

College Essays · Free sample

The College Essay Toolkit Sample

One chapter and one tool, taken straight from The College Essay Toolkit.

In this sample

Chapter 3 — Testing topics

Topic Testing Grid — the tool that chapter teaches you to use

The full Toolkit

Fifteen chapters on the personal statement, Common App prompts, UC PIQs, supplements, and revision, plus ten tools and the College Essay Tracker.

Everything that is in it: www.hearn.consulting/resource-college-essay-toolkit

Chapter 3

Testing topics

Once you have three or four candidates, the question is not which one is easiest to write. The question is which one shows the most thinking.

In this chapter

- Score each candidate

Companion tool

Topic Testing Grid

Does the working part of this chapter.

Score each candidate

Test	What to look for
Specificity	Does the topic point at a scene the reader can see, or a value claim the reader has heard before? Higher specificity wins.
Cliché risk	Could thousands of other applicants write a near-identical essay? If yes, lower it on the list.
What it shows	What does the topic let the reader learn about how you think? If the answer is generic, the topic is generic.
Prompt fit	Does it line up with a Common App prompt or open prompt without forcing? Force is a signal.

Specificity

1	2	3	4	5
1 = abstract value claim			better → 5 = a scene the reader can see	

Cliché risk

1	2	3	4	5
1 = original framing ← better			5 = many other applicants will write the same essay	

The two scored tests, as the Topic Testing Grid scores them. The shaded end of each scale is the one to aim for.

Companion tool

Topic Testing Grid — scores three to five candidates on specificity and cliché risk, checks prompt fit and what each shows, then records the chosen direction and the reason. Use it here, or on its own whenever a topic decision is stuck.

How to choose a prompt

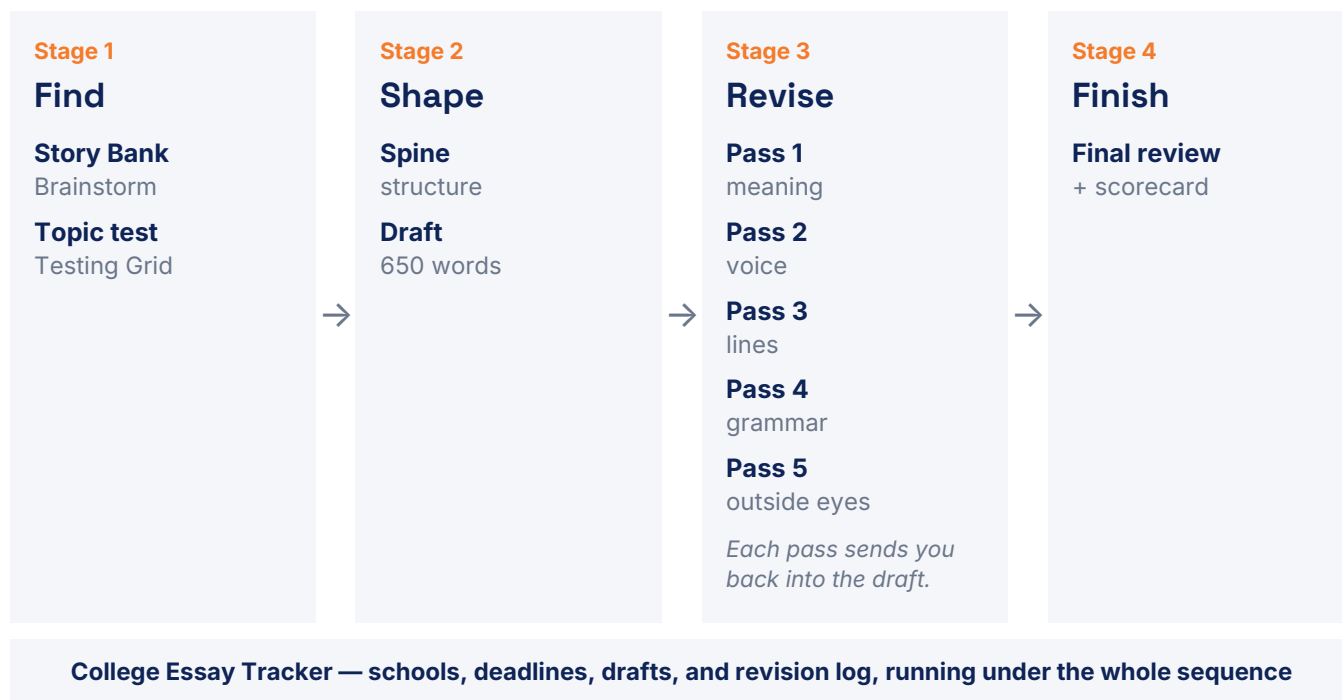
- Do not pick the prompt first and then look for a story.
- Pick the story first. Then find the prompt that fits it.
- Most strong essays could plausibly answer two or three of the seven Common App prompts.

College Essays • Tool

Topic Testing Grid

Compare three to five candidate personal statement topics so you can pick the one that shows the most thinking, not the one that is easiest to write.

Where this tool sits



Use this when: you have raw material from the **Essay Brainstorm** and need to choose a personal statement direction.

Before you start: have at least three candidate topics in mind, with notes or scenes from the Essay Brainstorm ready to refer to.

Scoring

Specificity (1–5): 1 = abstract value claim, 5 = a scene the reader can see. **Cliché risk (1–5):** 1 = original framing, 5 = many other applicants will write the same essay (higher is worse).

Topic	What it shows about how you think	Specificity	Cliché risk	Prompt fit	Notes

Chosen direction	
Reason in one sentence	

Update the College Essay Tracker

Open the College Essay Tracker. In the Common App table, find the prompt you chose and set its Using It? cell to Yes. In the Notes cell, paste the one-sentence reason from the Reason field above.

Score the draft

Once a rough draft exists, score it with the Personal Statement Scorecard at hearn.consulting/essay-scorecard. The lowest category names the next tool to use.