

## Van Gogh's Shoes and My Little Pony: Embracing the Application Essay

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Clockwise from top left: An artifact related to one of the opening lines shared at the end of this article, inspiration for a profound essay on a lost father, and a painting that has launched thousands of words of analytical essays.

*Mark Moody, Co-Director of College Counseling at Colorado Academy, joins us again today with some fantastic guidance on the college essay. There is so much good stuff here, we don't even know where to begin to describe how helpful this will be to rising seniors as they begin their essays -- hopefully this summer. Moody's vivid explanations of "Show, Don't Tell," the concept of framing, and the essay's first words are worth their weight in Common App gold. All we can say is, "Enjoy..."*



Many thousands of young people take on the writing challenge of the college essay each year, making 500 to 650-word personal narrative one of the most popular forms of writing in America. Yet most of the authors of the form have never done it before, and most won't do it again.

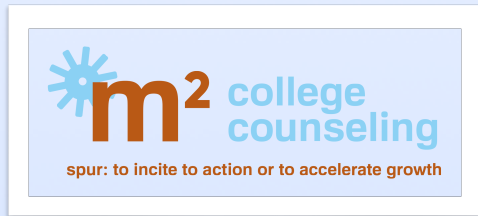
It's a challenging undertaking at the outset. Not only does the essay require an unfamiliar style that you probably haven't practiced in school, it asks you to explain something important about yourself in a restrictively small space. Many famous authors have been credited with the line, "If I had more time, I would write a shorter letter." Whoever first said it, the sentiment captures a reality you confront in the college essay—it's easier to write more than less. To make matters worse for those approaching this unusual task, the finished product will go out into the world to be judged by an unknown audience that holds your future in their hands. Pretty intimidating.

There are no hard and fast rules for writing a college essay, except, maybe: "Don't take yourself too seriously." To begin to orient yourself to the form, I suggest reading the advice on this blog, Chapter 13 of [College Admission: From Application to Acceptance Step by Step](#); the excellent [Essay Hell blog](#) of journalist Janine Anderson Robinson; and [this really helpful overview by Harry Bauld](#), (*\*original link is now gone but he covers similar content here*) author of the classic (and recommended) [On Writing the College Application Essay](#).

To this body of good advice, I will add three concepts I have distilled from my work with students on thousands of essays over the years, which may help you find your way to your own essay. They are all ultimately about confronting the brevity of the essay—a limitation that, viewed as an opportunity and challenge, can actually serve as an inspiration to powerful, evocative writing.

## **Making connections**

Trying to conceive of your essay start-to-finish before firing up the word processor can leave you feeling completely lost as to the right subject matter. I have found that some of the best essays reveal themselves and their true topic through the process of drafting, thinking, and rewriting. One way to approach this is to try to write your way to a connection between two different parts of your life, two memories that seem important to you, two places that have been important to you, or a person that's influenced you and how you see that influence manifested in yourself. There are many possibilities here, but this strategy can help you convey a great deal in a small



space. Start with a couple of ideas and try to connect them. See if you don't detect, in the way you create the connection with your words, something about your worldview, experience, and personality emerging out of your writing. Often, you will discover something simple, clear, and true in the process.

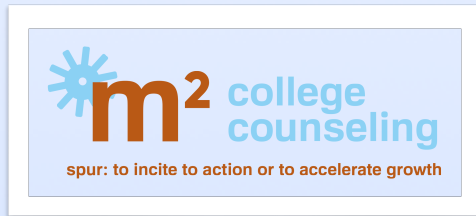
### **The Cinematic Approach**

Whatever you're writing about, one of the most frequent pieces of advice you'll hear is, "Show, don't tell." Simply put, this means don't waste precious time explaining. Bring the reader into the action with you. Evoke a moment that shows us what you want us to understand, and the sights, sounds, smells, and little details that make it real.

I often use the metaphor of film to help students make their essays "show" effectively. Think of a film or TV show that opens in the middle of a scene. Sherlock episodes offer good examples of this "cold open" technique, known in literature as beginning "in medias res." Before we even see the title sequence, we watch part of a mysterious crime unfold, see its aftermath, or encounter Sherlock and Watson in a perilous situation, with no introductory explanation as to how they got there.

We don't understand exactly what's going on, but we are drawn into the story immediately as our brain starts working to figure out the explanation for this scenario. Usually in film, the cold open scene is shot from close range. We see details but not the whole picture. Writing can work the same way. Opening the essay with your narrative focus closed in tight in the middle of action that has already begun to unfold serves to hook the reader right away.

As one example, instead of explaining that she was a ski patroller who had overcome the challenge of her small stature, learned a lot of responsibility and gained confidence from that job, a student of mine once opened her essay with, "As soon as my mother shoved me into the meeting room, forty burly mountain men made me their center of attention." Not knowing what's coming next, I'm compelled to keep reading. This technique doesn't just apply to action-movie topics. In a completely different kind of essay, another student opened with, "As I typed the words 'My Little Pony: Friendship is Magic' into the search bar on YouTube, I decided that if someone found out what I was doing, my excuse would be that I lost a bet." Don't you want to know what is going on here?



After setting that opening scene that gets us into the action, showing us the specifics of this moment that has been meaningful to you in some way, it can be helpful to pull the camera back. Explain to the reader more about the broader context of this scene. Think of your writing here as a narrator's voice giving a little bit of needed explanation and pointing us to why this moment is exemplary or important.

There are lots of ways to use a shift in the focus of your essay camera from close to wide fields of view. You might cut directly from one close shot to another one in a different time and place for the purpose of revealing contrasts. A lot of essays shift back and forth from a scene playing out to a broader narrative where connections are being drawn or context given. You might simply open with an anecdotal scene that represents, by putting us in one specific moment, why an activity, person, place, or quality of yours is worth understanding as part of your college application. However it works in your essay, thinking about your writing in terms of the focus of your narrative camera can help you "show" very effectively, while presenting just the right amount of "telling" to put the pieces together for the reader.

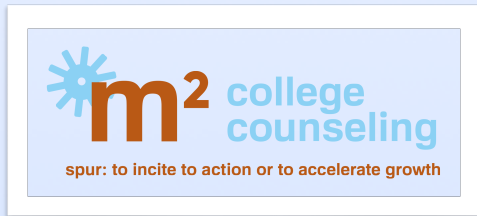
### **Van Gogh's shoes: a frame is worth a thousand words.**



*(\*Note: since I initially wrote this, it has been verified that in his personal life, Heidegger was a sympathizer of the regime in 1930's Germany. I absolutely condemn those beliefs and in no way endorse any part of them. Cultural theorist Jacques Derrida and art historian/ philosopher Meyer Schapiro have also written on the same painting of a pair of worker's boots.)*

There is a very famous painting by [Vincent Van Gogh](#) of a pair of shoes (shown above). More specifically, these shoes appear to be a worn pair of boots belonging to someone who has labored outside, probably in an agricultural setting. This painting became an inspiration for the philosopher [Martin Heidegger](#) to write his 1935 meditation [On the Origin of the Work of Art](#).





Since then, many other thinkers have turned to this image to build upon or respond to Heidegger's reflection upon the power of framing in creating meaning in art.

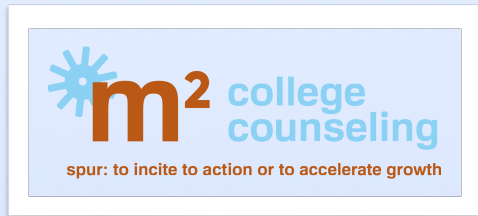
Why have so many, many words been written about a small, earth-toned painting of some old boots? Here's a sample of what Heidegger explains that he sees when he looks at the painting

*From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field.*

By drawing our attention to a corner of a room where a pair of empty boots sits on the floor, Van Gogh evokes a great deal more: the life of the boots' wearer, the daily work that the boots are used for, their contact with the natural world outside the room, the person who stitched the boots together, the culture and economy in which the boots are made and used... You can keep expanding this to come to an understanding of the entire world through the window of this painting, and the place of this pair of boots in relation to everything else. If Van Gogh's primary aim was to paint a kind of portrait of the boots' owner, then I think he was successful.

That's the power of framing. We've all experienced this while taking a photograph. Our eyes look out and see a broad, complex panorama. By looking through a viewfinder that crops out everything around what we choose to place within that rectangle, we assign meaning and importance to the subject inside the frame. We also imply a perspective (literally, a way of seeing) and relationships to the things left out. Every picture tells a story, as the old saying goes.

Understanding the wordless role framing plays in your essay writing can help you be comfortable with more showing, and less telling. Understand that the very choice of what is contained within your essay says something about you and your priorities that removes the need for you to explain, "This topic is important to me"— and is why you can liberate yourself in your college essay from the thesis-driven five-paragraph structure you've probably learned in school.



Framing is a useful concept to understand when you are writing a very short piece that you want to illustrate something important about you. In the roughly 500- to 650-word essay, smaller is better and communicates more. Essays are often most effective when they make use of a moment in time, an anecdote, a memory, or a description of a place, but you can pack even more of a wallop by fine-tuning the specific details you direct attention to. Discovering the right detail to place in your essay's frame can serve to paint a much bigger picture in the mind of the reader. Use your choice of frame to suggest the circumstances around that detail and your relationship to it—and by doing so, convey more with fewer words of explanation.

### **Bonus Round:**

#### **Last words: first words**

The methods I suggest have worked for many students in many essays, but there are lots of other ways to find the series of 650 words that will tell a piece of your story in your applications. However you approach it, one strategy is almost universally applicable—try to grab the reader's interest with your first sentence. The following are actual first sentences from essays written recently by students I've advised. They all make me want to keep reading to see where they are headed.

- **After thirty minutes of target shooting, my father and I were both warmed up.**
- **When my mom decided to take a bathroom break while leaving the burner on “High” to make pasta, my two-year-old self couldn't stand to leave the brilliant opportunity untouched.**
- **“That's the place!”**
- **I flung the door open.**
- **“I broke the stapler.”**
- **As soon as my mother shoved me into the meeting room, forty burly mountain men made me their center of attention.**
- **It was stall number three; it was always stall number three.**
- **It all started with a cowboy hat.**



- **For one year and eleven months, I spent every free moment surrounded by a tangled mess of bright orange yarn and wooden knitting needles.** (For what it's worth, nervous parents... this student attended Yale and is now a curator and conservator at the Met in NYC.)
- **Many people underestimate the power of chicken nuggets.** (And... this student attended Cal Tech to study jet propulsion and is now an oncology Fellow at Stanford University Hospitals.)

A few more recent openers from my independent clients:

- **“Henshin!”** As the flashing lights, blaring sound, and fire spun around the figure, my eyes widened in awe.
- **My fear of public speaking circled my head like a vulture, waiting for the right moment to strike; my racing heart just another meal.**
- **Casting aside all of the doubts in my mind, I spoke to the university student sitting next to me in Chinese.**
- **Color theory indicates blue and orange are complementary, which means despite being opposites, they bring out the best in each other. I’m no artist. I love blue and barely tolerate orange.**
- **The year was 2022. The time was one in the morning. The books were *American Psycho* and *Pride and Prejudice***

