

The Essay Artist

How to Choose Your Personal Statement Topic



Find the story only you can tell.

Erin Bailey

Founder, The Essay Artist LLC

For parents helping students find a meaningful,
authentic personal statement topic.

Step 1: Build the Story Bank

This is the foundation of your student's story. You are not aiming perfection yet. It is to notice stories, patterns, and moments worth exploring.

1 Moments that changed how I see myself

What moments, experiences, or realizations shaped the way your student understands themselves?

2 Interests, hobbies, and quirks

What does your student love, collect, notice, make, or do that feels specific to them?

3 Challenges or tensions

What situations pushed your student to grow, adapt, or rethink something?

4 Values underneath the stories

What values keep showing up in these stories?

Step 2: Check for Topic Fit

Use the four principles to compare a few possible essay topics before choosing one to explore more deeply.

1 Unique to your student	2 Student is the hero	3 Challenge is compelling	4 Student is curious to explore it
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Topic A

What makes this topic promising? <input type="text"/>	What might make it hard to write well? <input type="text"/>
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Topic B

What makes this topic promising? <input type="text"/>	What might make it hard to write well? <input type="text"/>
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Topic C

What makes this topic promising? <input type="text"/>	What might make it hard to write well? <input type="text"/>
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Step 3: Choose the Topic With Energy

Once one idea begins to stand out, slow down and test whether it has both substance and spark.

1 My strongest topic right now

2 What makes this topic feel unique to my student?

3 Where does my student show agency or initiative?

4 What tension, challenge, or question makes it compelling?

5 What is my student genuinely curious to explore?

Gut Check

When my student talks about this topic, their energy feels...

Flat

Somewhat engaged

Lit up and energized

Learn Your Lessons

Great essays do more than describe what happened. They uncover what the student learned, questioned, or came to understand.

Ninja Move #1: Start with the future and work backward

I want to be a...

Values Required	How I Learned This Value	Insight I Gained
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>
<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>	<input type="text"/>

Ninja Move #2: Write the expected insight, then do the opposite

What is the obvious takeaway? What more specific or nuanced truth might be underneath?

Ninja Move #3: Admit where they were wrong

Where did your student change their mind, misunderstand something, or grow into a more complex view?

Possible insight sentence

Step 4: Build the Essay Arc

Before drafting, sketch the basic shape of the story. This helps your student move from a topic to a meaningful essay.

1 Opening moment or scene

2 The tension, challenge, or question

3 What the student did

4 What changed internally

5 What the reader should understand by the end

You do not need the full essay yet.
You just need a promising shape.

Next Steps + Let's Chat

Choosing a topic is just one part of a strong application. The goal is an application that feels thoughtful, cohesive, and aligned - one that brings your story to life across every part.

1

The topic rising to the top is...

2

My next three actions

Talk it through out loud for 10 minutes

.....
Notice whether my student sounds specific and energized

.....
Draft a few moments or scenes before fully committing

3

What support would help us most right now?



Essays matter. Strategy matters more.

Essays are one piece of the puzzle. I help families build thoughtful, cohesive applications by aligning essays, activities, academics, and overall strategy. I support you comprehensively.

calendly.com/theessayartist/10-minute-consultation

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