

Essay Writing Workshop

How to Tell Your Story

Melinda Grismer Bio

BA in Journalism, MS in Adult Education, ELL teaching certificate, Ph.D. student
Purdue Extension Educator for 10 years, currently statewide specialist at Purdue
Mother, Legal Guardian, Aunt, Host Mom & Godmother

- Mother to two, Annaka & Drew Grismer
- Legal guardian to two, Judith Perez Castro & Marcos Rojas Aguilar
- Aunt to 21 nieces/nephews
- Host mom to four exchange students (Yumi, Sascha, Andrew & Leslie)
- Godmother to two, Sunshine & Quinn McDonald

Mentor, College Essay Editor, Driving Instructor & College Visit Escort

- Mentor to 15, Spanish-speaking, first generation college students
- College Essay Editor for more than 50 students through Purdue Extension/Learning Network
- Driving Instructor for five students who needed a licensed driver to practice with
- College Visit Escort for 20 students interested in attending Indiana's colleges/universities

Why write?

Respond to this Zoom poll

- Have you already written a college application essay?
Yes/No/In progress
- Have you already written a scholarship essay?
Yes/No/In progress
- Is writing something you enjoy?
Yes/No/Sometimes

It's more than just a hurdle to jump

- Writing is a skill you will use frequently in college or on the job
- Good writing is good thinking -- shows how well you can organize your thoughts/present them
- Writing your story on paper helps you think more critically about your journey/intended path

Why apply?

Respond to this Zoom poll

- Have you signed up for any scholarship services like FastWeb, Niche.com, Scholarships.com?
Yes/No/In progress
- Have you set up a scholarship tracker/spreadsheet?
Yes/No/In progress
- Have you asked a mentor or teacher to review your application(s)/essay(s)
Yes/No/In progress

Don't underestimate

- It's a numbers game! The more you apply, the more your chances of winning
- Scholarships can significantly reduce the cost of attending college
- You never know when the scholarship committee is going to choose you
- Your story is more compelling than you might think because it's yours/you're used to it
- Go to www.indianacollegecosts.org to learn where the money is

Why me?

Respond to this Zoom poll

- Do you think it is rude to brag?
Yes/No/Sometimes
- Should people announce their accomplishments/achievements publicly?
Yes/No/Depends on the circumstance
- How often do you brag?
Always/Sometimes/Never

Don't be afraid to brag

- You have spent a lot of time/energy building your skills and striving for your achievements
- You can “toot your horn” without blowing it by tying your accomplishments to people, places and things that have helped you along your journey
- Get over yourself -- take a bird's eye view of your life and focus on the highlights

Future Plans/Goals

In your Zoom breakout rooms, answer **one** of these basic questions about yourself:

- Why do you want to study _____?
- Why do you want to work at _____ ?
- What do you most look forward to accomplishing?

Pair & Share:

- One person (the reporter) takes 3 minutes to answer the question while the other person (the recorder) takes notes
- Then, the recorder takes 2 minutes to read back what he/she heard the reporter say
- Take turns! Switch after 5 minutes so that each of you has a turn at being reporter and recorder

Connecting a hobby with a choice of major

The Game of Life

“I believe that my young chess interest propelled me to become a better mathematician. In chess, the ability to visualize future moves is paramount to success. Over the chess board, multiple moves can seem viable. Through time and calculation, a chess player can rule out certain moves by evaluating upcoming positions and remaining chess pieces. I believe that over time, my chess obsession has led me to see math in a similar way; not only do I think more logically, but I can “see” the next step in solving a math problem.”

“If you think about it, life is like a chess game. Each move has an opportunity cost. Chess makes it crystal clear that the “moves” made at any stage in life matter greatly. Similar to real life, some moves might be unfavorable over a period of time (such as a choice to weaken the pawn structure), while other moves will have immediate consequences (such as moving into a checkmate position).”

Connecting an interest with a choice of major

Wings to Fly

“For all of my life, or at least back to my first memories, I have loved anything and everything to do with flight. As a single mother, my mom chose to live with her parents. I was first introduced to the concept of flying in my grandparents’ home. Some of my earliest pictures show me playing “airplane” with my family. My grandfather, the man I call Pops, was the first person to buy me an airplane toy. Knowing his love for all things aviation, and seeing my curiosity, he became my first teacher. My first airshow was at Mount Comfort Airport in Greenfield, Indiana. There I was able to see a vast array of aircraft. But, this was just the beginning. From there, my Pops took me to Cape Canaveral to see all things NASA. He showed me that space flight, aerospace, is yet another aspect of aviation. This interest prompted me to participate in the school-sponsored Space Camp trip to Huntsville, Alabama, at the U.S Space and Rocket Center. That’s where I experienced my first simulations of flight.”

Connecting an interest with a choice of major

Art Therapy

“For as long as I can remember I had an academic mind and an artistic heart. With a paintbrush in one hand and a book in the other, I grew up trying to use my passion in the arts and sciences to find my place in the world. As a kid, I would work hard on teaching myself how to improve my drawing skills at every opportunity.”

“In the sixth grade my interest in science flourished as I began participating in the Purdue Science Fair. In eighth grade I was awarded the opportunity to be an observer the International Science Fair. I found myself wanting to continue with my exploration of the sciences and convinced my middle school High abilities teacher to continue sponsoring me in the high school level of the Purdue Science Fair. My persistence brought the opportunity to other high school students at Frankfort.”

“Now, as a senior, I am preparing to go to college for illustration with the goal of becoming a storyboard artist for TV and film. I will never put down the books, but I know my grasp is firmly on that paintbrush.”

Describing family influence on interests/choice of career

Family Legacy

“My dad began working in the steel business when I was four years old. His job as a regional salesman meant he travelled a lot. When he wasn’t travelling, he always made it a priority to spend time with me, helping to foster my special interests. One of those was my love for music. I wish I could say I took as much of an interest in his career. But to be honest, his job in steel construction was like a backdrop for my childhood. At the dinner table, he would discuss the details involved in his work, like reading blueprints and estimating the cost of steel, and the complexity of bidding jobs and taking care of clients. I’m sure I learned a lot more from that than I realized at the time, such as the importance of attention to detail, follow-through, work ethic, and personal integrity. All of this came together for me just a few years ago when he took me, for the first time, to visit the site of a job that he had sold. Over spring break, we went to Nashville, Tennessee, to visit Belmont University, a music school I was considering. While there, he took me on a tour of the newly built Music City Center, pointing out the acoustics and the performance spaces. At that moment, I realized that his passion for construction and my passion for music had intersected, and I found a new respect for the work he does.”

Driving Force(s)

In your Zoom breakout rooms, answer **one** of these basic questions about yourself:

- What motivates you?
- What interests you?
- What are you passionate about?

Pair & Share:

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Describing what motivates your choice of career

Called to Serve

“At church camp my freshman year is where I was first exposed to the charity group called Destiny Rescue. A staff member for Destiny Rescue came to talk to us about the organization and its mission. He told us all to close our eyes. He proceeded to tell us about a young girl who lived in a foreign country. This girl got home from school one day and found out her mother had sold her to a man for 50 dollars. She was then taken into town and forced to work at a brothel. Her mother never knew what environment her daughter was sold into, just that she would most likely never see her again. He informed us this happens every 26 seconds to a child somewhere in the world. Ever since I heard the story of the girl, my drive for ministry work became stronger each year.”

Describing what you are passionate about

Gotta Sing

“I sing because no other career more completely uses all I have to offer—all of my dedication, my intelligence, my patience, my grief, my love. Already, my pursuit of this career have given me the highest highs and the lowest lows I have yet experienced. Knowing that, as a result of my efforts, others are touched and healed during evenings in concert halls, is the greatest reward of all. The journey isn’t toward perfection, and it isn’t not toward fame. The path I want to take leads to the heart of each story, brought to life through the music and my deep understanding of each character I portray. In that suspended moment, the audience sees the character instead of me, as they are transported away from the theater to a world that is not factual but is absolutely truth-filled. Art is humanity’s attempt to reach something higher than itself, and I believe that opera is a powerful and indispensable part of that attempt. I know that it will take everything I have, but at the end of the day, I think it will have given me more than I could ever repay.”

Becoming/Overcoming

In your Zoom breakout rooms, answer **one** of these basic questions about yourself:

- What major event that happened in your life has shaped/changed you?
- What challenges have you overcome?
- How do your character traits/values define who you are?

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Describing an event/circumstance that has shaped you

Milestones

“During the summer after my freshman year, I was chosen to participate in Project Stepping Stone, a program to help first-generation Latino students pursue college. Going in, I was very shy and unsure of myself. I didn’t talk to anyone or ask any questions. But, I learned so much that summer about being a college student—and even about myself, such as different traditions within my own culture. The following January, I was invited to be part of the Grassroots Leadership Development Program sponsored by the United States Hispanic Leadership Institute (USHLI). After nine sessions learning about local government, we earned a trip to Chicago to participate in the USHLI youth conference. I felt so motivated just being there, knowing that my dreams could be accomplished. After the conference, we wanted to share our experience with other Latino students. We were invited to lead a workshop at Marian University to inspire other first-generation college students. I returned to Project Stepping Stone as an incoming senior to become an ambassador for the program.”

Describing challenges you have encountered/overcome

Surmounting Obstacles

"There are times when I wish to give up, but then I remember the biggest obstacles my parents overcame for the sake of our family. During my freshman year of high school my mother was diagnosed with breast cancer. I was devastated, but my mother remained strong. I watched as her health slowly waned, but her faith in God and strength never faltered. In less than a year, my mom defeated cancer. It is because of her that I am the strong person I am today. From her I learned the power of inner strength and self-sacrifice. My world was turned upside down again during the end of my sophomore year when my father was charged with identity fraud. The fear of my dad being deported was overwhelming and visiting him in county jail was depressing. As the oldest child, I stepped up and paid for the rent and utility bills while my father was incarcerated. Once again, the Lord prevailed, and my father was not deported. I have turned these negative events into valuable learning experiences. My strong character and determination to succeed arose out of these events and shaped my values. I aspire to be an immigration attorney so I can represent those fighting for the American Dream. I want to prevent the separation of families and become a positive role model in my community."

Connecting a hardship with a choice of major

Dreaming of Justice

"I, myself, am a 'dreamer' and have personally experienced the struggles immigrants face as they strive to succeed. If I graduate from Wingate University, as I anticipate doing in two years, I will be the first one in my family to earn a college degree. With that education in hand, I hope to create social change in my local community. I believe education is power. True equal access to education can lead to the success of many instead of a few. I believe that by reforming the education system, issues like crime could be prevented. As a criminal justice major, I also want to influence reform by addressing racial bias within our country's criminal justice system."

Describing how character traits define who you are

Character Triumphs

“I didn’t enjoy watching my peers struggle in Economics, which is a required course for graduation, so I went out of my way to help my peers in any way I could. Whether that meant going over material with them again (or in simpler terms), answering questions for them in or outside of school, or simply encouraging them to challenge and believe in themselves, I tried to be a resource and support system for my peers. In return, my classmates reminded me that character not achievements define an individual. Several of my Economics classmates are valuable employees, leaders in their fields of interest, or athletically talented, but more importantly kind and humble individuals who accept you regardless of your successes or failures. From them, I have learned to appreciate my circumstances--no matter how difficult--and that fulfillment in life is more important than money and success.”

Describing how character traits define who you are

Learning from Leadership

“In my junior year of high school, I was elected vice president of Youth RISE! Council. I pushed our group to become more involved in the community by volunteering in the Clinton County Humane Society, spending time at the Clinton House retirement home, as well as helping at a nearby children's home. During that year, we became more well-known in the community, as we participated in various service activities. One event in particular sticks out in my mind. We were volunteering at a mobile food pantry in my hometown when I overheard of the recipients tell our sponsor, Healthy Communities of Clinton County, how she was previously embarrassed to receive help but needed it more than she even realized. The whole interaction brought a smile to my face, and I suddenly remembered why I was there and how important it really was. This year, as president of Council, I hope to encourage my fellow Youth RISE! members to embrace these opportunities that make a bigger difference in our community than we may ever know.”

Describing what you value and why

Value of Education

“From a young age, I was exposed not only to the value of education, but also the desperate need for Hispanic advocacy in my community. I remember being a little girl and interpreting at first only for my parents at doctor appointments or school meetings, but later on for friends and relatives as well. My parents saw the potential within me and encouraged me to excel in school and take advantage of the learning opportunities I was given. I took their advice to heart and quickly became one of the few top Hispanic students in my class. As I matured, I increasingly noticed the lack of voice and representation the Hispanic community had in Frankfort. This motivated me to continue improving my bilingual skills in order to eventually become a vital resource for my community.”

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Describing what you value and why

Value of Diversity

“Throughout my high school career, I was extremely uncertain about my future. Though I still managed to maintain my grades and a part-time job at Wendy’s, my academic insecurities led to anxiety and fear. Luckily, my older sister introduced me to a South Korean boy band called BTS. Within a year, I began to listen to their music, read their lyrics, and later was fortunate enough to attend their concerts. They’ve not only created a safe haven but have also helped me find my path—and inspired me to follow my dreams. Listening to their music and exploring different ideas helped me discover my interest in foreign language and sparked future goals and plans.

Now I look forward to all the diverse people I will meet on IU's campus. The past month, elements of racial, geographic, age, and gender diversity has ranked IU Bloomington #270 nationwide. Additionally, IU has seen record numbers of Hispanic/Latino, African American, and Asian American students with a total of over 9,000 minority students. I look forward to adding my voice to the mix, bringing my own unique perspective, while benefiting from the perspective of others.”

Connecting the Themes

How can you weave the three questions you've explored into one narrative that tells your story?

Find your story hook

- What's the "angle" that will hook your reader (application reviewers or scholarship committees) to read your particular essay

Create an outline to guide your writing

- Decide what the three/four paragraphs of your essay are going to be about
- Write a topic sentence for each paragraph
- Fill in the details, remembering to "show" not tell (giving examples, describing a time when, etc.)

Answer the prompt

- Once you're done with the first draft, be sure to return to the prompt to make sure you've answered the question they're asking – then add or delete content as necessary

An Example

The Set Up:

“Being from a rural community where teenage pregnancy was a reality for 46 in 1000 girls at the time I started high school, I decided to become educated about and involved with this issue. Most of all, I pledged to take responsibility for myself and my reproductive choices. In 2014, Clinton County had the highest teen birth rate in the state of Indiana, triple the national average. That number caught the attention of the federal Office of Adolescent Health, and in 2015, multiple nonprofit agencies in the county were awarded a \$3.75 million grant (fondly called Youth RISE!) to combat the problem.”

An Example

The Background:

“All four years of my high school career, I’ve had the opportunity to participate in Youth RISE!, which focused on reducing the teenage pregnancy rate by educating students from kindergarten through senior year about goal-planning and decision-making. In addition to the Youth RISE! core curriculum embedded within the Community Schools of Frankfort, the Youth RISE! Council applied “peer pressure” to the situation by advocating for saying ‘no,’ using contraceptives appropriately, and understanding the consequences of actions.”

An Example

The Change:

“As a member of the Youth RISE! Council for all four years of my high school career, I was able to contribute my opinion on topics where youth voice was critical to understanding how to affect change. Many times, adult leaders didn't know the teenage perspective on certain subjects being discussed, so they asked Council members to provide honest feedback. We also did a lot of outreach to our peers and participated in community events to bring widespread awareness to the issue. We even challenged our own family and friends to participate in Families Talking Together, designed to increase dialogue between generations.”

An Example

The Outcome:

“During my time serving with Youth RISE!, I grew in so many ways. I became less timid and more able to speak up about important matters. I became a better presenter, speaker, and events organizer. I learned to network with local community leaders and my peers in a meaningful way, and I began to genuinely care about the outcome of my efforts—and the efforts of our whole Youth RISE! team. Now, in my senior year, the teenage pregnancy numbers have dramatically changed to 26 in 1000 girls, nearly a 50% reduction in the overall number of births to teenagers in Clinton County.”

Why now?

Basic Essay:

- Use the core of your college application essay as the basis for your scholarship essays and edit for the target audience/specific scholarship guidelines
- This can be adapted to fit almost any biographical essay prompt - saving you time later on
- Your narrative eventually becomes your elevator pitch for future scholastic and career efforts

Other Resources:

- *Writing Your College Application Essay* by Sarah Myers McGinty
- *Conquering the College Admissions Essay in 10 Steps: Crafting a Winning Personal Statement* by Alan Gelb

You can do it!

Questions?

Happy to help any of you with essay editing via Zoom!

Feel free to contact me at mgrismer@purdue.edu