -- to explore the tone and rhythms that feel right to you.

The college essay is also a story of self. It’s one particular genre of a story of self, for a particular audience and purpose. But before you even think about college essay prompts and word limits and admissions officers, it’s important to take time (a lot of time, ideally) to feast on writing about selfhood that is not the college essay, and explore who you are and where you’re from in a way that is actually not about the college essay at all.

This stage is about exploration and self-expression, liberated from the need to please anyone else or “sell” yourself to a school.

It is about awakening to selfhood and beginning to take notice of your own life: all the little things here and there that have formed you, all the beauty and richness of the life you have lived up to now that you take for granted or dismiss as “boring.”

It is about discovering joy and playfulness in this process and taking ownership of it -- rejecting the idea that the college essay needs to be a horrible, stressful exercise in trying to get someone you’ll never meet to think you’re good enough, and embracing this process as a journey of affirmation of your own self-worth instead.

So please do not skip or speed through this stage -- it is the foundation for everything that follows. Enjoy, respect, critique, and learn from the stories of self. Lean into the silliness, the discomfort, and the joy of the write-alikes. Love the process!

What is a Story of Self?

A story of self is a work of creative nonfiction that expresses selfhood.

Creative nonfiction means that the writer uses literary craft that we associate with fiction -- like imagery, metaphor, suspense, hyperbole, and more -- to tell a true story.

Selfhood refers to what makes a person the individual they are:

- qualities,
- values,
- identities,
- personal experiences,
- shared histories,
- passions, and
- relationships.

“Story” is defined very broadly here -- it’s not necessarily a “once upon a time,” beginning-middle-end kind of story. A story of self can be:

- A narrative essay.
- A poem.
- A song.
- A painting.
- A sculpture.
- A photograph.
- A performance.
- A comic strip.

A story of self can focus on many different aspects of selfhood:

It can focus on cultural identity (*for example, Elizabeth Acevedo’s spoken-word poem “Afro-Latina”*).

It can focus on personality (*for example, Bomba Estéreo’s song “Soy Yo”*).

It can focus on environment (*for example, “Where I’m From” by Willie Perdomo*).

It can focus on an epiphany moment (*for example, “Perfect Together” by Mira Jacob*).

It can focus on a defining event (*for example, “American Revolution” by Mira Jacob*).

It can focus on relationships (for example, “daddy this time” by Jacqueline Woodson).

It can focus on names (for example, “Rebel Without a Clause” by Sherman Alexie).

It can focus on native language(s) (for example, “How to Tame a Wild Tongue” by Gloria Anzaldúa).

It can focus on struggle based on difference (for example, “Go Carolina” by David Sedaris).

It can focus on the gifts of being different (for example, Eli Clare’s Brilliant Imperfection, or “La facultad” by Gloria Anzaldúa).

It can focus on what it’s like to be different (for example, Naoki Higashida’s The Reason I Jump).

A story of self can have any tone:

- It can be **hyperbolic** and funny (for example, Calle 13’s song “Muerte en Hawaii”).
- It can be **humble** (for example, Shirley Geok-lin Lim’s poem “Self-Portrait”).
- It can be **joyful** (for example, Lizzo’s song “Soulmate”).
- It can be **proud** (for example, Maya Angelou’s poem “Phenomenal Woman”).
- It can be **defiant** (for example, Gloria Trevi’s song “Pelo Suelto”).

A **Story of Self** can be many, many different things, as long as it expresses who you are, where you’re from, what’s important to you, how you came to be the person you are.

How is the college essay a story of self?

The college essay is just one more format that people use to tell a story of self. It belongs to the narrative essay genre.

How it’s different than other genres (like a song or graphic memoir or poem):

- It’s written as an essay -- ideas are organized into paragraphs and there’s a logical progression through those ideas.
- It usually contains a conclusion in which the writer explains the lessons learned or growth accomplished through a particular experience or process of reflection (songs, poems, paintings, and even a lot of narrative essays you might read don’t have an explicit conclusion).

- It has some specific parameters: 500-750 words, in response to a broad prompt.
- It has a specific audience and purpose: it is read by admissions officers who are looking to it to get a sense of the person behind all of the test scores, GPA, and resume items, for the purpose of assessing how this person might fit into a campus community.

How it's the same as others:

- It concentrates on a specific aspect of selfhood, rather than telling the complete story of a person's life.
- It focuses on specific moments or events from the person's life related to that aspect of their selfhood.
- It's rich with details and imagery that create clear pictures in the reader's mind.
- It showcases the creator's authentic voice.
- It's infused with the creator's unique perspective and personality.
- It's an affirmation of selfhood -- not an expression of shame or self-loathing.

Why not just read college essays???

There are a lot of resources that provide sample college essays written by other high school students. And a lot of college essay workshops and curriculums start with looking at sample essays, for logical reasons.

Of course it is helpful to see examples of writing in the exact same genre, for the same audience, for the same purpose. Throughout each part of this curriculum, there are examples of real student writing -- not just sample essays (though they are here, too!), but also sample write-alikes, sample outlines, sample first drafts, sample revision plans, sample second drafts....

But I don't recommend starting with other students' sample college essays, for this main reason:

It sticks in your mind as a "formula." Read a bunch of college essays, and you'll notice that a lot of them sound a lot alike: different theme, but same structure, same tone, same writing style, same canned reflection about "It was then that I realized...." and becoming stronger by persevering. And a lot of them sound that way because some well-intentioned teacher, tutor, or counselor coached that student to sound like that, based on sample essays! A vicious cycle.

Consciously or unconsciously, once you have other people's formulaic writing in your mind, you then bring this formula to your own writing. Your creativity is limited from the very beginning, as it becomes hard to imagine writing a college essay any other way. Without meaning to, you relinquish some ownership over your own story and your own voice.

It's better to take inspiration from the best of what is out there: stories of self in a variety of genres, created by a diverse group of writers and artists. Exploring stories of self that aren't college essays exposes you to a much broader range of what is possible.

You probably won't create a poem or a comic strip as your college essay, and you may or may not have more in common with the creators of these stories of self than you do with other students writing college essays, but that's not the point. The point is learning something from the techniques and forms that really talented, really highly skilled writers use to express themselves. If you're learning to play tennis, you study and imitate Serena Williams.

Stage 1 Elements: Analysis & Write-alikes

This curriculum contains about 14 different stories of self and associated exercises. You don't have to do the exercises for ALL of them (though you definitely can!), but **you should aim to do about 3-5** -- it works best when you can compare and contrast different stories of self.

Part One of each exercise is **analysis**, in which you study the story of self and break it down, focusing on these five questions:

- What aspect of selfhood is this writer focusing on?
- What are the moments or events they focus on in relation to that aspect of selfhood?
- What is the tone of this piece? Or, how does this writer feel about the aspect of selfhood they are writing about?
- What details and images do they use to communicate that tone/feeling?
- What are three words you would use to describe this writer, based on this piece of writing? What can you tell about their personality, values, or passions?

Eventually, these are exactly the things you will focus on to plan out your own story of self (in the form of the college essay) -- so pay careful attention to how other writers have done it.

Here is an example of an analysis of a story of self, using Eli Clare's Brilliant Imperfection.

Sample Analysis of a Story of Self

Story of Self: *Brilliant Imperfection* by Eli Clare

What is this? An excerpt from Clare's nonfiction book *Brilliant Imperfection* (2017)

Text:

When nondisabled folks ask me whether I'd take the imaginary cure pill for cerebral palsy, I know what my answer is supposed to be. My questioners expect me to say, "Yes, of course, I'd take that pill in a heartbeat." And when I don't, they're puzzled and disbelieving. They wonder if I protest too much or am defending myself against the unpleasant truth of my misery. How can I possibly not want a cure?

It's simple. Having shaky hands and shaky balance isn't as awful as they imagine, even when I slip, totter, descend stairs one slow step at a time. My relationship to gravity is ambivalent. On mountain trails, I yearn to fly downhill, feet touching ground, pushing off, smooth and fluid. Instead on steep stretches I drop down onto my butt and slide along using both my hands and feet, for a moment becoming a four-legged animal. Only then do I see the swirl marks that glaciers left in the granite, tiny orange newts climbing among the tree roots, otherworldly fungi growing on rotten logs. My shaky balance gives me this intimacy with mountains.

I would lose so much if that imaginary cure pill actually existed. Its absence lets me be unequivocal. It opens the door to brilliant imperfection.

Analysis

1. What aspect of selfhood is this writer focusing on?
2. What are the moments or events they focus on in relation to that aspect of selfhood?
3. What is the tone of this piece? Or, how does this writer feel about the aspect of selfhood they are writing about?
4. What details and images do they use to communicate that tone/feeling?
5. What are three words you would use to describe this writer, based on this piece of writing? What can you tell about their personality, values, or passions?

Aspects of Self

- His disability: cerebral palsy

Moments or events referenced

- being asked if he would take a pill to cure his disability
- dropping onto his butt on mountain trails + feeling connected to the mountain landscape

Tone or feeling

- grateful
- awed

Details & images that create tone

- “slip, totter, descend stairs one slow step at a time”
- “swirl marks that glaciers left in the granite”
- “tiny orange newts”
- “otherworldly fungi growing on rotten logs”

3 words to describe writer

- Nature-loving
- Appreciative of difference
- Resilient

Part Two of each exercise is the **write-alike**, in which you take inspiration from the format, structure, and themes of the original story of self, but replace the content with your own. A set of reflection questions as well as a “starter” sentence is provided for each story of self to help you figure out what to write about and how to begin.

Don't skip the write-alike! This is a no-stakes, private exercise for no one but yourself, in which you use a story of self as your point of departure to reflect on your own selfhood.

I recommend setting a timer for 15 minutes for each write-alike, to avoid overthinking it and agonizing over it. Remember: this is not a “draft” of your college essay! It's a warm-up exercise to get you in touch with your voice as a writer and connect to some aspects

of your selfhood. It's not for a "grade" or for external judgment. If you reach the end of 15 minutes and you want to keep writing -- by all means, do!

Here are where to find two examples of write-alikes for Eli Clare's *Brilliant Imperfection*, written by real students:

Gabriel's Brilliant Imperfection write-alike
storiesofselfworkshop.com/gabriel_imperfection.html

Gayatri's Brilliant Imperfection write-alike
storiesofselfworkshop.com/gayatri_imperfection.html

A number of other stories of self also have sample **write-alikes**, which you can find on the **Stories of Self** website at storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing_samples.html

Where can I find the Stories of Self?

Find all of the Stories of Self on the website at storiesofselfworkshop.com/stage1_intro.html. Each document includes:

- the text
- analysis questions & template
- write-alike instructions & starter sentence
- where to find examples of write-alikes written by real students (if available)

What others are saying about Stage 1

This exercise was a very good way to extract everything from us and to put it in writing, [whether] poems or paragraphs. To get to learn about ourselves and what we appreciate.

There are many different ways to be able to connect yourself to a story of self while still being creative. To me, this made me feel like this wasn't something heavily formulated, rather, something that I could make deeply personal.

[The write-alikes] were helpful in getting my own story down, and with something to base it off of, it wasn't hard to start writing.

The stories of self were all amazing and I felt really inspired.