

Activity 4: What's Your Story?

Overview:

In this activity, students think about ways to tell their personal stories by capturing the audience's interest and using narrative techniques to draft a compelling Personal Statement.

Grade Level: 7–12

Power Skills:

- Positive Self Perception
- Self- Advocacy
- Empowerment

Objectives:

Students will:

- explain the purpose and audience for a personal statement.
- examine a sample personal essay(s).
- identify and reflect on the talents, skills, abilities, and experiences that have shaped them, and make them unique.
- draft a practice personal statement.
- provide peer feedback on one another's practice personal statements.

Common Core State Standards for English Language Arts/Anchor Standards:

- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.R.7: Integrate and evaluate content presented in diverse media and formats, including visually and quantitatively, as well as in words.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.SL.2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content.
- CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.4: Produce clear and coherent writing in which the development, organization, and style are appropriate to task, purpose, and audience.
- CCSS: ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.W.5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.



Suggested Time: 1–2 class periods, with additional time for the optional starter activity

Materials:

For Optional Starter Activity (per team)

- 2 sheets of paper for brainstorming
- 2 pencils
- 1 ruler
- 3 post-its
- 8 small paper cups
- 2 golf balls (batteries or other cylindrical or spherical objects can be used)
- 2 straws
- Other random office trinkets (rubber bands, paper clips)
- Various pieces of tape

For Activity:

- Sample personal essay(s) to analyze
- Student handout: “Personal Statement Starters” (one per student)
- Optional: Student handout: “Stages of the Writing Process” (one per student)
- Access to the Internet

Procedure:

Optional Starter Activity: Stages of the Writing Process: *Refer to the Student Sheet: Stages of Writing Process Handout prior to facilitating this activity. Each step taken in this activity simulates a stage of the writing process.*

1. Pair students up and distribute all activity materials listed with the exception of straws. They will be added later on in the activity. Explain to students that for this activity the objective is to build the tallest and most creative free-standing tower that holds two golf balls at least 12 inches from the ground or their table.
2. Allow students a few minutes to talk to their teams to brainstorm on white paper how they will proceed to build the tallest, freestanding tower (the “Prewriting” stage.) Upon concluding the “Prewriting” stage, follow-up with the next stage.
3. Allow students enough time to “draft” or build the ideas they envisioned in the previous stage. This can take 5 to 10 minutes.



4. Distribute golf balls and have students place them to test the structures. Whether the structures remain standing or fall, allow teams to discuss how they can “revise” their structures without touching any of their materials. Provide students with additional supplies (i.e. straws) to utilize in the revision of their structures. Upon concluding their discussions, proceed to the next stage.
5. Allow teams to “edit” their structures by providing approximately 5 to 7 minutes to make adjustments. If the teams were able to build successful structures on their first try, challenge them to make them taller. After seven minutes, instruct all students to stop and drop all materials for their “final submission.” Judge each team’s structure for build and aesthetics.
6. Distribute *Student Sheet: Stages of the Writing Process* to students. Encourage discussion among students on how this correlates with the importance of taking the proper steps as they write essays for their college applications. Refer to follow-up questions below:
 - How was the brainstorming useful with paper and pen?
 - Were there any epiphanies during construction and how did they come about?
 - How did the revisions help with the final construction? What modifications were made?
 - Were all the materials important in achieving the goal? Did using fewer materials allow you to surpass the goal?
 - What concerns do you have about writing your college essay?
 - Reflect on what strategies help you when writing any essay.

Main Activity

1. Write the questions below on separate index cards, and place the cards at stations around the room. Invite students to choose a partner and to move with their partner to one of the stations. Explain that each partner will get 30 seconds to answer the question at their station. They then will move in separate directions so that they have a new partner and a new question. Repeat the exercise until all students have answered at least five questions.
 - a. What three adjectives would a family member, teacher or mentor use to describe you?
 - b. What three adjectives would you use to describe yourself?
 - c. What is one thing you wish more people knew about you?
 - d. Describe a moment you overcame fear.
 - e. Describe a moment when you felt successful.
 - f. Describe a moment where you felt failure.



- g. What current issue are you passionate about?
 - h. Define a moment or an experience that changed your perspective on the world.
 - i. Define a moment when you stood up for someone or something.
 - j. Describe a moment when you felt like you didn't belong.
 - k. Describe a moment where you felt like you were a part of something great.
 - l. List a book that made you think deeply or challenged you positively.
 - m. Provide a hobby or activity that has helped you through a time in your life.
2. Write the term "personal statement" on the board. Ask students to explain what a personal statement is and to list characteristics, if they know them, of what makes a good personal statement. Guide students to explain that a personal statement is a unique reflection of ourselves. It uses the written word to tell our story and is often used in college applications as a way to tell an admissions officer something distinctive about ourselves. It can reflect our thoughts, feelings, and insights based on our own personal experience(s). Personal statements are designed to show an admissions officer something about the applicant that they can't learn just by reading the application so it's important that they help the writer stand out.
 3. Ask students how the questions at the beginning of the activity could help to contribute to their personal statements.
 4. Invite student groups to read a sample personal essay(s) to learn good techniques for sharing unique information about ourselves. The personal essay is creative nonfiction, which uses narrative techniques to tell about personal experience(s). Choose one or more personal essay(s) that captivate the audience and exemplify the author's personal story for students to analyze.

Two published examples are:

- "Fish Cheeks" by Amy Tan, which was written when the author was a teenager, and first published in *Seventeen Magazine* in 1987:
<http://www.ncpsk12.org/cms/lib8/CT01903077/Centricity/Domain/638/LA/Short%20Story%20-%20Fish%20Cheeks.pdf>
- "Champion of the World" by Maya Angelou, which is the nineteenth chapter of her autobiography, *I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings*:
<https://battlefieldhs.pwcs.edu/common/pages/DisplayFile.aspx?itemId=5858248>



Good student examples are:

- “A Life in Music” by Kwasi Enin, whose essay gained him admission to all eight Ivy League schools in 2014:
<http://nymag.com/daily/intelligencer/2014/04/kwasi-enin-college-essay-worked-on-every-ivy.html>
- Sample essays from the College Board:
<https://bigfuture.collegeboard.org/get-in/essays/sample-college-application-essay-1>

Invite student groups to discuss the following about the essay they analyze:

- Does the writer present a unique self-portrait?
- Does the writer offer any fresh insight?
- Does the writer provide supporting details or concrete examples?
- Does the essay flow well? Is there a beginning, middle, and end?
- Do you have a good picture of who the writer is as a person?
- Is the essay free of grammatical and spelling errors?

5. Now that they have analyzed the work of others, explain that students will have a chance to reflect on their own unique traits and experiences in preparation for writing their personal statements. Distribute the “Personal Statement Starters” handout. The answers to these questions should spark ideas of possible topics or experiences that can be further developed into a personal statement. Challenge students to choose three questions from the handout to answer. Give them ample time to answer them and, once finished, invite students to share their answers with a peer. Encourage peers to give feedback about whether the answers helped them learn something unique about the writer.

6. Challenge students to generate a list of guidelines they think would be important to follow when writing a personal statement for a college application.

Examples include:

- Make sure the statement shows how and why you are unique.
- Use powerful words and imagery.
- Make sure you answer the prompt.
- Introduce yourself, and set yourself apart from the crowd.
- Write the opening to capture the audience’s attention.
- Use the most concrete details you can think of. These provide authenticity.
- Move things along: don’t be afraid to use some dialogue.
- Vary the lengths of your sentences. Mix short and longer sentences.



- Make sure there is a clear beginning, middle, and end.
 - Let your own unique personality shine through!
 - Make sure the statement is grammatically correct.
7. Introduce an essay prompt of your choice, or distribute the current list of prompts from the Common Application (www.commonapp.org). Invite students to select the prompt they would most like to answer. Instruct students to write a first draft/practice essay for the prompt they have chosen (or you have selected).
 8. Remind students that their audience is comprised of college admissions professionals whom they have never met, so their essays must be clear to people who don't already know them.
 9. Pair students up and have them trade their drafts with each other. Allow enough time for each student to read his/her partner's draft. Ask students to answer the following questions regarding his/her partner's draft in writing on a separate sheet of paper. Share feedback.
 - Was the prompt addressed effectively? Why or why not?
 - Does the writer provide supporting details or concrete examples?
 - Does the essay flow well? Is there a beginning, middle, and end?
 - Do you have a better picture of who the writer is as a person?

Extension Activity: Distribute the “Stages of the Writing Process” student handout. Ask students to share a draft of their Personal Statement with a parent, teacher, counselor, supervisor, or other adult mentor and seek feedback/suggestions on how it might be revised/ improved. Students may then complete the remaining steps of the writing process (revision, editing, preparing a final copy) on their own. Stress the importance of polishing the essay and submitting a personal statement that:

- presents an authentic self–portrait of the author.
- offers fresh insight in an interesting way.
- has been edited for clarity and the logical flow of ideas.
- has been proofread for correct spelling, grammar, punctuation, etc.



Personal Statement Starters

Choose three or four of the following questions to answer. Pick the ones that seem most appealing to you. Answer as specifically as you can, using good descriptions. Don't forget to include concrete, sensory details in your descriptions. What did you see, taste, touch, hear, and/or smell?

If you need more room, use your journal or additional separate sheets of paper.

1. What is one thing you wish more people knew about you?

2. Describe a moment you overcame fear.

3. Describe a moment when you felt successful.

4. Describe a moment where you felt failure.

5. What current issue are you passionate about?



6. Define a moment or an experience that changed your perspective on the world.

7. Define/describe a moment when you stood up for someone or something.

8. Describe a moment when you felt like you didn't belong.

9. Describe a moment where you felt like you were a part of something great.

10. List a book that made you think deeply or challenged you positively. What affect has it had on your life? Why?

11. Provide a hobby or activity that has helped you through a time in your life. How has engaging in this hobby or activity helped you?



Stages of the Writing Process

Prewriting: This stage is key! It allows you to think, take notes, and talk to others; but most importantly, to brainstorm and outline various ideas/topics/experiences that would provide a good focus for the piece.

Drafting: Be prepared to write several drafts. Start by putting your ideas on paper, or doing a free-writing activity.

Revising: At this stage, the author rethinks what s/he has written and re-envision or re-sees the piece, literally “re-vision.” Revision involves adding, substituting, deleting, clarifying ideas, and/or moving ideas and words around to rework the piece.

Editing: Editing is the process of polishing the piece and getting it ready for the audience. The piece should flow smoothly from one idea to the next in a logical, orderly fashion. During the editing stage, the writer is also expected to attend to the surface features of writing – mechanics, grammar, punctuation, and spelling. In order to communicate effectively with an audience, the writing must be free of errors that can interfere with the understanding of the message or can distract from the writing itself. **Capitalization, punctuation, spelling, paragraph structure, grammar, vocabulary, complete sentences, and transitions are of utmost importance in getting your message across clearly!**

Final copy for submission: You have gone through all the stages—now what? Proofread and check punctuation, spelling, etc. for any minor errors one last time before clicking on that submit button!