

Stage 3: Shaping Your Story (Draft 1)

Stage 3 of the college essay writing process is **writing Draft 1**.

In Stages 1 and 2, you explored your own selfhood and some of the stories that might serve as trustworthy vehicles to carry the message of who you are -- your qualities, values, and passions -- to the reader.

In Stage 2, Step 4, you determined the basic outline of your essay, including your **message** (what you want the reader to come away from your story knowing about you) and your **medium** (the aspect of your selfhood you are going to focus on and the experiences or events you'll describe).

Now, the writing begins.

You'll write 3-4 drafts of your essay total. The focus of Draft 1 is just expression, as your story begins to take shape on paper. At this stage:

- Don't worry about length or word count yet
- Don't think about admissions officers or your first-pick college yet
- Don't look at prompts yet
- Don't look at sample essays written by other people yet

This might be very hard, and please note that each of those "don't"s ends in **yet** -- after Stage 3, you *will* (or you can!) start to think about these factors.

But please think of your essay as an ice sculpture. An artist begins an ice sculpture by slicing into a big block of ice with a chainsaw to create the basic shape of an image in their mind (let's say a fish) -- then takes a drill to it to begin to reshape the image further -- then uses progressively more specialized tools to carve out intricate details and refine the image to breathtaking precision.

(If you want to see the meditative magic of the ice sculpting process, take 10 minutes right now and check out ["How A Master Ice Sculptor Makes Ice Come Alive" on YouTube.](#))

Draft 1 is about hacking and drilling down into your story and beginning to create its shape. If you read other people's essays right before you write your own, those are the shapes that will be in your mind, and whether you consciously intend to or not, you'll find yourself attempting to recreate another person's story instead of being guided by your own. In a similar way, a prompt will impose an artificial shape onto your story.

Instead, refer to other people's essays, the prompts, and other specifications like word count as you undergo the revision process. That way, they will become part of your refinement process rather than part of your shaping process.

Master sculptor Shintaro Okomoto says, "There's a point in the process where everything just looks really broken up. But then there's a very beautiful point where it comes alive. . . .You give a soul to what you're making."

Draft 1 is about breaking your story up and getting it out in a rough form; your goal should be to get your story to breathe. Build in all the basic elements -- bones, heart, skin -- so that it can begin to come alive. Over the next two stages, you'll work on getting it to soar.

A Note On How To Begin Your Story

If you're finding yourself stuck because you don't know where to start and you feel pressured to come up with an amazing "hook" before you can possibly continue with the rest of the story, I suggest starting with a placeholder in the form of a simple, bare statement about your message -- what you really want the reader to know about you. Look to the outline you made in Stage 2, Step 4 for help.

Here's an example:

I am a dynamic person who never stops challenging herself and cares deeply about connecting to people who are different from me.

Then start telling your story. You'll almost certainly go back and delete that first sentence later! But this will give you a starting point to get into your story. Later, in the reshaping and refining stages, you can revisit your story and carve out a more beautiful beginning. For now, just hack in!

What Others Are Saying About Stage 3

It makes the task feel much less daunting and something that will actually be fun to see it go from idea to finished final project.

Looking over other essays first will not be the best option. By looking over other essays, the writer kind of gets those ideas and starts to think of similar ones to write about. And in some cases they might have had their own unique ones, but they are stuck with the examples.