

Writing the Essay II

The **BIG** Idea

- Which personal strengths do I want to highlight in my essay, and what experience reflects these strengths?

AGENDA

Approx. 45 minutes

- I. Free Form Writing: It's All About You (10 minutes)
- II. Your Best Qualities and How You Show Them (10 minutes)
- III. Sample Essays (10 minutes)
- IV. Selecting One Event — A Character Snapshot (10 minutes)
- V. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

MATERIALS

☐ STUDENT HANDBOOK PAGES:

- Student Handbook pages 16-21, Sample Essays II
- Student Handbook page 22, All About Me
- Student Handbook pages 23-24, My Main Strengths
- Student Handbook page 25, Homework: My Character Snapshot

☐ FACILITATOR PAGES:

- Facilitator Resource 1, Sample Character Snapshot
- ☐ Overhead and LCD projector

OBJECTIVES

During this lesson, the student(s) will:

- Identify personal strengths that can be demonstrated in an essay.
- Brainstorm life experiences that support each of those strengths.
- Choose one or two personal characteristics that could be developed into an essay.

OVERVIEW

This is the second week in the essay-writing unit. In this lesson, students will identify their own personal strength(s) and evidence of how they show that strength in their own life. They'll also discuss how an effective essay focuses on a single event or experience. Their assignment for the next lesson will be to identify a single experience in their own lives that reflects the strength(s) they selected. This experience will be the topic for their essay.

PREPARATION

- List the day's **BIG IDEA** and activities on the board.
- The following handouts need to be made into overhead transparencies or copied onto chart paper:
 - **Student Handbook pages 16-21, Sample Essays II**
 - **Student Handbook page 22, All About Me**
 - **Student Handbook pages 23-24, My Main Strengths**
 - **Student Handbook page 25, Homework: My Character Snapshot**

IMPLEMENTATION OPTIONS

To permit more time for self-reflection, you could begin the lesson with the free-form writing activity, **Student Handbook page 22, All About Me**, as the DO NOW activity.

ACTIVITY STEPS

I. Free Form Writing: It's All About You (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Today, we're going to address the first concern of essay writers everywhere: what to write about. You're going to do some personal reflection – not just about your best qualities, but also examples of how you've demonstrated these qualities at important points in your life. By the end of the lesson, you'll select one or two strengths that you can highlight in your essay. What positive qualities should you focus on? That's not always an easy question. Before we try to identify what those are, you're going to take a few minutes to reflect on who you are and what's important to you.
2. [Have students turn to their **Student Handbook page 22, All About Me**. Give them about five minutes to participate in this free form writing activity in which they brainstorm words and phrases about themselves — their personality, beliefs, goals, experiences, and proudest accomplishments. Remind them there are no rules and no one will read this. Just encourage them to dig deep and be honest!]
3. [After five minutes, ask students to take a few minutes to look over what they wrote. As they do, circle things they think best describe or define who they are and cross out things that don't reflect their true selves.]

II. Your Best Qualities And How You Show Them (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now that you've spent some time thinking about yourself, you're going to take a few minutes to identify the qualities or strengths that best describe you.
2. [Have students turn to **Student Handbook pages 23-24, My Main Strengths**.]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** First, you're going to look through this list and check the top three to five qualities that describe you best. You can also add qualities to the list. As you work on this, it might help to refer to the **All About Me** page for inspiration and ideas.
4. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Next, I'd like you to list at least two examples from your life that reflect each quality, writing these in the "Evidence" column. For example, if you checked "compassionate," how do you show this in your life? Do you devote time to helping others, like working in a soup kitchen or tutoring? If you're "confident," describe how you've handled a tough situation. If you checked "persistent," think of times when you've stuck with a task or job even though it was difficult. Or if you think you're "open-minded," how have you shown that you're open to new people, experiences, or ideas?

Also, try to be specific in your evidence. For example, for evidence of “risk taking” you wouldn’t write, “likes to try new things.” Instead, give a specific example, such as, “only guy to take dance freshman year.”

If you can’t provide good, honest evidence for a specific quality, don’t worry – that’s probably not a quality you want to highlight in your essay!

5. [Give students 10 minutes to complete the activity.]
6. [After doing this exercise, have students choose the one or two qualities they think best describe them and that they’d want an admissions committee to know about them. Then they should circle these qualities on their sheet.]

III. Sample Essays (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now let’s take a look at some sample essays and see how other students described their best qualities.

[Assign each student the number 1, 2, or 3. Explain they are to read this essay number in their **Student Handbook pages 16-21, Sample Essays II**. Students should read their assigned essay, describe what the essay’s about and place a check next to the paragraphs that support that theme or topic. Then they should describe the writer in their own words. What personal qualities can they infer from the essay?]

2. [Debrief the activity as a class, asking volunteers to share their answers from each of the three essays. Note that the writers of these essays have chosen very different topics, but each creates a memorable picture of the student. Remind students that an effective college essay focuses on one topic or theme, and that every paragraph should support that theme.]
3. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Like the college essay you just read, your essay should focus on one topic that highlights a positive personal quality. Remember, it doesn’t highlight *all* your positive qualities, just one or two.

IV. Selecting One Event — A Character Snapshot (10 minutes)

1. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Now that you’ve narrowed down one or two qualities you want to highlight in your essay, how do you know what to write about? Of course, the answer is going to be different for everyone, but the key is to describe a single event or experience from your life that reflects that quality. Think of it as a “character snapshot” — a glimpse of the person you really are. Imagine your essay as a photograph or a short video that will be viewed by an admissions counselor,

scholarship committee, or prospective employer. (It's your YouTube moment.) You want it to capture an experience that reflects a specific quality about yourself.

2. [On an overhead projector, display the **Facilitator Resource 1, Sample Character Snapshot**. Cover the final paragraph.]

SAY SOMETHING LIKE: Here's an example. [Read the story aloud.]

When I was in high school, I tutored my next-door neighbors in reading. They were two boys (second and third grade), great athletes (which I was not), and struggling in school. I really had no idea how to teach reading, but I was game to try. Reading can be a struggle when you're just learning how, and I thought my neighbors needed a better idea of all the adventures that awaited them between the covers of a book.

I was only 15, and I seldom had a chance to venture beyond my small town, about 45 minutes from the much-bigger city of Cleveland. Despite my lack of knowledge of the big, wide world, I decided that a trip to the city library downtown was just what we needed. I had never been there. And we'd have to travel by bus, something I'd only done once or twice before.

3. [Ask students how this brief event is a "character snapshot" of this person? What one or two qualities does this reflect? Then uncover the final paragraph, with this thought from the writer:

Looking back, I can't believe I took those two kids into the city by bus when I was just 15. I think this story reflects two qualities I still have today: my desire to educate kids and my determination — even in the face of fear!

4. [Point out that the story focused on a single event in the person's life. Have students look back at the qualities they circled on **Student Handbook pages 23-24, My Main Strengths**. What evidence reflects each of those qualities?]

V. Wrap Up (5 minutes)

1. [Have students turn to their **Student Handbook page 25, Homework: My Character Snapshot**. Explain that their assignment for next week is to choose an event or experience from their lives that reflects the qualities they chose. This will be their essay topic. This page offers suggestions if they get stuck thinking of a topic.]
2. **SAY SOMETHING LIKE:** Next week, you'll begin the process of turning your experience into a college essay. You'll brainstorm specific facts and details about the event, and start a rough draft. You'll also have a chance to get feedback from other students.

Sample Character Snapshot

When I was in high school, I tutored my next-door neighbors in reading. They were two boys (second and third grade), great athletes (which I was not), and struggling in school. I really had no idea how to teach reading, but I was game to try. Reading can be a struggle when you're just learning how, and I thought my neighbors needed a better idea of all the adventures that awaited them between the covers of a book.

I was only 15, and I seldom had a chance to venture beyond my small town, about 45 minutes from the much-bigger city of Cleveland. Despite my lack of knowledge of the big, wide world, I decided that a trip to the city library downtown was just what we needed. I had never been there. And we'd have to travel by bus, something I'd only done once or twice before.

Looking back, I can't believe I took those two kids into the city by bus when I was just 15. I think this story reflects two qualities I still have today: my desire to educate kids and my determination — even in the face of fear!

Sample Essays II

Directions: Read the essay you've been assigned, then answer the questions.

Essay #1

The legendary Sam Cooke once sang, "It's been a long time comin', but I know a change is gonna come," and he was exactly right. Last year at this time, I was strapping on shoulder pads under my dirt-and-bloodstained jersey and lacing up my metal spiked cleats. I was springing forward at the sound of "hike," wrapping 200-pound guys around the waist and slamming them to the ground. It was football season, and like every fall for as long as I could remember, I was looking for quarterbacks to crush.

But this year, things are different. Instead of shoulder pads, I am wearing padded shoulders. Instead of the bloodstained jersey, I am wearing a sparkling silver full-length dress. Instead of cleats, my shoes are size 14 sling-back high heels that match my dress. I've got a wig full of blonde curls and I'm practicing my curtsy. "What happened?" you might ask. The answer is simple. It was time for a change. After nine years of being one of the most feared middle linebackers in Pennsylvania, I decided to hang up my cleats and sign up for the school play.

I was always known as an athlete, but over the years I also built a reputation as a charismatic, outgoing individual — the type of kid who would be a natural on stage. The theater director kept asking me to sign up for the fall play. I kept resisting; fall was for football. I thought she would give up, but I was mistaken. During baseball season last spring, she turned up the heat: every game, in between every inning, she kept prying until eventually I cracked and agreed to do it.

She said I would play Joe. E. Brown, a movie star from the 40s, in a comedy called "Shakespeare in Hollywood." I thought, "All right, maybe this won't be so bad. At least I have a cool part." Little did I know that in this play, Joe E. Brown is forced to dress in drag. When I found this out, I reconsidered my decision. "Dress as a woman in front of hundreds of people? That would kill my reputation, I can't do that." But, as rehearsals went on, I started to realize something. People weren't looking at me saying, "Wow, he's dressed as a girl. What a loser." They were looking at me saying, "Wow, he has the courage to dress up as a girl on stage in front of everyone."

At first, I doubted my decision to give up football for acting, but it turned out to be one of the best decisions I've ever made, and one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. The football team went on to have a miserable 1-5 season while I made new friends and found a new appreciation for the theater. I received more praise and admiration for the play than I did for any football game I played in my nine-year career.

The great John F. Kennedy once said, "There are three things which are real: God, human folly, and laughter. The first two are beyond our comprehension, so we must do what we can with the third." I have taken JFK's advice, and used laughter as my medium towards happiness. I just hope I never have to walk in high heels again.

What is this essay about? _____

Place a check next to the paragraphs that support this theme or topic.

Describe the writer in your own words. What personal qualities can you infer about the writer from this essay? _____

Essay #2

My eighth-grade math teacher, Mrs. Natalie Sezbenski, has been one of the greatest influences in my life. She has changed me in ways she'll never know. Because of her, I know I'm not a nobody. However, four years ago when I first stepped into Riley Middle School, I thought I was. Before that, I lived in a part of Kentucky where everything revolved around basketball and cheerleading. Although I had nearly all A's, I was always told about the things that I didn't do: I didn't play ball and I didn't cheer.

When I moved to a new school in West Virginia, I had no idea what to expect. I certainly wasn't expecting Mrs. Sezbenski. The first thing she taught me was not math. It was that I was worth something. When I was finally brave enough to ask a question, she took me seriously. She showed me that not asking questions when I'm confused would get me nowhere. I had to take nine weeks of an AP math class, which was basically a logics class. It was awful! Not only was it difficult, there were many problems for which there was no concrete answer. You had to support your opinion with your work. I was amazed that she cared about what I said. She listened to my opinions even if they were off the mark.

After she got me to speak up, she began to teach me math. The math curriculum was different at Riley than at my former school. All types of math were combined with geometry and I had never seen geometry before. I was behind, so she helped me by staying after school and coming in early to tutor me. After the first nine weeks, I still didn't understand math very well, but I was doing better. She didn't give up on me when most other people would have. She was determined that I would succeed, and made me feel the same way.

Mrs. Sezbenski also helped me develop a sense of perspective. As an eighth-grader, if I got a bad grade, it seemed like the end of the world. Mrs. Sezbenski helped me to stop turning everything into an "issue." When I got frustrated, she would calm me down and explain each error. She told me that she couldn't help me if I was so uptight about everything. When things didn't go just right, she would help me understand what I did wrong so I could do better next time. She really helped me see that not everything is a cataclysmic event.

Mrs. Sezbenski was the most influential teacher I've had, although she didn't mean to be. She didn't intend to show me that I could act like myself with my friends. She never meant to teach me not to get embarrassed when I answered incorrectly or said something silly. She never realized that she helped raise my self-confidence to a new level. She won't know all the ways she helped me, but because of her I finally feel that I can be myself.

Mrs. Natalie Sezbenski was a real teacher, and I am absolutely a better person for having known her.

What is this essay about? _____

Place a check next to the paragraphs that support this theme or topic.

Describe the writer in your own words. What personal qualities can you infer about the writer from this essay? _____

Essay #3

I wasn't exactly raised with a "silver spoon" in my mouth. All my life I had to struggle to get what I needed. I went from living with a drug-addicted mother to being thrown into foster care for seven years, where I had to fend for myself. While other children were out playing on the playground, I was stuck at home taking care of my younger siblings. I was worrying where our next meal was going to come from and how long my mother would be gone this time before she remembered that she had kids at home. Every night as I put my little brothers and sisters to sleep, I prayed and promised myself I would grow up to be someone better.

My mother became a cocaine addict when I was just 10 years old. Her addiction grew to the point where she cared little about my three younger siblings, leaving me to take care of them. So I became the mother of the house. While my mother was passed out in her room, I would get my siblings up, dress them, feed them and take them to school. Every day, I had to ask the neighbors if they had money we could borrow to buy food with. They knew we couldn't pay them back, but most of them helped us out of kindness. On days I couldn't get money for food from the neighbors, I would go to the supermarket and pack bags all day or run errands for people in the area for a dollar or two. The kids became my one and only concern. They became dependent solely on me and I was determined not to fail them.

When I was 12 years old, the Administration for Children's Services took me and my little brothers and sisters away. I was happy because it felt good to be away from my mother. I thought I would finally be released from her grip and be able to live my life, or so I thought.

Going through foster care wasn't exactly a walk in the park, either. I've been in and out of nine homes over the years. I've dealt with serious depression, feeling like my life was cursed and I would never be happy. My grades fluctuated between the semesters, depending on which home I was living in. But with the support of my friends and school, I'm back on track, determined to improve my future and eventually go to college.

Life is full of lessons, and my lesson has been to never give up or lose hope. Growing up with a drug-addicted mother and going in and out of foster care taught me to fight for what I want and that with hard work and dedication anything is possible. No matter what I'm going through, I still try to have an optimistic attitude about my life. I know that one day I will be successful and show my younger siblings that even though you had a hard life, you can still succeed and make a future for yourself.

What is this essay about? _____

Place a check next to the paragraphs that support this theme or topic.

Describe the writer in your own words. What personal qualities can you infer about the writer from this essay? _____

All About Me

Directions: For the next five minutes, fill this sheet with statements about yourself — your personality, your beliefs, your goals, your experiences, your proudest accomplishments. Write anything down as it comes to mind.

- What words describe you best?
- What people, events, or places help define you?
- What are you most proud of?
- What are the places you've been, and places you dream of going?
- What are the daydreams and concerns that keep you up at night?
- Which moments or events from your life are so vivid it's like they happened yesterday?

Don't worry about your audience, or about spelling, grammar, or neatness. The only rules are to dig deep and to be honest!

My Main Strengths

First, look through the list of qualities below and check the three to five that describe you best. Feel free to add to the list. Next, under “evidence,” list at least two examples from your life that reflect each quality you checked. Be as specific as possible. When you’re done, choose the one or two qualities you feel are your strongest, and that you could highlight in your essay.

QUALITY	MY TOP QUALITIES (check 3-5)	EVIDENCE (How do you show this quality through your actions, your achievements, your relationships, and in your day-to-day life?)
Ambitious	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Caring, compassionate	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Curious, questioning	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Confident	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Courageous, risk-taker	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Creative, innovative	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Diligent, persistent	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Enthusiastic	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Fair, principled	<input type="checkbox"/>	

QUALITY	MY TOP QUALITIES (check 3-5)	EVIDENCE (How do you show this quality through your actions, your achievements, your relationships, and in your day-to-day life?)
Good-natured, sense of humor	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Honest, genuine	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Introspective, self-aware	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Leader, consensus-builder	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Mature, responsible	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Motivated, takes initiative	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Open-minded, tolerant	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Optimistic	<input type="checkbox"/>	
Organized, disciplined	<input type="checkbox"/>	

Homework: My Character Snapshot

Which personal qualities do you want to highlight in your essay?

Before next week, try to think of a single event or experience that reflects these qualities. If you're stuck, think about a time or specific way that you were influenced by:

- Your family, ancestors, or heritage
- Your pastimes or favorite activities
- Significant people outside your family
- Travel to different places or exposure to different people
- Your strongest beliefs or values
- A difficult or challenging event
- Criticism or failure
- Your dreams for the future
- A piece of literature or art