ACADEMIC ELIGIBILITY

LESSON 11-16 ▲ PREPARING FOR THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY

**LEARNING GOALS/OUTCOMES**

* List the attributes of an effective college application essay.
* Evaluate college application essay examples for strengths and weaknesses.
* Create an outline for their college application essay.

**MATERIALS NEEDED**

* **Student Handouts:**
* College Application Essay Worksheet
* Sample Essays and Hooks
* Journal Page

**CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES**

1. **Students share post-secondary goals with a group.** Divide students into small groups. Ask each student to share their current post-secondary goal. After each student has shared their goal, ask students to go around the group again, having each student share one tangible thing they have done to prepare for this post-secondary goal (for example, they have visited a college, completed a post-secondary entrance exam, satisfied a prerequisite for their post-secondary program, etc.).
2. **Students summarize their status with respect to post-secondary preparation.** Call students back together after a few minutes and ask them to rate their own level of post-secondary preparation as low, medium, or high. Encourage students to all work to a high level of readiness.
3. **Students** **list the attributes of an effective college application essay.** Explain that for any students planning on four-year college (and for many students on the two-year college and CTE paths as well), one of the major parts of the application process will be writing an application essay. Students seeking financial aid may also have to complete scholarship application essays. Tell students that every college has a slightly different question students must answer in their essay, but all of the questions are designed to do one thing: give students an opportunity to introduce themselves to the college’s admissions officers and explain why they should be accepted to that college. Ask students to define the attributes of an effective college application essay. Write their ideas on the board and note common themes.

Distribute the *College Application Essay Worksheet*. Quickly review the first page, comparing the handout’s tips on an effective essay to the attributes students identified.

Note that you may want to work in cooperation with your school’s Language Arts department to extend this lesson.

1. **Students evaluate college application essay examples for strengths and weaknesses.** Have students return to their small groups. Give each student the *Sample Essays and Hooks* Handout (which contains two complete essays and a number of first paragraph “hooks”). Ask students to read one of the essay questions and the sample essay response, and then discuss it with their small group. Ask students to rate the essay against each of the tips from the handout. Students should discuss why the sample essay is effective and how they could create an essay that would be effective. Groups that have extra time should discuss the first paragraph hooks that are provided, discussing how they might start an essay in answer to each question. Call students together and ask for volunteers to discuss each of the essays and their group’s analysis of that essay
2. **Students create an outline for their college application essay.** After the group discussion, ask students to return to their seats and turn to the second page of the *College Application Essay Worksheet*. Ask students to use the questions on the handout as prompts to help them develop an outline for a college application essay. They should keep in mind both the tips from the first page of the handout, as well as the successful strategies they analyzed in the essays and hooks they read. Above all, they should think of examples from their own life to share as part of the essay.
3. **Students identify personal strengths and weaknesses in writing the college essay.** Ask students to write answers to the following questions on their *Journal Page*.
   * Which of the tips for writing a good college essay is easiest for you? What others do you find quite easy to do?
   * Which of the tips for writing a good college essay will be your greatest challenge? What others will require your extra attention?

**STUDENT PRODUCTS**

* **Completed *College Application Essay***
* **Completed *Journal Page*** on personal strengths and weaknesses anticipated for writing the college essay

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LESSON 11-16 STUDENT HANDOUT

COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY WORKSHEET

The college admission essay is one of the most important parts of the college application process. Nearly every college expects a personal essay to help them learn more about you. You have two primary goals for the college essay: first, to demonstrate your quality thinking and writing skills, and second, to show an admissions officer that you are an interesting personality. Here are six tips to help you.

**TIP 1: ANSWER THE QUESTION**

Make sure your response answers the question posed by the college. You can be disqualified simply because you missed the point.

**TIP 2: FIND A FOCUS**

A college application essay is not a resume. That means it shouldn’t just be a long list of all the things you’ve done or all the awards you’ve earned. Instead, choose just a few interesting points to focus on, ones that show the kind of person you are, and then build your essay around these points. For example, if you are writing about a sports experience, don’t list all the positions you’ve played or all the teams you’ve joined. Instead, focus on how you built your skills after recovering from an injury, or how a coach or teammate inspired you to do your best.

**TIP 3: START WITH A HOOK**

Once you choose a focus, find a good, engaging story to start your essay. You want an interesting “hook” to capture your readers’ attention and make them want to read more. Spend most of your time on the introduction, as it must grab the reader’s attention.

**TIP 4: LET YOUR PERSONALITY SHOW**

Don’t be tempted to make your essay sound like you think the college expects it to sound. Instead, let your own interests and personality shine through. Be original. Choose a focus for your essay that is important to you and that reflects who you are. Use examples from your own experiences to illustrate your main points.

**TIP 5: CONNECT THE ESSAY TO THE COLLEGE**

It’s not necessary to connect your essay’s focus to the college you’re applying to: after all, the essay should be about you. But, it doesn’t hurt to connect your interests to the college. For instance, if you’re applying to a college because of its strong marine biology program – and you’ve spent the last two summers doing research on tide pools – your essay is a great opportunity to make the connection. If you do refer to the college in your essay, however, make sure to do your research: don’t refer to a major the college doesn’t offer, don’t misspell or mistake the college mascot, and don’t try to reuse an essay you wrote for a different college without checking it carefully first.

**TIP 6: PROOFREAD CAREFULLY**

Your essay is your chance to market yourself. Make sure you present a good impression. Carefully proofread your essay for spelling, punctuation, and grammar. Ask a friend or teacher to proofread it for you. Check it one last time before you send it.

**GET STARTED ON YOUR ESSAY**

Use the space below to develop an outline for a college application essay. A common question would be: “*Please submit a brief essay, either personal or creative, which you feel best describes you.”*Complete the essay on a home or school computer.

**Focus** *(What is the question you are answering?)*

**Hook** *(How can you start your essay in a way that will interest your readers?)*

**Supporting Details** *(Remember that these should be about YOU!)*

**Connection to college or program** *(How do the experiences you’ve described relate to what you hope to accomplish in college? Why this college rather than somewhere else?)*

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SAMPLE ESSAYS AND HOOKS

**SAMPLE ESSAYS**

**ESSAY 1: Discuss the significance to you of the activity in which you have been most involved.**

On any crisp Monday morning in October, I can be found marching into my school just as the first rays of dawn crawl across the morning sky. Before any buses, before most students, and even before some staff, I come to school. I come because I am committed to bettering my school each week, and it all starts at the Monday Associated Student Body (ASB) council meeting for executive officers. ASB has become my life the past two school years, first as ASB Vice President and now as President.

ASB has defined me as a person. It has helped me figure out what values are central to the person that I am today. One of those key values is leaving every place better than the way I found it. ASB has become the medium that I use to conduct this belief throughout my school. Over the past few years the morale at my school has been steadily decreasing, possibly due to the increasing pressure and stress to take more challenging academic courses. Students these days just do not have the energy or time to attend after school functions and form unity as a school. So last year as Vice President the ASB officers and I set a goal to change the spirit and mood at my school into a fun, positive, common bonding experience. We did this by implementing a weekly entertaining and informative Friday video announcement. Thus the *NC News* was born. A huge success, *NC News* has become part of our school culture. Every Friday starts off on a light-hearted note in an all too serious academic atmosphere. The *NC News* also gives every student and teacher a common experience in which all can relate. They often approach me throughout the week exclaiming that they look forward to Friday to watch the *NC News*. When we miss a week due to unforeseen circumstances, my peers constantly ask questions to make sure that it will be back and running the following week. The student body does not just watch the news; they become a part of it, raising their spirits and the overall morale of the school.

As a result of ASB, I have seen the return on the investment of taking risks. One of the rewarding risks I have taken has been speaking in front of the whole school either through the morning announcements, *NC News*, or assemblies. Before I was involved in ASB, outgoing would not be a word used to characterize me. Through the experiences provided by ASB, I have gained confidence and am more willing to take a risk to put myself out for all to see. I have taken this new trait and applied it to life outside of ASB. I applied to the Legislative Youth Advisory Council without knowing a single person involved. At the first meeting, I walked into a room 300 miles away from home and debated about policy and the issues most important to youth

with people I have never met before. I also have contacted state legislators and worked with them on these issues. This practical experience for a career in the government would never have been possible without the courage that ASB instilled in me.

Because of ASB, every day I make an effort to form a relationship with someone new (typically someone I wouldn’t have talked to before ASB) in order to connect with my student population. When walking through the halls, I often hear “Hi Zack!” from every direction, thus I know that my goal is being achieved. Through this effort, I have learned a great deal from talking to a plethora of peers. For instance, from Binh, a foreign exchange student, I learned that life in Vietnam is, at times, a polar opposite than life in the US. From Cameron, I learned how demoralizing it is to work hard and be a member of a football team that didn’t come close to winning a game this season. And from Galen I found out that some students who skateboard actually have sponsors and compete. I have come to find that the students and staff at my school all have interesting stories; they have widened my view on life. This view would never have been fostered without the aid of ASB.

As ASB President I am a role model, most of the time without even realizing it. Just last week, I was walking next to two students who were worrying that they were running late to class. When one of them saw me he said, “Oh I’m not late, this kid would never be late.” From this it dawned on me how pervasive the need is for me to always conduct myself responsibly. The mentality at my school seems to be that the ASB President always acts ideally. Even though this seems too often ignored, this mentality is not too different than the standards society holds of elected officials in America to not cheat, lie, or steal. Now everything I do I keep in mind that someone may be watching, waiting to follow my lead. That is why I no longer cut in the lunch line.

ASB has changed my life. By setting goals and learning from them, trying innovative ideas, taking risks, building relationships with new people and learning how to use time wisely, I have grown as a person through this constantly changing activity. It has not always been easy. Sometimes I fail, and other times I succeed. But through it all, ASB has been the primary way for me to give to my school. Without it I would not be the same person I am today. In the process of redefining ASB, it has defined me.

**ESSAY 2: Please submit a brief essay, either personal or creative, which you feel best describes you.**

*Passionate.* If I choose one word to describe myself it would be *passionate.* I have often heard my mother tell me, “Jeez Zack. You don’t have to obsess about it.” Everything I do, I do with a passion. Whether I am studying for classes, practicing for sports, advising the school board, working with the state legislature, to family, to friends, I pour my heart into it. It almost seems that I have always been this way, but looking back throughout my life I can see how my passion has progressed.

One of my first memories of this progression starts with the 2002 Winter Olympics. When I was younger and watching the opening ceremony, taking in all the fireworks, the hard work, the excitement, and the unity of the world, the Olympic motto - “Light the fire within” - struck a chord. This motto completely filled my mind for the next two weeks. All I wanted to do was watch the Olympics, root for America, and dream about tomorrow. I saw the reward of working hard and following after one’s dreams. The fire had been

ignited.

The next stage of my fervor took place my sophomore year in AP World History. My teacher showed passion in her teaching, getting so worked up in debates that sometimes she would start jumping around the classroom. She made class exciting. We traveled through time on a retreat to a Japanese tea house. We were merchants in the Indian Ocean trade system, and we were Members of Parliament, arguing just like the British House of Commons. History came alive. I felt like my teacher was Ms. Frizzle with her Magic School Bus. Never before had history had so much meaning to me. Never before had I seen how history influenced my present. Never before had I realized history had so much depth to discover. I had a newfound interest in history and governance. It was this passion of hers that inspired me to take this enthusiasm and run with it. That year I spent an abundant amount of time working for that class, ultimately achieving my goal of earning a 5 on the AP test.

The latest turn in this path of ongoing passion developed with the current presidential election. This time in my life has been different; I am more focused than ever before on one interest. I have taken my passion and enthusiasm and turned them into action. While I now talk about politics and policy often with people that never cared before, I have not just stopped there. I have canvassed neighborhoods, registered friends and family to vote, attended debates, and cheered at rallies for candidates. Often time I pull other people around me into one of these activities with my enthusiasm. Nothing feels better than taking action. What is the benefit of having great ideas if one does nothing with them? Nothing at all. I want to take dreams, pour my heart into them, get more people involved and make a difference. There will be many more opportunities in the future when I can do this. I cannot wait for them; at this point in my life, my passion is spilling over into action and into the future.

Of course, one word doesn’t really give the full picture of me. I am funny and friendly. I am witty and wishful. Sometimes I fail, but I always continue to fight on. I am tactful, tolerant, and tough. I am open-minded. I love my family. I love to learn more about the world around me. I am humble and have a hunger to discover more. I have enthusiasm. I am passionate.

**SAMPLE HOOKS**

**Leadership/group contributions: Describe examples of your leadership experience and share how you have significantly influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time. Consider responsibilities you have taken for initiatives in or out of school.**

As a captain of my high school soccer team, I help resolve issues on and off the field. There are always disputes on the playing field and it is mostly the captain's job to resolve those. Captains are also viewed as leaders and role models for younger players. I make sure to work harder than everyone else at practice, so the rest of the team will want to work harder for themselves and for the good of the team.

**Knowledge or creativity in a field:** **Describe any of your special interests and how you have developed knowledge in these areas. Give examples of your creativity: the ability to see alternatives; take diverse perspectives; come up with many, varied, or original ideas; or willingness to try new things.**

Football has been one of my most enjoyable interests in the last two years. I had always wanted to play football but just never got around to it. I tried out my junior year and was the kicker for my high school team. I was bored with just kicking, so for my senior year I decided to play on defense. It was a big change from kicking but I really enjoyed it. I never thought I would be able to fit football into my already busy schedule but it was one of the best decisions I could make.

**Dealing with adversity: Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to address this challenge. Include whether you turned to anyone in facing that challenge, the role that person played, and what you learned about yourself.**

One of the most difficult challenges I have faced is trying to balance football, soccer, and homework with my busy schedule. I take a lot of AP classes so we have quite a bit of homework every night. Football and club soccer also are in season during the same time. Having done this the last 2 years, I have been very successful with keeping up with the work. Some nights I'm out late but I still make sure I do all of my homework and get enough sleep to be able to do it all over again the next day.

**Community service:** **Explain what you have done to make your community a better place to live. Give examples of specific projects in which you have been involved over time.**

This past winter I volunteered with a program called TOPS Soccer. This program teaches children with various mental and physical disabilities how to play soccer. I volunteered once a week and was a mentor to a child with Down Syndrome. I also have multiple hours of volunteering from St. Luke's Rehabilitation day, West Central Community Carnival, and multiple soccer camps.

**Handling systemic challenges:** **Describe your experiences facing or witnessing discrimination. Tell us how you responded and what you learned from those experiences and how they prepared you to contribute to the WSU community.**

Playing in the sport of soccer, my team encounters a lot of players of the Hispanic heritage. We travel to a lot of towns like Tri-Cities and Walla Walla where the population is largely Hispanic. There are a few kids that like to poke fun at the players on the other teams. Even though I know they are joking, I'm sure that the players on the other team don't find it funny. Whenever I hear this happening, I say something to stop the inappropriate comments. It has really taught me to act more mature in childish situations.

**Goals/task commitment:** **Articulate the goals you have established for yourself and your efforts to accomplish them. Give at least one specific example that demonstrates your work ethic/diligence.**

During my freshman year of high school, I did not take school very seriously. I did just what was necessary to get decent grades and not have to apply myself too much. But as my sophomore year came around, I decided I needed to change something in order to go to the college I wanted to attend. I set a goal of achieving a 3.5 G.P.A or better throughout the remainder of high school. I began to work hard, apply myself, and do my best work. I have stayed true to my goal and not slipped once.

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JOURNAL PAGE

**DATE:**

**Lesson 11-16 | *PREPARING FOR THE COLLEGE APPLICATION ESSAY***

***Q1:*** Which of the tips for writing a good college essay is easiest for you? What others do you find easy to do?

***Q2:*** Which of the tips for writing a good college essay will be your greatest challenge? What others will require your extra attention?

***Answers:***