

# The College Essay Guy's

## *Using the Secrets of Screenwriting to Write Your College Essay*



### **Who is *The College Essay Guy*?**

**Ethan Sawyer** has worked for the past nine years as an SAT Critical Reading and Writing instructor, curriculum writer, and college application specialist. He received his BS in Speech in Northwestern, his MFA from UC Irvine, and in 2013 will receive his Certificate in College Consulting, also from UC Irvine. Ethan's interests are varied and in the past he has worked as a voice actor, grant writer, theater director, motivational speaker, community organizer and truck driver. He is a member of the National Association of College Admissions Counselors (NACAC) and the Western Association of College Admissions Counselors (WACAC). Learn more here: [www.thecollegeessayguy.com](http://www.thecollegeessayguy.com)

### **Upcoming presentations/workshops in 2013:**

- April: NACAC College Fair – Pasadena
- May: WACAC – Orange County
- September: NACAC – Toronto (anticipated)

### **I'd love to hear from you!**

I'm always interested in connecting with colleagues. If you have questions, ideas for collaboration or simply want to "geek-out" on college essays, email me!


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# Essence Objects Exercise

*For an audio recording of this exercise please visit:*  
<http://www.thecollegeessayguy.com/#!/brainstorm/c33b>

A large, empty rectangular box with a thin black border, intended for the student to write their response to the exercise.

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# what do I value?

- |   |  |  |
|---|--|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> community            | <input type="checkbox"/> inspiration           | <input type="checkbox"/> money           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intellectual status  | <input type="checkbox"/> financial gain        | <input type="checkbox"/> laughter        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> serenity             | <input type="checkbox"/> physical challenge    | <input type="checkbox"/> responsibility  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> competition          | <input type="checkbox"/> career                | <input type="checkbox"/> fame            |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> working alone        | <input type="checkbox"/> humility              | <input type="checkbox"/> efficiency      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> intensity            | <input type="checkbox"/> health and fitness    | <input type="checkbox"/> meaningful work |
| <input type="checkbox"/> my country           | <input type="checkbox"/> music                 | <input type="checkbox"/> truth           |
| <input type="checkbox"/> resourcefulness      | <input type="checkbox"/> challenges            | <input type="checkbox"/> commitment      |
| <input type="checkbox"/> leadership           | <input type="checkbox"/> helping others        | <input type="checkbox"/> influence       |
| <input type="checkbox"/> wit                  | <input type="checkbox"/> success               | <input type="checkbox"/> patience        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> listening            | <input type="checkbox"/> diversity             | <input type="checkbox"/> love            |
| <input type="checkbox"/> fast-paced work      | <input type="checkbox"/> nutrition             | <input type="checkbox"/> competence      |
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| <input type="checkbox"/> collaboration        | <input type="checkbox"/> social change         | <input type="checkbox"/> beauty          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> ecological awareness | <input type="checkbox"/> quality relationships | <input type="checkbox"/> travel          |
| <input type="checkbox"/> decisiveness         | <input type="checkbox"/> curiosity             | <input type="checkbox"/> spirituality    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> loyalty              | <input type="checkbox"/> honesty               | <input type="checkbox"/> independence    |
| <input type="checkbox"/> supervising others   | <input type="checkbox"/> recognition           | <input type="checkbox"/> accountability  |
| <input type="checkbox"/> democracy            | <input type="checkbox"/> close relationships   | <input type="checkbox"/> religion        |
| <input type="checkbox"/> respect              | <input type="checkbox"/> bravery               | <input type="checkbox"/> communication   |
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## Four Types of College Essays

<p><b>A</b></p> <p>Student <u>has</u> faced significant challenges and <u>knows</u> what s/he wants to study</p>	<p><b>B</b></p> <p>Student <u>has not</u> faced significant challenges, but <u>does know</u> what s/he wants to study</p>
<p><b>C</b></p> <p>Student <u>has</u> faced significant challenges but <u>does not know</u> what s/he wants to study</p>	<p><b>D</b></p> <p>Student <u>has not</u> faced significant challenges and <u>does not know</u> what s/he wants to study</p>

**Key: Each student should be treated differently and each requires different approaches for the essay. For an example of how to help Type A students, for example, see next page.**

Some important things to note:

First and foremost I am an artist and a writer who believes that people cannot be generally reduced to “types,” so I acknowledge that grouping students into categories can feel highly reductive. On the other hand, different students require different strategies and grouping the strategies into these four categories helps. (So if it pains you to think of yourself or the student you’re working with as a type of student, just think of these as different types of strategies, which may apply to different student.)

It’s also important to note that these categories are fluid and it is entirely possible for a student to move from one to another. A student who has faced significant challenges but does not know what s/he wants to study (Category C), for example, may discover, through a process of research or counseling, what s/he would like to study and so move to Category A.

Similarly, a student who has not faced significant challenges and does not know what s/he wants to study (Category D) may discover, through self-reflection or counseling, that s/he has indeed faced significant challenges, and so move to Category C, therefore finding the strategies described in the third section to be more useful.

**Note:** There is of course no surefire approach for essay writing. No essay will, on its own, get a student into a college. Many different students are accepted to colleges each year with many different types of essays. Having said that, the task of the college essay is to shape the student’s life into a coherent narrative. What follows are some strategies that have helped some of my students do just that.

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## **Sample Essay A: “With Debate” Essay**

***Written by a student who has faced significant challenges and did know what she wanted to study***

The clock was remarkably slow as I sat, legs tightly crossed, squirming at my desk. “Just raise your hand,” my mind pleaded, “ask.” But despite my urgent need to visit the restroom, I remained seated, begging time to move faster. You see, I was that type of kid to eat French Fries dry because I couldn’t confront the McDonalds cashier for some Heinz packets. I was also the type to sit crying in front of school instead of asking the office if it could check on my late ride. Essentially, I chose to struggle through a problem if the solution involved speaking out against it.

My diffidence was frustrating. My parents relied on me, the only one able to speak English, to guide them, and always anticipated the best from me. However, as calls for help grew, the more defunct I became. I felt that every move I made, it was a gamble between success and failure. For me, the fear of failure and disappointment far outweighed the possibility of triumph, so I took no action and chose to silently suffer under pressure.

Near meltdown, I knew something needed to be done. Mustering up the little courage I had, I sought ways to break out of my shell—without luck. Recreational art classes ended in three boring months. I gave up Self Defense after embarrassing myself in class. After-school band, library volunteering, and book clubs ended similarly. Continued effort yielded nothing.

Disillusioned and wrung dry of ideas, I followed my mom’s advice and joined a debate club. As expected, the club only reaffirmed my self-doubt. Eye contact? Greater volume? No thanks.

But soon, the club moved on from “how to make a speech” lessons to the exploration of argumentation. We were taught to speak the language of Persuasion, and play the game of Debate. Eventually, I fell in love with it all.

By high school, I joined the school debate team, began socializing, and was even elected to head several clubs. I developed critical and analytical thinking skills, and learned how to think and speak spontaneously.

I became proud and confident. Moreover, I became eager to play my role in the family, and family relations strengthened. In fact, nowadays, my parents are interested in my school’s newest gossip.

Four years with debate, and now I’m the kid up at the white board; the kid leading discussions; and the kid standing up for her beliefs.

More importantly, I now confront issues instead of avoiding them. It is exciting to discover solutions to problems that affect others, as I was able to do as part of the 1st Place team for the 2010 United Nations Global Debates Program on climate change and poverty. I take a natural interest in global issues, and plan to become a foreign affairs analyst or diplomat by studying international affairs with a focus on national identity.

In particular, I am interested in the North-South Korean tension. What irreconcilable differences have prompted a civilization to separate? Policy implications remain vague, and sovereignty theories have their limits—how do we determine what compromises are to be made? And on a personal level, why did my grandfather have to flee from his destroyed North Korean hometown—and why does it matter?

I see a reflection of myself in the divide at the 38th parallel because I see one part isolating itself in defense to outside threats, and another part coming out to face the world as one of the fastest- developing nations. Just as my shy persona before debate and extroverted character after debate are both part of who I am, the Korean civilization is also one. And just as my parents expect much from me, the first of my family to attend college, I have grand expectations for this field of study.

## Sample Essay B: “Endodontics” Essay

***Written by a student who has not faced significant challenges but did know what he wanted to study***

As a kid I was always curious. I was unafraid to ask questions and didn't worry how dumb they would make me sound. In second grade I enrolled in a summer science program and built a solar-powered oven that baked real cookies. I remember obsessing over the smallest details: Should I paint the oven black to absorb more heat? What about its shape? A spherical shape would allow for more volume, but would it trap heat as well as conventional rectangular ovens? Even then I was obsessed with the details of design.

And it didn't stop in second grade.

A few years later I designed my first pair of shoes, working for hours to perfect each detail, including whether the laces should be mineral white or diamond white. Even then I sensed that minor differences in tonality could make a huge impact and that different colors could evoke different responses.

In high school I moved on to more advanced projects, teaching myself how to take apart, repair, and customize cell phones. Whether I was adjusting the flex cords that connect the IPS LCD to the iPhone motherboard, or replacing the vibrator motor, I loved discovering the many engineering feats Apple overcame in its efforts to combine form with function.

And once I obtained my driver's license, I began working on cars. Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.

My love of details applies to my schoolwork too.

I'm the math geek who marvels at the fundamental theorems of Calculus, or who sees beauty in  $A=(s(s-a)(s-b)(s-c))^{1/2}$ . Again, it's in the details: one bracket off or one digit missing and the whole equation collapses. And details are more than details, they can mean the difference between negative and positive infinity, an impossible range of solutions.

I also love sharing this appreciation with others and have taken it upon myself to personally eradicate mathonumophobiconfundosis, my Calculus teacher's term for “extreme fear of Math.” A small group of other students and I have devoted our after-school time to tutoring our peers in everything from Pre-Algebra to AP Calculus B/C and I believe my fluency in Hebrew and Farsi has helped me connect with some of my school's Israeli and Iranian students. There's nothing better than seeing a student solve a difficult problem without me saying anything.

You probably think I want to be a designer. Or perhaps an engineer?

Wrong. Well, kind of.

Actually, I want to study Endodontics, which is (I'll save you the Wikipedia look-up) a branch of dentistry that deals with the tooth pulp and the tissues surrounding the root of a tooth. As an Endodontist, I'll be working to repair damaged teeth by performing precision root canals and implementing dental crowns. Sound exciting? It is to me.

The fact is, it's not unlike the work I've been doing repairing cellphone circuits and modifying cars, though there is one small difference. In the future I'll still be working to repair machines, but this machine is one of the most sophisticated machines ever created: the human body. Here, my obsession with details will be as crucial as ever. A one millimeter difference can mean the difference between a successful root canal and a lawsuit.

The question is: will the toothbrushes I hand out be mineral white or diamond white?

**Sample Essay C: The “Raising Anthony” Essay**  
***Written by a student who did face challenges, but did not know what she wanted to study.***

At age three, I was separated from my mother. The court gave full custody of both my baby brother and me to my father. Of course, at my young age, I had no clue what was going on. However, it did not take me long to realize that life with my father would not be without its difficulties.

My brother, Anthony, was eleven months old when my father placed us in the hands of our first babysitter. I remember being confused at first, wondering where my father had gone and when he would be back, but after a while, I became accustomed to this routine of absence and the never ending babysitters that filled in for him. These strangers consisted of college students, chain-smokers, senile women, and foreigners—all were technically adults, but not one was a suitable substitute for a parent. When my father was home, he still seemed absent; he was distant both physically and emotionally. He was busy bouncing from one girlfriend to the next, sleeping in until 1:30 in the afternoon, and sitting on the couch watching television. He took us out to restaurants every night and wasted the money he earned on expensive dinners, his current girlfriend, and liquor. This continued for ten years.

Legally, we had all the necessities to survive, but in truth our home was devoid of structure. Schoolwork went unchecked. Bedtimes were unregulated. Dust accumulated in thick layers on the paperwork that overflowed on the dining table. Often times, Anthony and I would spend hours waiting at school for someone to pick us up, and most of our dinners were served well past eleven at night.

Consequentially, and quite unwittingly, I shed my childhood and assumed the role of “parent” for Anthony before my seventh birthday. I memorized the routes we took to school and led Anthony home myself. I watched professional chefs on PBS and learned how to cook basic meals for two. Unfortunately, as I progressively developed into the parent, Anthony took advantage of our lack of true authority and grew into the epitome of a problem child. He became unruly, and his behavior soon bled into his school life. His grades suffered and he seemed to act out more often. His rash temper continued to grow until one day the school called our home because he had tried to throw a chair at his teacher.

Anthony was the only kindergartner in our school's history to be suspended. The school counselor recommended that when my father was in town we attend therapy as a family. But that accomplished nothing—my father's initial attempts to implement authority devolved quickly into apathy, and then he was traveling again. I, on the other hand, would not give up so easily. I became the watchful eye and mentor that Anthony and I both needed. I soaked in the parenting videos that our family counselor had given my dad. I explained to Anthony why a structured lifestyle is important and why retribution is needed for one's misdeeds. To further instill self-discipline in him, I would have him formulate his own penalties. I also began to follow up on his schoolwork by contacting his teachers. On one particularly hopeful afternoon I even tried to introduce him to books that I had read— but I learned I can't win every battle. I wasn't satisfied with just giving a fish to my little brother; I wanted to teach him how to cast lines himself and learn the tools of self-reliance. Looking back at my hectic childhood, I am grateful for the insight it afforded me, and I am grateful for the effect my little brother had on me.

Inadvertently, by raising Anthony I ended up raising myself. Living with my unreliable father and reliant younger brother gave me the need and incentive to find myself and to mature quickly. At a very early age I became resourceful, independent, and responsible. It makes me proud to know that I single-handedly raised Anthony and myself. I now know that I can face any challenge with confidence. Even if I don't succeed, I know I will be stronger just for trying.

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## **Sample Essay D: The “Five Families” Essay** ***By a student who did not face challenges, and did not know what he wanted to study.***

When I was 16, I lived with the Watkins family in Wichita, Kansas. Mrs. Watkins was the coordinator of the foreign exchange student program I was enrolled in. She had a nine-year-old son named Cody. I would babysit Cody every day after school for at least two to three hours. We would play Scrabble or he would read to me from *Charlotte’s Web* or *The Ugly Duckling*. He would talk a lot about his friends and school life, and I would listen to him and ask him the meanings of certain words. He was my first friend in the New World.

My second family was the Martinez family, who were friends of the Watkins’s. The host dad Michael was a high school English teacher and the host mom Jennifer (who had me call her “Jen”) taught elementary school. She had recently delivered a baby, so she was still in the hospital when I moved into their house. The Martinez family did almost everything together. We made pizza together, watched Shrek on their cozy couch together, and went fishing on Sunday together. On rainy days, Michael, Jen and I would sit on the porch and listen to the rain, talking about our dreams and thoughts. Within two months I was calling them mom and dad.

After I finished the exchange student program, I had the option of returning to Korea but I decided to stay in America. I wanted to see new places and meet different people. Since I wasn’t an exchange student anymore, I had the freedom--and burden--of finding a new school and host family on my own. After a few days of thorough investigation, I found the Struiksma family in California. They were a unique group.

The host mom Shellie was a single mom who had two of her own sons and two Russian daughters that she had adopted. The kids always had something warm to eat, and were always on their best behavior at home and in school. It would be fair to say that this was all due to Shellie’s upbringing. My room was on the first floor, right in front of Shellie’s hair salon, a small business that she ran out of her home. In the living room were six or seven huge amplifiers and a gigantic chandelier hung from the high ceiling. The kitchen had a bar. At first, the non-stop visits from strangers made me nervous, but soon I got used to them. I remember one night, a couple barged into my room while I was sleeping. It was awkward.

After a few months I realized we weren’t the best fit. In the nicest way possible, I told them I had to leave. They understood.

The Ortiz family was my fourth family. Kimberly, the host mom, treated me the same way she treated her own son. She made me do chores: I fixed dinner, fed their two dogs Sassy and Lady, and once a week I cleaned the bathroom. I also had to follow some rules: No food in my room, no using the family computer, no lights on after midnight, and no ride unless it was an emergency. The first couple of months were really hard to get used to, but eventually I adjusted.

I lived with the Ortiz family for seven months like a monk in the deep forest. However, the host dad Greg’s asthma got worse after winter, so he wanted to move to the countryside. It was unexpected and I only had a week to find a new host family. I asked my friend Danielle if I could live with her until I found a new home. That’s how I met the Dirksen family, my fifth family.

The Dirksen family had three kids. They were all different. Danielle liked bitter black coffee, Christian liked energy drinks, and Becca liked sweet lemon tea. Dawn, the host mom didn’t like winter, and Mark, the host dad, didn’t like summer. After dinner, we would all play Wii Sports together. I was the king of bowling, and Dawn was the queen of tennis. I don’t remember a single time that they argued about the games. Afterward, we would gather in the living room and Danielle would play the piano while the rest of us sang hymns.

Of course, those 28 months were too short to fully understand all five families, but I learned from and was shaped by each of them. By teaching me English, nine year-old Cody taught me the importance of being able to learn from anyone; the Martinez family showed me the value of spending time together as a family; the Struiksma family taught me to reserve judgment about divorced women and adopted children; Mrs. Ortiz taught me the value of discipline and the Dirksen family taught me the importance of appreciating one another’s different qualities.

Getting along with other people is necessary for anyone and living with five families has made me more sensitive to others’ needs: I have learned how to recognize when someone needs to talk, when I should give advice and when to simply listen, and when someone needs to be left alone; in the process, I have become much more adaptable. I’m ready to change, learn, and be shaped by my future families.

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