

Developing a Winning College Essay

A Montgomery College (Germantown)

Writing, Reading, and Language
Center Workshop

Mimi Yu
here!



I'm Jess
Pajak!





- Paint a picture of the person you want to show them — focus on **ONE** aspect
- Keep a reader perspective in mind
- Start as early as possible and expect to go through multiple revisions
- Essays are important, but only part of the package

They want to get a sense of:

- **WHAT** matters to you
- **HOW** you identify yourself
- **WHAT** kind of person will be on their campus

Admissions counselors say that the best essays help them learn something about the candidate that they would never know from reading the rest of the application!

Source: [CollegeBoard](#)



What
Colleges Want
to Know



What Defines You?

Possible launch points!

- A **core value** you can't imagine yourself without
- **Experiences** that shaped who you are
- **Passions** or **interests**
- A **trait** that defines you
- A **goal** that serves as your north star

You don't (and shouldn't!) try to cover all of these!




Complete the following sentence as many times as
you can:

"I am someone who _____"

Essay Questions: 2022-2023 Common Application

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.



Essay
Questions:
2022-2023
Coalition

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
2. What interests or excites you? How does it shape who you are now or who you might become in the future?
3. Describe a time when you had a positive impact on others. What were the challenges? What were the rewards?
4. Has there been a time when an idea or belief of yours was questioned? How did you respond? What did you learn?
5. What success have you achieved or obstacle have you faced? What advice would you give a sibling or friend going through a similar experience?
6. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.



LAUNCH

You are here! ★

Hold on to that launch point and its importance to understanding who you are



PORTRAIT

Build from your launch point

How do you want your audience to see you?

Stick to **ONE** trait or aspect



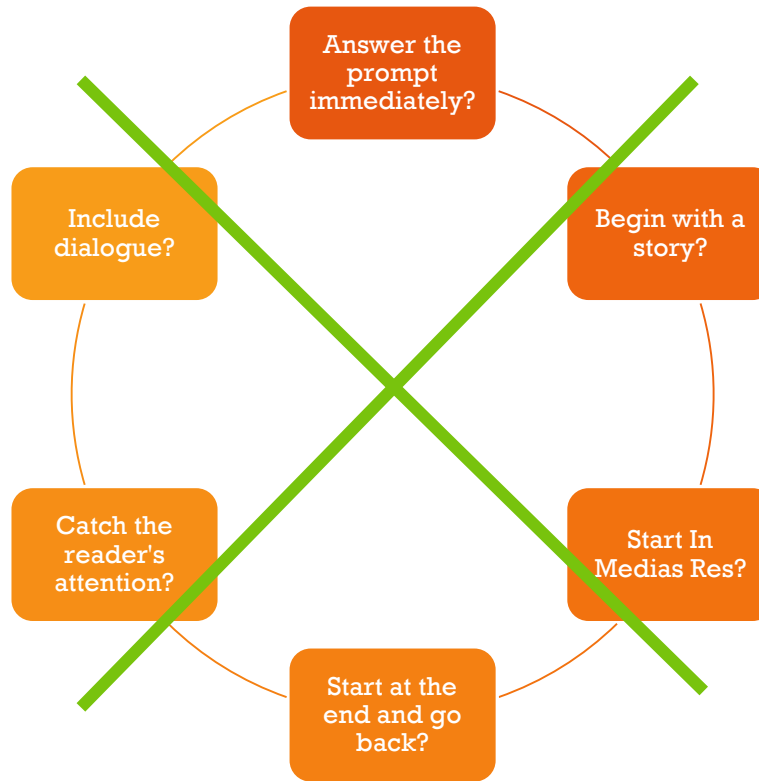
SUPPORT

Jot down ideas to prove that trait or aspect

Be as specific as possible. Anecdotes, examples.

Show, don't tell!

Getting the Details In Place



Putting the Story Together

Truth is, there is no "correct structure",
only one "rule":

Get your message across!

Sometimes, chronological order makes sense
(depends on the prompt).



Best Practices



MAKE SURE YOU ANSWERED ALL PARTS OF THE QUESTION



DON'T WORRY ABOUT LENGTH OR GRAMMAR AT FIRST



DON'T TRY TO GUESS WHAT ADMISSIONS WANTS TO SEE



USE FORMAL LANGUAGE, BUT STILL SOUND LIKE YOURSELF



BE AS SPECIFIC AS POSSIBLE WITH YOUR EXAMPLES



AVOID UNCERTAIN PHRASING LIKE "MAYBE," "SORT OF," AND "I THINK"



PAY ATTENTION TO TONE; FIND A BALANCE BETWEEN PRIDE AND HUMILITY



TIE YOUR STORY BACK TO THE IMAGE OF YOURSELF YOU WANT TO GIVE

Humor

- You don't know how it'll come off

Religion

- Be aware of your audience
- Don't assume familiarity

Quoting

- You only have so many words; make sure they're all yours!

Name-dropping

- Don't rely on prestige or flatter the school

Common Pitfalls

A stylized illustration of a man in a black suit, white shirt, and black tie, wearing a black hat and carrying a brown briefcase. He is falling into a black hole in a yellow ground. The background is a green and yellow landscape with stylized trees and a sun. A large green speech bubble contains the text 'Common Pitfalls'.

Last Touches

Trim out repetition
Smooth out transitions

Polish

Length

Get as close to the
wordcount as possible

Formatting

Healthy use of
paragraph breaks
Paragraph indents
Standard font and
margins

Proofread multiple
times
Read aloud
Ask for help

Proofread





Applying for Scholarships

RESEARCH

MATCH

WRITE



Research!



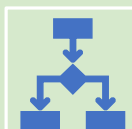
**VISIT THE
SPONSORSHIP'S
WEBSITE**



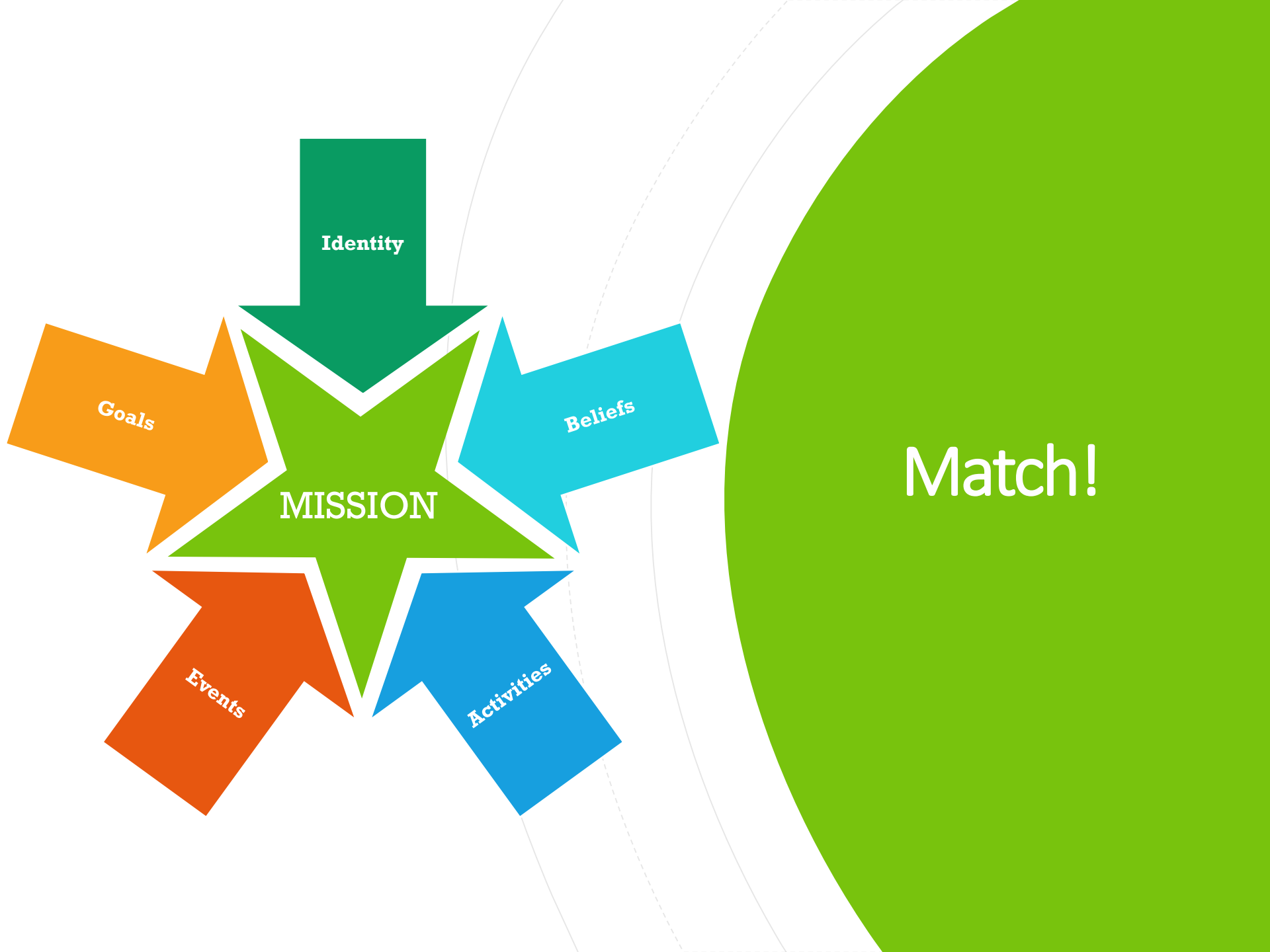
**WHY WAS IT
ESTABLISHED?**



WHAT IS ITS MISSION?



WHAT ARE ITS VALUES?



Identity

Goals

MISSION

Beliefs

Events

Activities

Match!

1

SHOW the ways you match their mission, not just because you want the money.

Use specific examples!

2

DISCUSS your goals.

They want to see that their investment is worth it.

3

APPLY best practices from the college essay.

Most of the same advice applies!

Write!

Takeaways



Schools don't want you to be "never-before-seen"; they want you to be you



Decide how you want the committee to see you, and focus on sending that message



Content first, then the small stuff – expect many drafts



Scholarships: match who are you & what you do to their mission



Proofread, proofread, proofread!

I
T'S
M
P
O
S
S
I
B
L