

Start before the prompts.

This four-lesson mini-unit helps students find personal-essay material in ordinary experiences and decide which idea is actually worth developing.

“Nothing important has ever happened to me.”

The answer is not to push students toward a bigger story. It is to help them notice what they already have.

ROUND 1

Work, skills & strange expertise

Do not limit “skills” to things that belong on a résumé.

- 1 A job nobody realizes is interesting
- 2 Something people always ask you to do for them
- 3 A thing you can fix, organize, cook, build, identify, or explain
- 4 A subject you know far more about than you need to
- 5 Something you have learned by watching instead of being taught
- 6 A problem you actually enjoy solving

WRITE FAST.

Do not decide whether an idea is “good.”

Write enough to recognize it later.

Let one memory lead to another.

About 2 minutes.

MODEL

Read for the person, not the plot.

By October, I no longer needed to write down Mr. Ellis’s order. Two eggs over medium, rye toast almost burnt, coffee before the menu even opens. I learned Maya’s extra lemon and the nurses’ shared fries too. I used to think remembering orders was just a way to move faster. Then I noticed the tiny pause when I set something down before a customer asked for it — the look that said, Oh, you remembered.

I like that moment more than I expected to. I am not the loudest person in a room, and I am rarely the one who starts a conversation. But I remember details. I notice when someone changes an order they have made for six months, or when a regular suddenly comes in alone. At the diner, paying attention is its own kind of talking.

WHILE YOU READ

What do you learn about this writer that is not simply “works at a diner”?

Where does the writing move from what happened to how the writer sees?

BY THE END, STUDENTS CAN:

- name several possible stories without deciding too early which one is “best”
- explain what a story might reveal beyond what happened
- spot the difference between a familiar topic and generic treatment
- choose whether to keep, narrow, or pivot before drafting

A small sequence with a clear stopping point.

Students do not choose a Common App prompt or draft the whole essay here. This mini-unit is about finding and testing the idea first.

1

The Event Is Not the Essay

Students see why the event itself cannot do all the work.

2

Nothing Important Has Ever Happened to Me

Students collect possible stories from ordinary life.

3

What Does This Story Give Us Access To?

Students test what several ideas might reveal about them.

4

The Generic Essay Test

Students decide whether to keep, narrow, or pivot before drafting.

THREE VERSIONS

Same experience. Three very different essays.

Our student works at a grocery store. The topic stays the same. Watch what changes.

VERSION 1

Working at a grocery store has taught me responsibility, teamwork, communication, and time management. Balancing my job with school has prepared me for the challenges of college.

VERSION 2

At 9:37 p.m., three minutes before closing, a woman pushed a cart that looked like an entire Thanksgiving dinner into my checkout lane. My manager was already locking one entrance.

VERSION 3

At first, I sorted customers quickly: prepared, disorganized, difficult. Then I started noticing what I had missed — the woman counting cash twice, the nurse shopping after a late shift. I still scan groceries. I try not to scan people so quickly.

RESCUE MOVE 3

Use one moment to reveal the larger pattern.

Instead of proving that you do a lot ... **... choose a moment where the way you handle "a lot" becomes visible.**

TIME The five-minute ritual you use to reset between work and homework.

LEADERSHIP The moment you realize everyone is waiting for you to decide something.

RESPONSIBILITY The small job nobody notices until you stop doing it.

AMBITION The thing you keep doing after the applause or grade is over.

Common topics are fine. Trauma is not required. The goal is a story that gives the student something specific to say.

WHAT YOU GET

Ready to teach as a four-day mini-unit.

Each lesson is designed for about 35 minutes of usable instruction and is described as approximately one 40-minute class period.

INCLUDED

- 4 instructional PowerPoints
- 16 student-facing pages
- 4 teacher guides
- quick-start + pacing guide

USE IT WHEN YOU NEED

- a college-essay brainstorming sequence
- an alternative to prompt-first writing
- help getting students beyond generic life lessons
- a focused start before your own drafting assignment

COLLEGE ESSAY • LESSON 2

Think small.

For now, collect. Do not decide whether an idea is "good enough." Fragments are fine. Follow any detail that feels more interesting than the prompt.

ROUND 1 • PLACES & ROUTINES

- A place you know well enough to move through in the dark
- A route you could travel from memory
- A small ritual in your morning or evening
- A place where you act differently
- Something your family does the same way every time
- A routine you would miss if it disappeared

ROUND 2 • OBJECTS & HABITS

- Something in your room you have had for years
- An object you always carry, fix, sink, lose, or borrow
- Something worn out that you refuse to replace
- A tiny habit other people tease you about
- A drawer, box, shelf, folder, or collection only you understand
- A smell, sound, or texture that instantly puts you somewhere

Write a word, phrase, image, or quick note — just enough to recognize the memory later.

COLLEGE ESSAY • LESSON 4

Stress-test your seed.

Use the idea you chose in Lesson 3. A "yes" does not mean the topic is bad; it tells you what to fix before drafting.

REPLACEABLE Could another student swap in their name and keep most of this essay?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

EVENT HEAVY Is the event itself more interesting than my thinking?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

CAMERA DRIFT Does another person become the real main character?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

REDUNE MODE Am I listing what I do instead of showing how I move through the world?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

SLOGAN ENDING Am I already heading toward a broad moral or inspirational slogan?

☐ Yes ☐ Maybe ☐ No

The warning sign I most need to address is:

This mini-unit is the opening four-lesson sequence from the complete **Plotting Something College Essay Writing Unit**.