

CHAPTER ONE

Brainstorming

BEFORE WE DISCUSS *HOW TO* write the essay (structure), we need to know *what* we're writing about (content). I've used many brainstorming exercises over the years, but the following two are my favorites. They generate lots of ideas, and they get my heart pounding while I write.

ESSENCE OBJECTS EXERCISE

For this, you'll need a quiet place (or headphones) and about fifteen minutes.

Ready? Here we go:

- I want you to imagine a box.
- In this box is a set of objects.
- Imagine that each one of these is an "essence object" for you.
- What do I mean?
- Each object represents one of your fundamental qualities.
- So each object is more than just an object.

Example 1: My green pen. Why a green pen? I always carry a green pen because, like my mentor Cliff Faulkner, I grade nearly all my students' essays in green. Why green? Because red carries so many negative connotations—bad, wrong, warning—and when a student gets an essay back and it's covered in red marks, it can tend to look bloody, like a battlefield. But if a student gets an essay back that's covered in green, it looks verdant. Also, red means "stop" (like a stoplight), but green says "keep going." And that's the essence I want to communicate to my students: keep going. So my green pen is more than just a green pen.

Example 2: A well-worn North Carolina Tar Heels basketball. Why? I came home from the hospital wearing Carolina Blue, so I've been a Carolina fan, literally, since birth. I've spent more time on a basketball court than almost anywhere else (which is why the ball is well worn), and basketball represents my connection with my dad: when I was a kid, we'd watch Carolina games and play basketball for hours. In fact, basketball was one important way my dad showed he loved me. So this basketball is more than just a basketball.

Example 3: The blue Bible my grandma gave me when I was seven. This represents my having been raised in the Presbyterian Church. It represents Wednesday night potluck dinners, summer camp adventures, and trips with my youth group. So this Bible is more than just a Bible.

You get the idea.

I want you to make a list of twenty essence objects. (Don't complain—you're infinitely complex and creative and could come up with a thousand—I'm asking for only twenty.)

Note: No need to write what the objects mean to you as I've just done if you don't want to. You can just do this:

- green Precise V5 extra-fine rolling-ball pen
- worn-down North Carolina basketball

- blue Bible with my name stitched on it in gold lettering
- BBQ sauce
- annotated copy of *The Brothers Karamazov*
- friendship bracelet
- black-and-white composition notebook
- *Amélie* DVD
- Evanston Hockey T-shirt

If it helps, put on some music. Let your mind wander.
Begin now.

MY ESSENCE OBJECTS

Use your imagination.

(If you get stuck, you'll find questions on the next page to inspire you.)

THE BIG LIST OF BRAINSTORMING QUESTIONS

- What's a food that reminds you of your grandmother?
- What's an object that reminds you of home?
- An object that represents your father?
- Or, if you don't have a relationship with your father, what object reminds you of that absence in your life?
- What about your mother?
- What's something that makes you feel safe?
- What's something you lost?
- Something you forgot?
- What—or who—makes you laugh?
- Best book ever?
- What would your desert island movie be—the one you'd watch again and again?
- What piece of art consistently blows your mind?
- What object represents something you regret—something you wish you'd done differently?
- What's a secret you have? (Don't worry, this stays here.)
- What's something about you that no one else knows?
- Something you stole?
- Something you found?
- Something that makes you feel safe?
- What do you wish you were better at being or doing?
- The worst thing that ever happened to you?
- The last time you cried so hard that your breath caught in that halting way that it does when little kids cry? What mattered to you so much that it brought forth your deepest sobs?
- What's a challenge you faced?
- When you think about that challenge, what brought you through—what resources did you develop to overcome that difficulty?
- What would the logo on your imaginary business card be?
- What image would you have carved into your tombstone?
- An object that represents: a smell you love, a smell you hate, a taste you love, a taste you hate, the sweetest sound in the world?

- What's the coolest thing about science?
- Something that reminds you of being a kid?
- Something that represents a dream you have?
- What object represents your best friend? Your grandmother?
- When did you know? (Yes, that's the whole question.)
- What object represents a quality you have that you love but that people don't often recognize?
- What object represents the best advice you ever received?
- What's the best money you ever spent?
- What's your favorite word?
- Something you'll never get rid of?
- A bad habit?
- A perfect moment?
- A time you laughed so hard you cried?
- A time you cried so hard you laughed?
- An image you'll never forget?
- What would they put in the museum of your life?
- The cover image on your first self-titled album?
- An object representing a near-death experience?
- When did you feel most alive?
- What does a perfect Saturday night look like to you?
- A perfect Sunday afternoon?
- Best game ever—real or made up?
- Your favorite metaphor for life?
- When were you so embarrassed you wanted to disappear?
- What's a recurring dream you have?
- Your worst (actual) nightmare?
- When were you most afraid?
- If you had a clone, what would you have the clone do?
- When's a time you were speechless?
- The moment you left childhood behind?
- A quotation you love?
- Your favorite photo?
- A word that you love from another language?
- The biggest decision you've ever made?

Now survey your list and ask: Which essences or qualities are missing? What else could I include?

Write down two to three more essence objects.

(Google “100 Brave and Interesting Questions” for more.)

WHAT'S YOUR STORY?

FINDING THE RIGHT CLAY

Think of essay writing as sculpting. You're working to sculpt an essay that reflects something true about who you are. The purpose of the Essence Objects Exercise is to help you find the right clay. How can you be absolutely sure you're sculpting with the right clay? You can't. Writing is an art, after all, not a science. But here's a tip:

Tell your deepest story.

I was part of a story circle once in which we were asked to tell our deepest story. How can you tell when you've found yours? You'll feel it in your gut. It'll feel vulnerable (more on this on page 189). If you read it aloud and the writing sounds superficial or like it could have been written by any number of people, it's probably not your deepest story. So:

What's your deepest story?

Before moving on, spend three minutes jotting down answers to these questions:

What's the toughest lesson you've ever had to learn?

What was the hardest thing you've ever had to overcome?

What's your actual superpower? When did you learn you had it? How'd you develop it?

I wouldn't be who I am today without _____
_____.

If you have a specific career/major in mind, answer: Why am I a [writer/doctor/teacher]?

Do any of these answers connect to any of your essence objects?

CORE VALUES EXERCISE

Here's my other favorite brainstorming exercise, and it'll help you figure out the second half of your essay in about five minutes. To begin, pick your Top Ten values from the following list.

What do I value?

- community
- inspiration
- serenity
- physical challenge
- responsibility
- competition
- career
- practicality
- working with others
- freedom
- security
- strength
- self-control
- hunger
- personal development
- respect
- mindfulness
- culture
- bravery
- communication
- change and variety
- compassion
- nature
- intuition
- trust
- social justice
- intellect
- self-reliance
- financial gain
- laughter
- faith
- involvement
- adventure
- vulnerability
- adaptability
- restraint
- healthy boundaries
- friendship
- excellence
- meaning
- power
- privacy
- self-expression
- stability
- diversity
- love
- control
- surprise
- nutrition
- competence
- risk
- balance
- self-discipline
- courage
- family
- empathy
- working alone
- fun
- humility
- efficiency
- intensity
- health and fitness
- meaningful work
- my country
- music
- truth
- resourcefulness
- awareness
- art
- autonomy
- wit
- patience
- listening
- commitment

- leadership
- helping others
- meditation
- practicality
- creativity
- excitement
- collaboration
- social change
- beauty
- passion
- integrity
- ecological awareness
- quality relationships
- travel
- logic
- curiosity
- spirituality
- directness
- honesty
- independence
- multiplicity
- supervising others
- cooperation
- affection
- wisdom
- knowledge
- growth
- mystery
- order
- innovation
- accountability
- democracy
- religion
- experience
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Now pick your Top Five.

- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____
- _____

Once you have those, pick your Top Three.

- _____
- _____
- _____

And then, yes, pick your Number One value. Remember that you're not losing any of the others, you're just picking the most important value for you today.

- _____

Don't read ahead until you've done this.
Really.

Finally, if you know what career you'd like to pursue—engineering, for example—put the first letter of that career (“E”) beside five values of a great engineer. Maybe you write an “E” next to collaboration, autonomy, innovation, and helping others, and for a fifth value, you write “working with my hands” in one of the blanks at the end of the list.

Once that's done, set these aside. I'll tell you what to do with them in a little bit.

HOW THE ESSENCE OBJECTS AND CORE VALUES EXERCISES CAN HELP YOU WRITE YOUR ESSAY (AND YOUR LIFE)

That's right. You're not just writing your essay. You're writing your life. I'll explain in a second. First, let's talk about:

How These Exercises Can Help You Write Your Essay

T. S. Eliot once wrote: “The only way of expressing emotion in the form of art is by finding an ‘objective correlative.’”

What's an objective correlative? It's an object to which you correlate emotions, memories, and complex meanings. It's an object that's more than an object.

Every object in your essence object box is an objective correlative for some important, complex part of you.

Think of each one as a hyperlink to your soul. Click on any one of those essence objects and there's a story behind it. At this point we don't know how many will end up in your story—one, fifteen, or none—but the essences they represent most certainly will be the college essay you submit.

I love the Core Values Exercise for a few reasons:

1. If we sat down and I asked you why your top value is your top value, I'd probably learn something pretty great about you.
2. I believe your values can serve as a magic glue for your essay, helping to connect your past with your present and future (more on this in a bit).
3. It can also help generate material for my favorite prompt:

Describe the world you come from and tell us how your world has shaped your dreams and aspirations.

Why is this my favorite prompt? Because I believe that if a student answers this question—and answers it well—then this essay can work for most personal statement prompts and even some scholarship essays. Working on this particular question can also lead to a lot of personal growth. And how could you apply the material from the Essence Objects and Core Values exercises to this prompt?

Like this:

Your essence objects = your world

Your core values = your dreams and aspirations

I'll explain this in more detail in chapter four, but your essence objects will help you generate content for the first half of your essay (your past) and your core values will help you map out the second half (your present and your future).

How the Core Values Exercise Can Help You Write Your Life

Let me emphasize something: the process of writing your personal statement is more than just reporting on the facts of your life—you're actually assigning them meaning in the larger context of your life. As one of my students told me recently as she was finishing her essays, “I feel like this process has helped me realize the importance of everything I've experienced.”

And check it out: this process can help you understand not only your past, but also your future. Here's how:

Some people think of their career as the end goal, their answer to the question, "What are your dreams and aspirations?" But I believe that thinking is flawed.

Why? I believe your career (doctor, lawyer, sports trainer, and so on) isn't actually your end goal. Instead, I think your career is the means by which you will experience and express your values. In other words:

Your values *are* your dreams and aspirations.

An example from my life: my goal in life is not to be the College Essay Guy, but to help people connect more deeply with themselves, realize that it's okay to be vulnerable, and tell the stories of their lives in ways that can be useful and empowering. The College Essay Guy just happens to be my current platform, the way I'm manifesting these values in the world right now.

That's why it's so important to begin identifying your core values. Understanding your core values can give you some criteria for judging what your priorities are and what it might take for you to find happiness—both in work and in life.

So if you skipped the Core Values Exercise on page 8, go back and do it!

The question to consider when writing your essay is: Should you focus on a single overarching value or a wide variety of your core values? Should you focus on a single essence object or several? That depends on which structure you choose.