

## Stage 2: Prewriting and Planning

Stage 2 in the college essay writing process is **prewriting and planning**.

The purpose of Stage 1 was to awaken your thinking around expressing selfhood by 1) exposing you to other stories of self and 2) reflecting about your selfhood and playing around with different forms of expression through the write-alikes.

In Stage 2, the purpose is to think through in a more methodical, focused way what stories you have to tell, in order to arrive at what story you want to tell, in the specific story of self that will become your college essay.

The prewriting process includes 4 basic steps:

- **Who am I?** Name some of your fundamental **qualities, passions, and values** and determine what you want your reader to understand about you through your story.
- **How did I get that way?** Identify the **experiences, identities, and relationships** that helped those qualities, passions, and values develop.
- **What stories do I have to tell?** Immerse yourself back in a moment through timed freewriting in which you begin to explore the details and images of that moment, as well as how you feel towards it. (You'll repeat this step multiple times.)
- **What story do I want to tell?** Reflect on the freewriting you did, decide the essential qualities you want to communicate through your story, and select the aspects of selfhood and the major moments you want to focus on. Outline your essay!

To find examples for this exercise, visit [www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing\\_samples.html](http://www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing_samples.html).

### A Note About Topics

You might hear a lot about what not to write about from college essay guidebooks, counselors, teachers, or tutors.

Some of the books on the market have whole sections labeled things like “Mundane Topics” or “Topics to Avoid” in which they provide long lists about what you’re supposedly not allowed to write about in your college essay. “Nobody wants to read about that,” someone might say to you.

You might also hear a lot about what you should write about. The books often use words like “juicy” or “meaty” to describe the kind of story you’re supposed to come up with.

You might see your teacher or counselor's eyes light up when you mention something particularly difficult you've gone through -- discrimination, poverty, migration, illness, having to take care of siblings, or losing a loved one, just to name a few examples. "Now that's what you should write about," they might say. "Admissions officers love that kind of thing."

They might also just zero in on any minority or marginalized social identity you happen to possess -- race, religion, disability, sexuality, gender, and so on -- and pressure you to focus on that, again with the justification that this is juicy subject matter for an admissions committee to dig their sharp white teeth into.

Please do not take this advice without thinking hard about it first, even when it comes from really loving, experienced, intelligent people who deeply want to support you.

**You and your life are not "subject matter."**

**You do not owe anyone your story. You don't owe anyone your trauma OR your joy.**

**You get to determine what is meaningful, what is important, and what is true in terms of your own personal history.**

You might very well decide that you do want to write about a period of difficulty you've had or your experiences as a member of an identity group (marginalized or not) -- that's absolutely "allowed"!

But you might also realize that a certain topic that you are being pressured to write about brings up really difficult feelings for you when you try to write about it or is really stressful and anxiety-inducing to contemplate sharing with others. **That's important information to know.**

This prewriting and planning stage is designed to help you explore and reflect on not just what stories you have to tell, but also **how it feels to tell the stories you have to tell.** This is an essential part of your decision.

If a story feels really good to tell -- that's a candidate, no matter how "mundane" the topic is.

If a story feels bad to tell -- that's not a candidate, no matter how "juicy" the topic is.

**Here's why:**

The story is not actually the most important thing at all.

The story is the medium -- the vehicle that delivers the message. But it is not, itself, the message.

The message is you -- the essential qualities, values, or passions you want to make sure your reader knows about you.

There are many stories that can be used as the vehicle to deliver you to your reader.

**This stage is about finding and test-driving some possible stories and choosing the one that feels like the most enjoyable ride for you.** Not the flashiest car on the lot. Not the one you (or anyone else) imagines the admissions committee really wants to see. Your story should be one that you feel at home in and excited to take on the road.

\*\*\*\*

And, if you really cannot get the voices out of your mind that are saying, “They’ve read that essay a million times” or “Trust me, this will definitely get you in” -- please rest assured that there is literally no topic that admissions officers have not already read an essay about. There is also no topic guaranteed to get anyone in and no topic guaranteed to keep someone out.

But you are the only you out there, and all they’re trying to do is get a sense of who you are. Your voice is more important than your topic, and your story is only a vehicle to express what really matters -- your qualities, values, and passions.

## **What Others Are Staying About Stage 2**

*No story is a bad story. It made me feel that this should be a fun process, not one that is driven by peer pressure.*

*I found the process in which I reflected on the experiences that made me who I am to be very helpful and reminding of who I am as a person, and reminded me that I do have stories to tell.*

*I love the experience of freewriting. I think it’s a really helpful tool in figuring out what stories resonate with you. Writing should be a fun experience!*

*It’s a really good way of making the essay writing process seem much less daunting.*

*Steps don’t feel pointless and/or tedious. Every exercise has a purpose and I love that.*

*I had no idea on what to write about but the prewriting process made it so easy to find out.*