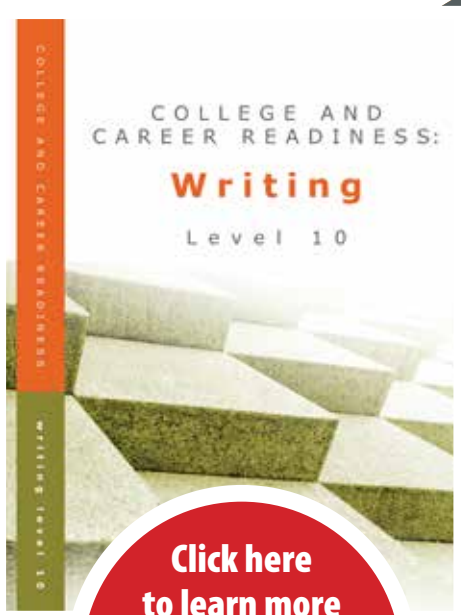




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CAREER READINESS:

# **Writing**

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# PART I :

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## 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 Slant/Angle/Hook**

**STEP 3: Brainstorm, Discuss, Research**

**STEP 4: Outline**

**STEP 5: First Draft**

**STEP 6: Peer Edit**

**STEP 7: Revised/Final Draft**

**POSSIBLE STEP 8: Second Edit and Final Revision**



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# ASSIGNMENT 1:

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## 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 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.

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### **STEP 3: Brainstorm, Discuss, Research**

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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.



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### STEP 4: Outline

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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: 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 as 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.



## Analysis of First Draft

**What is this writer's point?** A single, identifiable point is hard to isolate. At first, it seems as if the writer is going to tell a story about the difficulty of getting a job. Much of the essay is simple narrative, a chronological retelling of the events of his first day. Eventually, it seems as if the point has something to do with admitting when you don't know something and asking for instruction.

**What is his angle?** As unclear as the point is, the angle is even less clear. Everyone who works has a first job and a first day on that job. Most of those first days involved making mistakes and feeling stupid. There is nothing new or different or unique in this telling of this experience to make the reader like, dislike, pity, or admire the narrator.

**What type or tone of voice has he created in his reader's mind?** The voice and tone in this essay are not particularly distinctive, but there are a few attempts at a glibness or mild humor. The writer generally maintains an informal, conversational tone.

**What techniques has this writer used to create this voice?** This essay does not give the overall impression of control. While there is nothing particularly bad about this writer's voice, there is nothing particularly distinctive, either.

**What specific details, facts, etc., make this experience real?** One problem with this draft is that it contains quite a few details, most notably physical descriptions of Nick, the company uniform, and the machinery; but since there is no clearly discernible point, it is difficult to assess the relevance of these particular details. As it becomes more clear that the point has to do with the writer's learning a lesson about admitting what he does not know, some of these particular details do not seem relevant to the point. What did Nick's tallness, or thinness, or the name embroidered in red on his shirt have to do with the lesson the writer learned?

**NOW you will plan your own essay to the same prompt. You will probably find it helpful to follow the process by which Kyle arrived at his first draft. Remember that Kyle brainstormed, took notes on several possible topics, and developed each of them to see which one would yield the best essay.**

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



---

### **STEP 1: Select a Topic**

---

What experiences lend themselves to a successful evaluation?

What point would you want to make in evaluating each of these potential topics?

Go back and look at Kyle's thoughts in this step. Even in the selection of topics, you need to think about things like an interesting angle and sufficient and relevant details.

---

### **STEP 2: Develop a Slant/Angle/Hook**

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What will your angle be?

Where might you begin your evaluation?

What type or tone of voice do you want to create in your reader's mind?

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### **STEP 3: Brainstorm, Discuss, Research**

---

What specific details, facts, etc., will make this experience real and not merely hypothetical?

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### **STEP 4: Outline**

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Remember, a variety of outline forms is available to you, and you should practice with as many as possible to find which one(s) work best for you.

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### **STEP 5: First Draft**

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Be your own first editor. Go back and look at the scorer's notes and analysis of Kyle's first draft and see if you can avoid some of the first-draft blunders Kyle has committed, especially those concerning clarifying the point early in the essay and selecting only the most relevant details.

---

### **STEP 6: Peer Edit**

---

You and your partner might find it helpful to use the same questions Kyle and his partner used:

**What is this writer's point?**



What is his/her angle?

What type or tone of voice has he/she created in his/her reader's mind?

What techniques has this writer used to create this voice?

What specific details, facts, etc., make this experience real?

---

### **STEP 7: Revised/Final Draft**

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After the peer edit, it's time to write a second draft. In many cases, due to time limitations, this second draft may have to be your final draft. That's why it's so important to make the first draft really count.

The first step in revising your draft, of course, should be to consider all of your editor's comments on your first draft and determine how to deal with them.

Remember that anyone you give your draft to for review and editing help wants only for you to succeed with this essay (otherwise, why else would you choose this person to review your essay?). You should, therefore, consider everything your editor has said and respond to it, even if your response is to explain why you are not changing something or are changing it in a different way from the one suggested. The final decision on any revision is yours, but *you must have a valid reason that you can explain in your own words* for disregarding an observation or suggestion made by your editor.

Here are Kyle's editor's comments and analysis, as well as Kyle's responses. The responses do not need to be written, but you must know that you understand what your editor is telling you, and you must know whether or not you are going to revise your essay accordingly (and why).

- 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.

- 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 to evaluate its impact. Why is this an important lesson for Kyle to have learned? In what ways is it important?

**And here is Kyle's reaction:**

The biggest problem seems to be with making my point clearer from the very beginning. I want this essay to be about the irony of making myself look stupid by not wanting to look stupid. I probably need to state that right in the first paragraph.

I think that, if I take care of that point, the other problems will be easy fixes. I can include only details that show my stupidity...like why I didn't know how to start the weed-whacker.

I think I understand the comments about the narrative. In most of my essay, I am simply telling the story. And the prompt says to "evaluate," not "describe." I think making my point earlier will also help me to cut out a lot of the narrative.

The other comments I understand, too. The doctor analogy doesn't fit, and I have to explain why realizing I had made myself look stupid was important.

**Analysis of First Draft**

**What is this writer's point?** A single, identifiable point is hard to isolate. At first, it seems as if the writer is going to tell a story about the difficulty of getting a job. Much of the essay is simple narrative, a chronological retelling of the events of his first day. Eventually, it seems as if the point has something to do with admitting when you don't know something and asking for instruction.

My point is that I was afraid of looking stupid, and so I ended up looking even more stupid by pretending I knew how to do things I didn't know how to do. I know I need to make that clear earlier.

**What is his angle?** As unclear as the point is, the angle is even less clear. Everyone who works has a first job and a first day on that job. Most of those first days involved making mistakes and feeling stupid. There is nothing new or different or unique in this telling of this experience to make the reader like, dislike, pity, or admire the narrator.

Why was I so afraid of looking stupid? Because all of my older brothers are smarter and more accomplished than I am.

What difference does it make that I had this experience and learned this lesson? Admitting what I don't know and asking is what is necessary to really learn in school... so this experience means I will do well in college.

**What type or tone of voice has he created in his reader's mind?** The voice and tone in this essay are not particularly distinctive, but there are a few attempts at a glibness or mild humor. The writer generally maintains an informal, conversational tone.

I want the tone to be conversational and informal. Everyone has felt stupid at some time, and no one likes to feel stupid, so this is an experience everyone should be able to relate to.

**What techniques has this writer used to create this voice?** This essay does not give the overall impression of control. While there is nothing particularly bad about this writer's voice, there is nothing particularly distinctive, either.

Contractions. Shorter sentences and paragraph. Maybe some direct address to the reader?

**What specific details, facts, etc., make this experience real?** One problem with this draft is that it contains quite a few details, most notably physical descriptions of Nick, the company uniform, and the machinery; but since there is no clearly discernible point, it is difficult to assess the relevance of these particular details. As it becomes more clear that the point has to do with the writer's learning a lesson about admitting what he does not know, some of these particular details do not seem relevant to the point. What did Nick's tallness, or thinness, or the name embroidered in red on his shirt have to do with the lesson the writer learned?

The description of Nick isn't important, but I still think the description of the colored buttons and the parts of the weed-whacker are because they show how and why I was confused.

To make the experience really seem real, maybe I should use some dialogue...maybe "describe" Nick through the way he talks...direct quotation...maybe even dialect.



Here is Kyle's revised draft. Notice how he has addressed the comments and suggestions his peer editor made. Read the essay and consider how it is stronger and more likely to make a positive impression on the admissions committee.

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

No one likes to feel stupid, and if you're the youngest of five sons, and your older brothers include a chief surgical resident, a physics professor, and a first-year Harvard Law student, you already feel dumb enough without completely screwing up your first day at a new part-time job. I would be working for a lawn service, doing "edgework." That meant I would swing the weed-whacker around flower beds and stone walls, guide the edger along driveways and sidewalks, and the walking mower around places where the riding mower wouldn't fit.

How hard could it be?

We got to the first house, and "Nick" expected me to know something about how to open the gate at the back of the truck and operate the elevator mechanism that lowered the riding mower out of the truck and raised it back in again. If it had been a matter of a couple of buttons—red for down and green for up or something—that would have been fine. But there were four buttons, red, green, blue, and yellow. And there was a black lever and a silver toggle switch. Nothing was labeled.

Nothing happened as I flipped the toggle switch back and forth, fiddled with the lever and pushed the buttons in every order I could think of. I think Nick sat on the mower waiting for his ride to the street for a full fifteen minutes before, grumbling what I think were curses, he jumped off the truck and lowered the gate.

This strong first sentence mentions the experience and suggests the terms by which it is going to be evaluated.

This one-sentence paragraph may work to establish voice, or it may distract the reader.

This comment is very important. The prompt instructs the student to "evaluate" the experience, not to "narrate" the experience. This sentence brings the focus back to the theme of feeling stupid.

It turns out the toggle switch controlled the power—on and off. The red button was indeed for down and green for up. The lever tilted the gate up when everything was stowed on the truck, and it was time to go to the next house. I never learned what the yellow and blue buttons were supposed to do.

"Ya' should of asked if ya' didn't know how to do it," Nick grumbled.

I just kind of shrugged my shoulders and muttered that I didn't want to seem stupid.

He handed me the weed-whacker. "Ya' know how to start it?" I think I heard more mockery in his voice than was actually there.

I nodded and walked over to the brick retaining wall where I was supposed to begin trimming the 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 a gasoline-powered tool. I had no idea how to start it.

There was a little rubber bulb, a choke, and the cord to pull. I was so intent on studying the contraption and trying to figure out what to do with what that I didn't hear Nick huffing and puffing toward me.

"Ya' should of asked if ya' didn't know how to do it," he grumbled.

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 sputtered and smoked and roared. Shaking his head, Nick returned to his riding mower.

The rest of the day was a little better. I did know how to start the gasoline-powered walking mower, and once he showed me how to

operate the truck's gate and start the weed-whacker, I was able to do it without any more help. But all day long, sitting next to Nick in the truck and feeling stupid, I could hear him grumbling to me, 'Ya' should of asked if ya' didn't know how to do it.

I knew he was right. And 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.

This isn't an essay about how, by the end of the summer, Nick and I became best friends and when my first son was born I named him Nick and my wife and I go to his house every Sunday for dinner. I don't think he ever liked me. Maybe he really did think I was stupid, or lazy, or something. Maybe he felt that I didn't keep up my end of the work, and he had to work harder that summer because of me.

But I will always remember the important lesson he taught me my first day: I should ask if I don't know how to do something. At the end of the summer when school started again, I was in a chemistry lab. There was a lot I didn't know how to do. But I knew enough to ask.

I think I'll do well in college. I'm sure I'll face things I don't know or don't know how to do.

But I now know enough to ask.

Thanks to a disastrous first day at work and the fear of looking stupid.

The student makes certain to specify the point.

This paragraph might be an unnecessary tangent, or it might help the student to establish his voice, give the reader a sense of the person behind the essay.

This is a college application essay. This statement explains why this particular experience is relevant to the occasion.

This last sentence might be unnecessary. The student's point and the relevance of the chosen significant experience are already clear.



## **Analysis of Final Draft**

**What is this writer's point?** The writer wants to establish that he has mastered the one crucial element of being educated—the ability to ask questions.

**What is his angle?** By providing the little bit of background about his successful older brothers and beginning with the admission that he is more or less afraid of feeling stupid, this writer makes himself a little vulnerable. This vulnerability is intended to emphasize that the writer is a real person, a high school student, someone who is still learning and growing.

**What type or tone of voice has he created in his reader's mind?** The voice and tone in this essay are not particularly distinctive, but there are a few attempts at a glibness or mild humor. The writer generally maintains an informal, conversational tone.

**What techniques has this writer used to create this voice?** The glibness is most apparent in the few single-sentence paragraphs, especially the second paragraph, “How hard could it be?” The rhetorical question reinforces the humorous intent. Relatively short paragraphs, attempts at recreating, “Nick’s” voice and manner of speaking, and the use of contractions all contribute to an overall informal tone.

**What specific details, facts, etc., make this experience real?** Recreating Nick’s actual words and manner of speaking is a powerful tool to help the writer recreate this experience. Listing specific components of the two machines that puzzled the writer—the colored buttons, silver toggle switch, the rubber bulb on the weed-whacker—allows the reader to experience the writer’s confusion, not merely know the writer was confused.

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### **POSSIBLE STEP 8: Rewrite Opportunity**

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# MINI-LESSON 1:

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## Journal Writing

Journal writing can be the most personal of all personal writing because it can indeed be intended never to be read by anyone other than the writer. Private journals can be written in any form, and journal writers often create their own conventions, even their own languages, to record thoughts, feelings, daily events, or impressions of the time period in which they live.

Because journal assignments tend to be short and informal—and some teachers require some kind of journal writing every day—you may be tempted to pass these writing opportunities off as throwaways. They can, however, be important tools to help you improve your overall writing.

Last year, we advised you to look at a journal opportunity from three different viewpoints: as a free-writing exercise, as light practice, or as heavy training—similar to the way an athlete or performer keeps in shape or prepares for a major event. All three purposes are worthwhile, and it is important for you to know what your goal is for each kind of exercise.

### Journal as Free-writing Exercise

Free-writing, of course, involves the least planning of any type of writing. It is essentially a “mind-dump” of ideas on the assigned topic. Of course, you wouldn’t necessarily intend anyone else to read a free-writing exercise, and you certainly wouldn’t submit it for evaluation or grading.

Like Kyle, “**Maya**” plans to attend college. The daughter of two lawyers—her mother works for a non-profit legal aid organization, and her father is a public defender—she also intends to study law and maybe enter politics. Near the beginning of her school’s second marking period, she arrived in her English class knowing that they were going to begin a new unit, reading William Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. As the teacher distributed copies of the play, students were instructed to respond in their journals to the following prompt, which was displayed in the front of the room.

Renaissance philosopher and political scientist Niccolò Machiavelli is usually credited with the maxim “The end justifies the means,” which is usually interpreted to mean that a minor immoral act is excusable if it is committed in order to achieve a greater good. How do you respond to this philosophy? What examples from your education or your own experiences can you provide to explain your view?

In the past, students have been invited to review the ideas recorded in their journals to inform more formal essays and their participation in class discussion, but Maya knows that journal entries are not graded. She also knows she has probably only fifteen or twenty minutes to write her entry, so she decides to simply free-write her response without following a “process.”

Here is her entry:

This is a good example of a free-written paragraph. Maya is off to a quick start with her statement of disagreement and an example.

One benefit of this free-writing exercise is that Maya processes her thoughts and refines her ideas as she goes along. She knows she will not be penalized for changing her mind or not expressing herself perfectly.

Whatever ideas Maya can include can only help. In a free-write, she does not have to worry about organization, coherence, grammar, etc.

I do not agree that the end justifies the means. Look at what happened a couple of years ago when the banks collapsed. The executives of these banks sold bad loans to other banks, knowing those loans would fail, but they made enormous profits for their own banks. The banks that bought the loans lost a lot of money, and people who had invested in those banks lost their savings, their pensions, and sometimes their houses. But the immoral act of selling the bad loans was justified by the executives saying their actions were justified by the profits they made for their own banks. Another good example that hits closer to home would be cheating in school. Cheating is definitely wrong, but many students claim they do it only to raise their grades so they can get into a good college and have good careers. But a career based on cheating isn't really a “greater good.” All of the patients of the doctor who cheated in school are cheated out of having a good doctor. All of the clients of a lawyer who cheated in school are cheated by not having a good lawyer. I think maybe a lot of revolutions and wars are also based on the false philosophy that the end justifies the means. A government sends young men and women to be killed for a “greater good.” Some countries even take away their citizens' rights for the sake of a “greater good” like security or law and order. Benjamin Franklin even said something about a people willing to sacrifice their freedom for the sake of security deserved neither freedom nor security. He was sort of saying that the



end of peace or security does not justify the means of imprisoning people illegally or limiting their freedom of speech or religion and so on. Maybe the point is that the end that is supposed to come about by immoral means never really comes about. The French Revolution did not create rights and prosperity for the people of France. The Russian Revolution did not improve the lives of most of the Russian peasants. A suspension of, like, the right to free speech or assembly will not make us any safer in the long run...only silenced, oppressed, and afraid. Like prisoners.

Time has run out, and Maya's teacher has begun the lesson. Still, Maya has managed to come around to a clear understanding of the maxim and her reasons for disagreeing.

### Analysis of Free-write Journal Entry

**What is this writer's point?** Responding to the question of whether she agrees or disagrees with the “Machiavellian” principle that the end justifies the means, Maya clearly establishes her disagreement.

**What is his/her angle?** Maya draws on both historical, relatively current, and personal experiences to illustrate the reasons for her disagreement.

**What type or tone of voice has he created in his reader's mind?** This is a free-write, so there is no intentional attempt at tone or voice.

**What techniques has this writer used to create this voice?** N/A

**What specific details, facts, etc., help this writer establish his/her point?**

Maya refers to the 2006–2007 economic crisis, the French and Russian Revolutions, and the current cheating trend in United States schools.

### Journal as Light Practice

Last year, we compared the “Journal as Light Practice” exercise to a person who exercises to keep in shape, or a person who dances, paints, sings, etc., as a hobby. Hobbyists and enthusiasts practice their art or skill essentially every day, and they achieve a certain degree of expertise. Their daily practice is not as intense as if they were preparing for a competition, but they strive to maintain—probably even increase—their skill.

Kyle's school is only a few weeks away from its state-mandated writing assessment, so his teacher is having the class practice every day by assigning a

journal entry prompt. Her intent is to give the students opportunities to write under a tight deadline and without the benefit of preparation or time for editing and revision. Kyle knows his response to these prompts will not be graded, but he also knows that the essays he writes on the state assessment will be scored. He wants to do well on the assessment, so he does his best to make his journal entries not simply free-writes but actual attempts at organized and coherent essays.

Here is one of the daily prompts Kyle's teacher assigned:

Explain the meaning of the proverb, "He who will not read is no better off than he who cannot read." Does your experience lead you to believe this to be true? Why or why not?

Here is Kyle's response:

So far, not a bad start for Kyle. He wastes no time explaining the meaning of the adage as the prompt assigns.

The adage "He who will not read is no better off than he who cannot read" is a comment on people's willful ignorance. It says that, even if you have been to school and consider yourself "educated," if you act stupidly or follow the crowd instead of being yourself, you are no different than someone who has never been to school. It's like the saying Forrest Gump made famous in his movie, "Stupid is as stupid does." From people I know in my own family and school, I would have to say that I think the saying is true. Stupid is as stupid does, and people who will not use the skill or knowledge they got in school might just as well have never gone to school in the first place. I see this especially in my uncle, who gets all of his opinions from one television source even though he has a Master's Degree and is a teacher in a private school. Some of the students in my school are just as stupid. A lot of our politicians also brag about their impressive degrees but will not listen to someone else or consider an opposing opinion, so that they are no better than people who have never had the opportunity to have their minds expanded by an education. In other words, if you



can read, and you don't, then you're really no different than a person who never learned to read in the first place.

My uncle claims to be a well-educated man. He even brags that he is an educator, helping to shape the minds of tomorrow's citizens. He does have a Master's Degree from a decent school, but he teaches in a small private school that allows for only one viewpoint—no discussion, no exploration of other ideas, no room to question the official view. This same uncle, even though he must have read a lot while in college and graduate school, insists that schools today don't teach but indoctrinate. To me, though, indoctrination is what happens when you only get one view and you get graded on how well you can explain why you agree with it. When he is at home, my uncle watches only one news channel and soaks up everything the newscasters and commentators say. If anyone tries to watch another channel, my uncle yells insults at the other commentators. You cannot have a discussion with him about politics or religion. All you can do is let him talk while you nod. If you say anything, he gets angry, and the conversations turn into a shouting match.

A lot of kids in school are almost as bad as my uncle. The books and articles we read and the films and programs we watch expose us to all sorts of ideas and different views of the same topic. I don't think our teachers require us to agree with any particular ones or disagree with others, but we are always told to point out the strengths and weaknesses of someone's view or argument. To say that the argument is strong is not the same thing as agreeing with it. But a lot of kids only find strengths in arguments they already agree with, and they find weaknesses only in arguments they already disagree with. They're supposed to be getting an education—sort of metaphorically

It appears that Kyle has defaulted to a five-paragraph-essay structure, which is a good skill to practice for times when a timed, on-demand essay is assigned.

Typical of the five-paragraph essay, the first body paragraph will apparently elaborate on the first point mentioned in the introduction.

Kyle has a great deal of elaboration here, but the paragraph becomes something of a rant.

The use of slang is all right for this journal entry, but Kyle will have to be more careful of his word choice in an actual assessment essay.