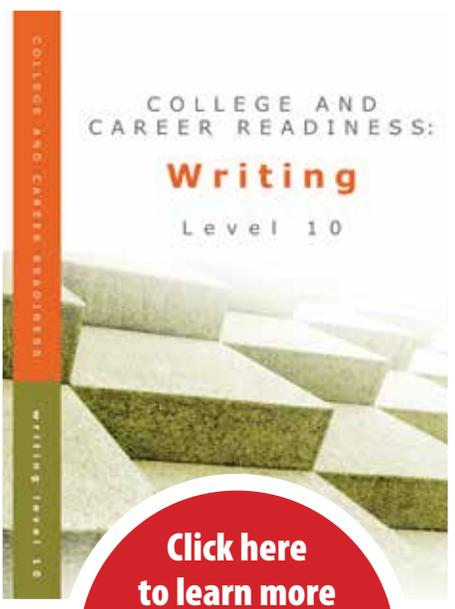




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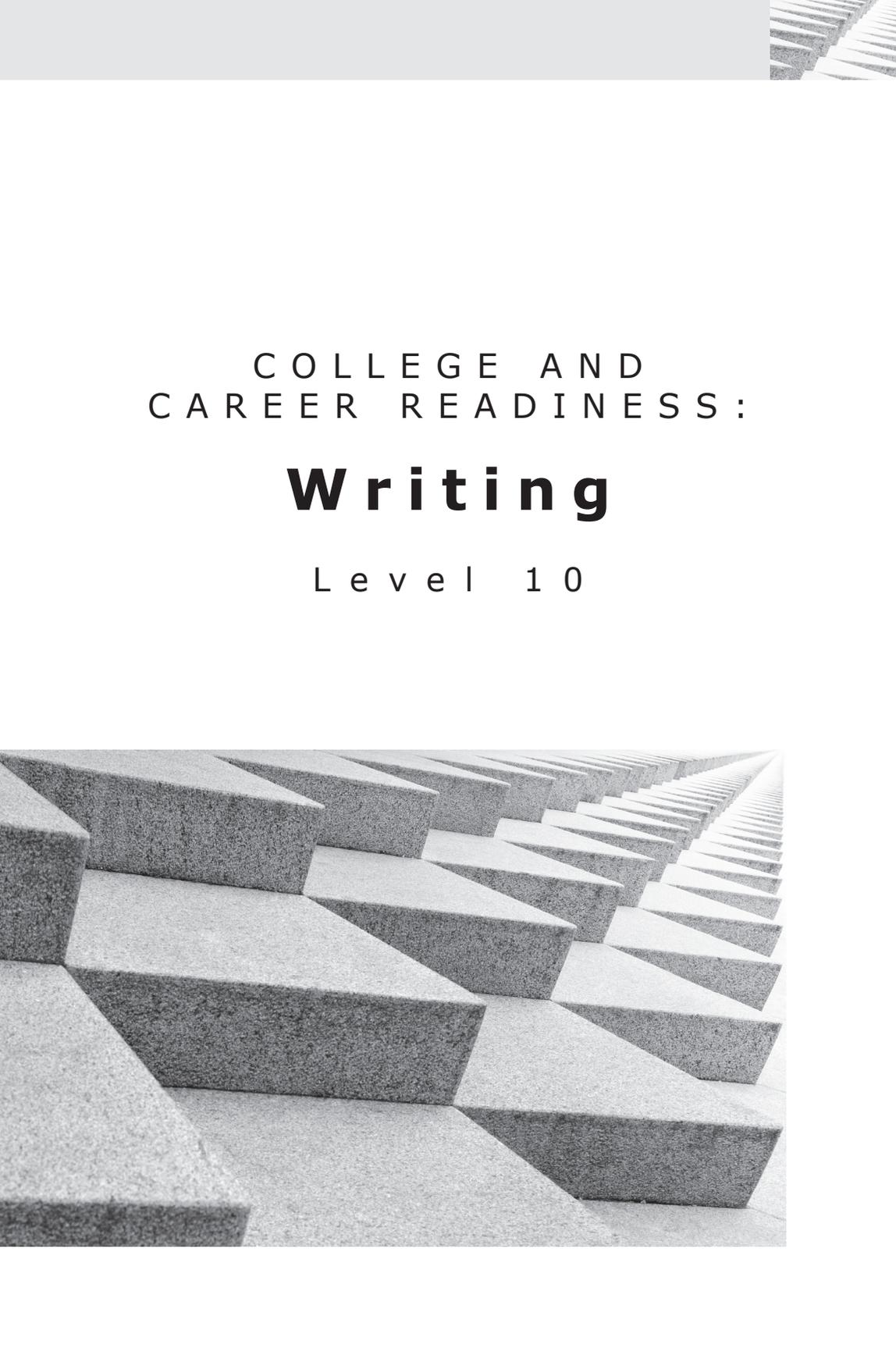
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PART I :

Personal Writing

*[conveying what students have experienced,
imagined, thought, and felt]*

The occasion might be as dull as the clichéd first writing assignment of the new school year: *How I Spent My Summer Vacation*. Perhaps your new English teacher has assigned you to write “a paragraph or two introducing yourself” to her.

Then again, this might be an immensely important essay: your college application “personal statement” or an essay to accompany your request for financial aid, employment, or some form of honor or special recognition.

Whatever the case, the next several years will probably provide you with a number of occasions on which you will be asked to write about yourself, to sell yourself, to make yourself stand out in the minds of men and women who will be reading thousands of statements just like yours. And these readers will be deciding whether or not to admit you to their school or program, give you money, give you a job, or present you with that award.

This book begins with personal writing, not because personal writing is “easier” than the other purposes—it is no easy task to make your “Why I Think I Deserve Your \$500 Book Scholarship” essay stand out from the thousands of other essays the scholarship committee has already read and the 500 it will read after yours—but because personal writing requires the least outside research and, therefore, allows us to focus completely on the craft of writing the essay.

After all, you should not have to devote too much time to gathering information about your experiences, thoughts, and feelings. Instead, you can devote your time and energy to developing the best, most effective means of communicating that information.

Common elements of good personal essays (actually, common elements of good writing):

- **A point:** This is your answer to your reader's question, *Why are you telling me this?*
- **An angle:** What makes your account of your day at the beach, your first job, the day you got cut from the team *more meaningful, moving, or memorable* than those of the hundreds of other teenagers who visited beaches, worked first jobs, or got cut from teams?
- **A voice:** How do you want to sound to your reader? Confident but not cocky? Respectful but not subservient? Witty but not caustic? Along with your angle, a voice is what will give your reader a sense of you beyond the mere facts of your narrative.
- **Substance:** Vague generalities and abstract concepts might suggest ideas to your reader, but they will do little to recreate the physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual effects that will make the reader take notice of your account.

Remember your writing process. We cannot stress enough that, except for the most personal writing, good writing does not simply flow spontaneously from brain through the pen onto the paper (or fingers to keyboard). It is planned, often over long periods of time. The more important the writing, the more carefully you want to plan it.

For the most part, you'll want to leave yourself time to accomplish these steps in the process of crafting the final draft of something you're writing for an audience:

STEP 1: Select a topic

STEP 2: Develop a(n) slant/angle/hook

STEP 3: Brainstorm, discuss, research

STEP 4: Outline

STEP 5: Write your first draft

STEP 6: Peer edit

STEP 7: Revised/final draft

POSSIBLE STEP 8: Second edit and final revision

ASSIGNMENT 1 :

The “significant experience” essay

As we’ve said, the personal essay is often the means by which you will introduce yourself to a potential employer, scholarship giver, or college admissions officer. All of these people will have access to your transcript and information like your attendance record and class rank. But consider how many students, even in your school, have taken the same courses as you and have earned similar grades. Chances are, you are tied or nearly tied with at least one or two other people for your class rank; and even if you are at the top of your class, every high school graduating class has a valedictorian and salutatorian.

The fact that you got “straight As” and are tied for #1 ranking in your class does not make you unique. This information does not give the person reviewing your file a sense of you as a person.

Neither does the fact that you have more “credits” than are mandated by your school, district, and state for graduation.

Your personal essay is really the only way to show yourself to the reviewer. The goal of this essay is to get your file from the big pile of “Everyone Who Applied” into the smaller pile of “People They Are Still Considering.”

Here is a typical writing prompt on college and scholarship applications:

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

“**Kyle**” is a first-semester tenth-grader in a large, urban high school. He does plan to attend college, and he believes he has the grades (and will also have the test scores) to attend an Ivy League school. He knows he will need scholarship and grant money, however, if he is going to achieve that dream.

Here is a recreation of the process Kyle followed when faced with the “Evaluate a significant experience” prompt:

STEP 1: Select a topic

First, Kyle paid close attention to the actual wording of the prompt and brainstormed as many experiences or events as he could think of.

- **Significant experiences:** learning to ride a bicycle? learning to drive? first summer job? grandfather's funeral?
- **Achievements:** finishing my first marathon?
- **Risks:** not sure what kind of “risk” they mean? Jumping off a cliff? Standing up for someone being bullied?
- **Ethical dilemmas:** when I saw Maxie cheating?

He then evaluated the topics on his list to determine which ones would give him the most material and the most interesting angle.

- ~~learning to ride a bicycle~~—not very unique. I was glad to learn, but it wasn't really a challenge.
- ~~learning to drive~~—not unique either. Gained freedom—but isn't that what everyone says? Also not much of a challenge. Did I overcome anything or learn anything?
- ~~first summer job~~—Did I overcome anything or learn anything? Yes...I didn't want to look stupid in front of Nick, and it ended up that I looked even more stupid. I can say that I'm a different person now because I've learned how to ask for help...or something.
- ~~grandfather's funeral~~—it was kind of hard for me to be a pall-bearer. I was afraid I'd trip and fall or something. Okay...am I different now because I did it? Maybe I'm more confident. How unique is that?
- ~~finishing my first marathon~~—same thing. What's unique? Not everyone runs a marathon. I trained hard. Learned the “benefit of dedication and hard work”?
- ~~when I saw Maxie cheating~~—this could be a good one. There's the whole friendship versus what's the right thing to do? Maybe I could bring in a mention of Julius Caesar. But would they see me as a tattletale or something? What if they disagree with the decision I made? Do I even still believe I did the right thing? But maybe I could talk about that...not knowing whether I did the right thing or not.

Finally, Kyle narrowed his list down to the summer job and the friend cheating. Unable to make his final decision, he decided to move to the next step and see whether his possible slant or angle would help him eliminate one of the two.

STEP 2: Develop a(n) slant/angle/hook

WHAT CAN MY ANGLE BE?

- ~~Cheating~~ - not sure what the right thing is. Right versus wrong; good versus evil. Is friendship an important ideal? Brutus was a tragic hero because he thought there was something higher than the ideal of friendship. But Maxie hasn't spoken to me since, and I do not feel good about what I did. Can I write a good essay about something that I guess I haven't really figured out yet?
- ~~Summer job~~ - I like the irony of making myself look more stupid by not wanting to look stupid to begin with. If I'm willing to look stupid (admit I don't know something), maybe that makes me more ready to learn. Like you've got to admit you're sick to go to the doctor and get healed. So maybe that's a good thing to say to the college admission people: I'm able to learn because I'm not too proud and afraid to look stupid and ask questions.

WHERE WOULD I BEGIN MY EVALUATION?

- I guess I'll begin at the beginning, tell the story and then talk about what I learned.

Note: This is an early choice that Kyle will eventually change to make his essay better address the prompt's instruction to evaluate the experience and its impact.

WHAT TYPE OR TONE OF VOICE DO I WANT TO CREATE IN MY READER'S MIND?

- I want to impress these guys, so I guess I'll try for a formal tone, something that shows them I am intelligent and a good student.

Note: This is another early choice that Kyle will eventually change. As his own voice emerges, and he begins to trust his understanding that the committee members want to get to know him as a person, he allows himself to sound like himself.

STEP 3: Brainstorm, discuss, research

Thinking about his potential angles helped Kyle realize that he wasn't ready to write about the cheating incident. He also realized he had some good ideas for an essay about what he learned as a result of his first summer job. That is the topic he chose for this essay.

Now, having selected a topic he is excited about, he knows he must make note of the specific details, facts, etc., that will make his experience real to his readers.

- The tools: the gas-powered weed-whacker, the lawn mower. Why couldn't I start the weed-whacker? There was the starter-rope. The primer bulb, and the choke lever. The buttons on the truck's lift: red, green, blue, yellow, and the black lever.
- The lush green of the lawns. The nauseating smell of the exhaust from the tools. The noise.
- The houses: brown and gray stone. Brick (brown and red). Raised flowerbeds in stone or brick retaining walls. Brown and red paver driveways. The mulch. Some smelled fresh—like Christmas? Some smelled foul—like [what would be the best word?] excrement? feces?
- Nick's voice: deep, grating. Sort of mush-mouthed, mumbling. With kind of a Southern accent. Or Western drawl?
- Nick, tall and really skinny. Stoop-shouldered. Dark blue-gray pants. Lighter gray shirt with "Nick" in red over the breast pocket. Clean-shaven to look professional. Baseball cap with name of lawn company embroidered on it.
- I did not have a uniform. Khaki pants and dress shirt.
- Some of the customers/clients were nice. Some were really snobby.
- Blue sky. Gray sky. Overcast days. Hot and humid days. Bugs.
- Loved rainy days because we did not work, but I did not get paid for days we did not work.

Kyle is definitely giving himself more material than he is going to need. Remember that it is always easier to delete excess material than to run out while writing and have to come back to this step. Notice also, however, that some of these details are fairly well developed while others do nothing more than name a tool or article of clothing, etc.



STEP 4: Outline

Because at this point Kyle thinks he is going to write a chronological narrative, he has chosen something that looks like an academic outline, with each Roman numeral representing a distinct step in the narrative sequence.

- I. How I got the job.
 - A. Client of Dad's uses this service
 - B. Recommended me
 - C. I sort of lied and said I had experience
- II. My first day
 - A. First house
 1. Nick tells me to unload truck
 2. I can't operate the lift
 - a. describe the buttons and levers
 3. Nick grumbles at me
 4. I can't start the weed whacker
 - a. describe the primer bulb, starter cord, and choke lever
 5. Nick grumbles at me again
- III. What I learned
 - A. I was afraid of looking stupid
 1. Everyone in my family is smarter and more accomplished than me
 2. Yard work should be easy and not require knowledge
 - B. I looked more stupid by pretending I knew what I didn't know

Note: This is a flawed outline that can lead only to a flawed essay. If Kyle were to share the prompt and this outline with a sharp reader, the reader would tell him that this outline focuses too much on the story of the job and not enough on the evaluation of the experience and its impact.

STEP 5: Write your first draft

Even though Kyle believes he has a strong topic, more-than-adequate notes, and a sound outline, he knows that this is only the first draft of his essay. Even so, however, he strives to make this as polished as he can. Given his notes and outline, he is beyond the stage of this draft's being simply a rough "mind-dump."

Here is Kyle's first draft. Read it and consider its strengths and weaknesses. How successfully has Kyle responded to the prompt and drafted an essay that will be noticed by the admissions committee of the college he hopes to attend?

The essay starts out pretty weakly. We can guess the "significant experience" has to do with Kyle's first summer job, but we don't yet have a clue to why it is significant or what its impact has been.

The significance is still unclear. Is this essay going to be about the difficulty in finding a job? The father's help?

With each paragraph, this essay seems to be developing into a description of the job. Kyle needs to be reminded that the prompt instructs him to evaluate the experience, not merely narrate it.

It was my first summer job. I knew I had to work because that was how it was in my family. All of my older brothers started working summers the summer they turned fifteen. I was the youngest of five sons. I had four older brothers.

I did try to find a job on my own, but a lot of places won't hire you until you're sixteen or seventeen, so it was hard. My Dad decided to help me out. A client of his (he's a lawyer) used a lawn service, and the guy who did his lawn said he needed some extra help for the summer. My father asked if I thought I could handle yard work for the summer, and I thought I could.

How hard could it be? My job would be to do the "edgework." That meant I would swing the weed-whacker around flowerbeds and stone walls, guide the edger along driveways and sidewalks, and the walking mower around places where the riding mower wouldn't fit.

The guy who owned the lawn service didn't ask if I thought I could do it. He asked if I had experience. He meant had I actually used a weed-whacker, an edger, and a lawn mower. I said yes even though I never had. I didn't think they were chores that required a lot of skill or training. He hired me, and I was partnered with "Nick."

Nick was tall, much taller than me, and really, really skinny. But he didn't look emaciated



like someone who was sick. He looked wiry and strong. He wore the company's uniform, dark gray khaki pants and a lighter gray shirt with his name embroidered in red over the shirt's breast pocket. He was clean-shaven and wore the company's baseball cap. Because I was only temporary, I didn't have a company shirt with my name on it. They told me to wear khaki pants and a dress shirt every day.

The company's territory was huge, and we serviced lawns not only in the nicest neighborhoods of my city, but we went several miles out into the suburbs. Many nights that summer, I didn't get home from work until 10:00, and then I had to be at work by 8:00 a.m. the next morning. I loved rainy days because we didn't work in the rain, but of course we didn't get paid for days we didn't work, so that wasn't so good.

My first day at work was the hardest, and that's when I learned an important lesson.

When we got to the first house, Nick told me to open the gate at the back of the truck, so we could get out the equipment. I didn't know how to operate it! It was a gate and a lift elevator because the riding mower was really heavy. There were four buttons on the control: red, green, blue, and yellow, as well as a black lever and a silver toggle switch. Nothing was labeled.

Finally, grumbling what I think were curses, Nick jumped off the truck and lowered the gate. He looked at me and said that I should have asked how to operate the gate. His voice was low and mumbly. I replied that I didn't want to seem stupid.

He handed me the weed-whacker and asked if I knew how to start it. I knew he was mocking me.

I nodded and walked over to the brick retaining wall where I was supposed to begin trimming the

These details are from Kyle's pre-writing work, but they don't seem relevant. Of course, without yet knowing what specifically is Kyle's point, it is hard to assess the relevance of any details he chooses to include.

Again, we don't yet know Kyle's focus, and we do question the relevance of this information.

This is the seventh paragraph. We're more than a page into Kyle's essay, and this is the first suggestion of what the significance of this experience—the impact—is going to be. It is, however, a very vague reference to an impact.

Now the essay seems to have returned to a simple narrative.

The reader might guess that Kyle's point has something to do with feeling stupid and needing to ask for help, but Kyle does not make it at all clear.

Back to narrative.

This is the third reference to Nick's insistence that Kyle should have asked. We are probably certain that that is the "important lesson" Kyle learned that day, but he has not made it explicit at all.

Finally, in the next-to-last paragraph, Kyle specifies his point. By now, however, it is too late. Whatever relevance or significance any of the previous details has is lost in our not knowing this point. Kyle has essentially failed to "Engage and orient [his] reader by setting out a problem, situation, or observation ..." from the beginning.

This is a rather silly statement since we know that Kyle is in the first semester of his sophomore year. That means this important lesson has stuck with him for, maybe, two or three months at the most.

There is nothing wrong with an analogy, but a doctor/patient comparison does not fit in the context of Nick and the landscape company.

We finally have some statement of significance, but it is too little too late. The prompt did not instruct Kyle to narrate an experience but to evaluate it. He was also instructed, not only to state the impact of the experience, but also to evaluate its impact. Why is this an important lesson for Kyle to have learned? In what ways is it important?

grass that Nick would not be able to get to. The weed-whacker was heavier than I expected, and it wasn't until I thought I'd forgotten the extension cord that I realized it was gasoline-powered. I did not know how to start it.

I did not know what the rubber primer bulb was for. I did not know how to operate the choke. I knew I had to pull on the starter cord, but my strongest attempts didn't even produce a sputter. I was so intent on studying the contraption and trying to figure out what to do with the different parts that I didn't hear Nick walk up to me.

Again, he told me that I should have asked how to start the thing.

He laid the machine on the ground, opened the choke, squeezed the bulb a couple of times, gave one quick pull on the rope and the machine roared. Nick shook his head, and returned to his work.

The rest of the day was a little better. I did know how to start the lawn mower. Now that I knew how to control the truck's gate and start the weed-whacker, I was able to work without any more help. But all day long, I could hear Nick grumbling that I should have asked.

That was when I realized that it wasn't the fact that I didn't know how to do it that made me look stupid; it was the fact that I pretended to know how when I didn't.

I learned an important lesson that day that lasted the entire summer and still stays with me. I won't learn anything if foolish pride makes me pretend I already know it. Like a person who has to admit he's sick and go to the doctor, I have to admit I don't know something. Then someone can teach me what I need to know, and I can learn.