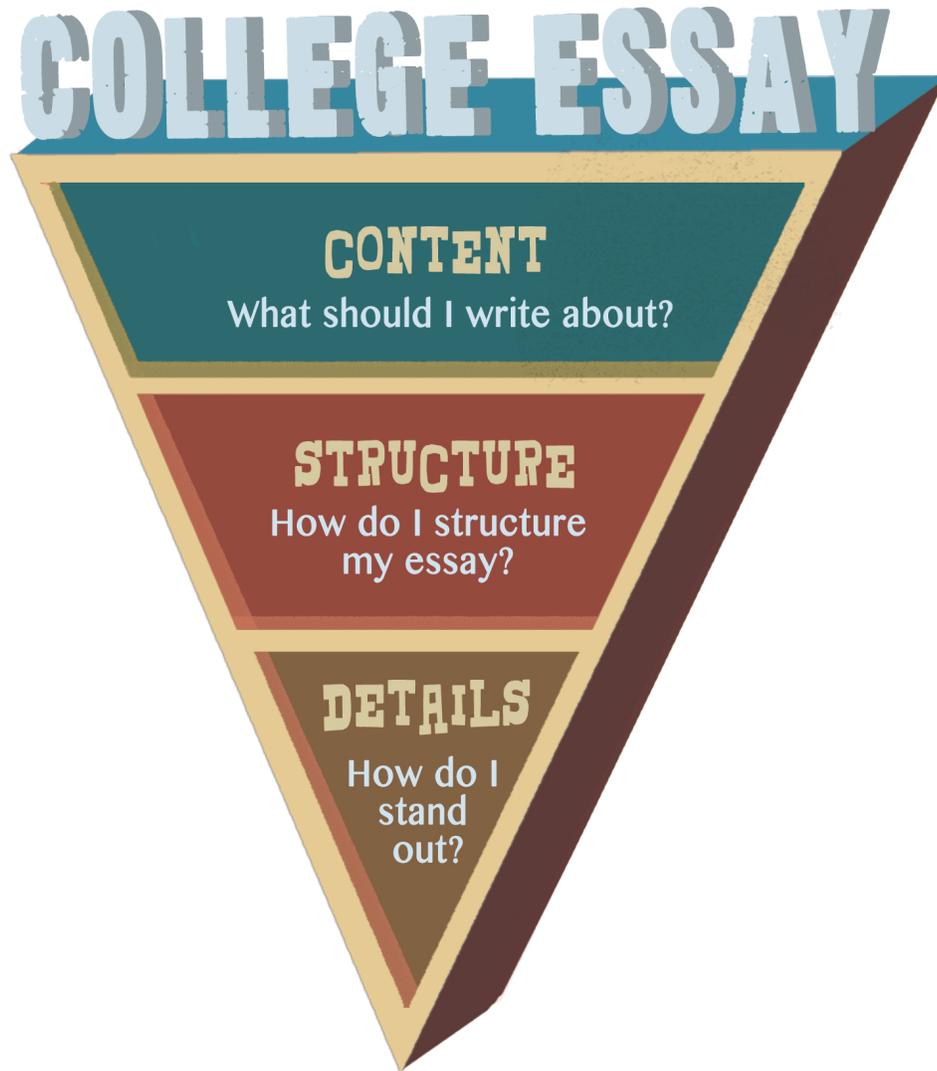


# Bringing Your Essay to Life or When to Scrap What You Have and Start Over

Here's how I break down the writing process:



So far we've looked at some ways of choosing what to write about (content), how to organize (structure) your essay, how to help someone else tell his or her story, and how to revise the first draft.

This week we'll look at some new ways of bringing the essay to life (which will take us from structure into details) and we'll do that by analyzing two of my favorite essays ever: the "I Shot My Brother" Essay and the "Dead Bird" Essay.

# THE "I SHOT MY BROTHER" ESSAY

**This was originally written for the Common App prompt called "Topic of your choice," but note that it could work for any number of prompts.**

From page 54 of the maroon notebook sitting on my mahogany desk:

"Then Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me." - Genesis 4:13

Here is a secret that no one in my family knows: I shot my brother when I was six. Luckily, it was a BB gun. But to this day, my older brother Jonathan does not know who shot him. And I have finally promised myself to confess this eleven year old secret to him after I write this essay.

The truth is, I was always jealous of my brother. Our grandparents, with whom we lived as children in Daegu, a rural city in South Korea, showered my brother with endless accolades: he was bright, athletic, and charismatic.

"Why can't you be more like Jon?" my grandmother used to nag, pointing at me with a carrot stick. To me, Jon was just cocky. He would scoff at me when he would beat me in basketball, and when he brought home his painting of Bambi with the teacher's sticker "Awesome!" on top, he would make several copies of it and showcase them on the refrigerator door. But I retreated to my desk where a pile of "Please draw this again and bring it to me tomorrow" papers lay, desperate for immediate treatment. Later, I even refused to attend the same elementary school and wouldn't even eat meals with him.

Deep down I knew I had to get the chip off my shoulder. But I didn't know how.

That is, until March 11th, 2001.

That day around six o'clock, juvenile combatants appeared in Kyung Mountain for their weekly battle, with cheeks smeared in mud and empty BB guns in their hands. The Korean War game was simple: to kill your opponent you had to shout "pow!" before he did. Once we situated ourselves, our captain blew the pinkie whistle and the war began. My friend Min-young and I hid behind a willow tree, eagerly awaiting our orders.

Beside us, our comrades were dying, each falling to the ground crying in "agony," their hands clasping their "wounds." Suddenly a wish for heroism surged within me: I grabbed Min-young's arms and rushed towards the enemies' headquarters, disobeying our orders to remain sentry duty. To tip the tide of the war, I had to kill their captain. We infiltrated the enemy lines, narrowly dodging each attack. We then cleared the pillars of asparagus ferns until the Captain's lair came into view. I quickly pulled my clueless friend back into the bush.

Hearing us, the alarmed captain turned around: It was my brother.

He saw Min-young's right arm sticking out from the bush and hurled a "grenade," (a rock), bruising his arm.

"That's not fair!" I roared in the loudest and most unrecognizable voice I could manage.

Startled, the Captain and his generals abandoned their post. Vengeance replaced my wish for heroism and I took off after the fleeing perpetrator. Streams of sweat ran down my face and I pursued him for several minutes until suddenly I was arrested by a small, yellow sign that read in Korean: DO NOT TRESPASS: Boar Traps Ahead. (Two summers ago, my five year old cousin, who insisted on joining the ranks, had wandered off-course during the battle; we found him at the bottom of a 20 ft deep pit with a deep gash in his forehead and shirt soaked in blood) "Hey, stop!" I shouted, heart pounding. "STOP!" My mind froze. My eyes just gazed at the fleeing object; what should I do?

I looked on as my shivering hand reached for the canister of BBs. The next second, I heard two shots followed by a cry. I opened my eyes just enough to see two village men carrying my brother away from the warning sign. I turned around, hurled my BB gun into the nearby Kyung Creek and ran home as fast as I could.

\* \* \*

Days passed. My brother and I did not talk about the incident.

'Maybe he knew it was me,' I thought in fear as I tried to eavesdrop on his conversation with grandpa one day. When the door suddenly opened, I blurted, "Is anything wrong?"

"Nothing," he said pushing past me, "Just a rough sleep."

But in the next few weeks, something was happening inside me.

All the jealousy and anger I'd once felt had been replaced by a new feeling: guilt.

That night when my brother was gone I went to a local store and bought a piece of chocolate taffy, his favorite. I returned home and placed it on my brother's bed with a note attached: "Love, Grandma."

Several days later, I secretly went into his room and folded his unkempt pajamas.

Then, other things began to change. We began sharing clothes (something we had never done), started watching Pokémon episodes together, and then, on his ninth birthday, I did something with Jon that I hadn't

done in six years: I ate dinner with him. I even ate fishcakes, which he loved but I hated. And I didn't complain.

Today, my brother is one of my closest friends. Every week I accompany him to Carlson Hospital where he receives treatment for his obsessive compulsive disorder and schizophrenia. While in the waiting room, we play a noisy game of Zenga, comment on the Lakers' performance or listen to the radio on the registrar's desk.

Then, the door to the doctor's office opens.

"Jonathan Lee, please come in."

I tap his shoulder and whisper, "Rock it, bro."

After he leaves, I take out my notebook and begin writing where I left off.

Beside me, the receptionist's fingers hover over the radio in search of a new station, eventually settling on one. I hear LeAnn Rimes singing "Amazing Grace." Her voice slowly rises over the noise of the bustling room.

"'Twas Grace that taught my heart to fear. And Grace, my fears relieved..."

Smiling, I open Jon's Jansport backpack and neatly place this essay inside and a chocolate taffy with a note attached.

Twenty minutes have passed when the door abruptly opens.

"Guess what the doctor just said?" my brother cries, unable to hide his exhilaration.

I look up and I smile too.

# THE "DEAD BIRD" ESSAY

**This was originally written for a Common App prompt that no longer exists, "Evaluate a significant experience, risk, achievement, ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you." Like the essay above, it could work for any number of prompts.**

Smearred blood, shredded feathers. Clearly, the bird was dead. But wait, the slight fluctuation of its chest, the slow blinking of its shiny black eyes. No, it was alive.

I had been typing an English essay when I heard my cat's loud meows and the flutter of wings. I had turned slightly at the noise and had found the barely breathing bird in front of me.

The shock came first. Mind racing, heart beating faster, blood draining from my face. I instinctively reached out my hand to hold it, like a long-lost keepsake from my youth. But then I remembered that birds had life, flesh, blood.

Death. Dare I say it out loud? Here, in my own home?

Within seconds, my reflexes kicked in. Get over the shock. Gloves, napkins, towels. Band-aid? How does one heal a bird? I rummaged through the house, keeping a wary eye on my cat. Donning yellow rubber gloves, I tentatively picked up the bird. Never mind the cat's hissing and protesting scratches, you need to save the bird. You need to ease its pain.

But my mind was blank. I stroked the bird with a paper towel to clear away the blood, see the wound. The wings were crumpled, the feet mangled. A large gash extended close to its jugular rendering its breathing shallow, unsteady. The rising and falling of its small breast slowed. Was the bird dying? No, please, not yet.

Why was this feeling so familiar, so tangible?

Oh. Yes. The long drive, the green hills, the white church, the funeral. The Chinese mass, the resounding amens, the flower arrangements. Me, crying silently, huddled in the corner. The Hsieh family huddled around the casket. Apologies. So many apologies. Finally, the body lowered to rest. The body. Kari Hsieh. Still familiar, still tangible.

Hugging Mrs. Hsieh, I was a ghost, a statue. My brain and my body competed. Emotion wrestled with fact. Kari Hsieh, aged 17, my friend of four years, had died in the Chatsworth Metrolink Crash on Sep. 12, 2008. Kari was dead, I thought. Dead.

But I could still save the bird.

My frantic actions heightened my senses, mobilized my spirit. Cupping the bird, I ran outside, hoping the cool air outdoors would suture every wound, cause the bird to miraculously fly away. Yet there lay the bird in my hands, still gasping, still dying. Bird, human, human, bird. What was the difference? Both were the same. Mortal.

But couldn't I do something? Hold the bird longer, de-claw the cat? I wanted to go to my bedroom, confine myself to tears, replay my memories, never come out.

The bird's warmth faded away. Its heartbeat slowed along with its breath. For a long time, I stared thoughtlessly at it, so still in my hands.

Slowly, I dug a small hole in the black earth. As it disappeared under handfuls of dirt, my own heart grew stronger, my own breath more steady.

The wind, the sky, the dampness of the soil on my hands whispered to me, "The bird is dead. Kari has passed. But you are alive." My breath, my heartbeat, my sweat sighed back, "I am alive. I am alive. I am alive."

# Four Qualities of an Amazing Essay

In [Ira Glass on Storytelling](#), a short series of YouTube videos, Glass notes that a great story has two parts: a narrative that engages us (this happened, then that happened...) and an insight that illuminates (Why did you tell this story? So what?). I've read a lot of college essays. But the two essays you've just read have two of the most interesting narrative and "so what" combinations I've ever seen. And when I started looking at them side by side I realized that they have a few other things in common, which I call:

## Four Qualities of an Amazing Essay

1. The story is unusual in either content, structure or both.
2. A "wow" moment.
3. The ending is both surprising and inevitable.
4. The ending makes the reader do a little bit of work.

### Analysis of the "I Shot My Brother" essay:

#### 1. Unusual elements

- a. Unusual content: what kind of person shoots his brother? And what kind of person shoots his brother to save his brother's life? Not many people.
- b. Unusual structure: non-chronological order of events (starts with the end). Cinematic time-jumps.
- c. Unusual style: great dialogue. Realistic characters. Memorable visual details. One of the best essay openings I have ever read.

#### 2. The "wow" moment

- \* The moment he has to shoot his brother in order to save his life.
- \* Double wow: he's also been looking to get back at his brother, so shooting him is both an "I love you" and "I hate you" moment.
- \* Triple wow: the moment of violence ends up being the catalyst for ultimately bringing them together...

#### 3. The ending is both surprising and inevitable

- \* Surprising: no way will these two reconcile.
- \* Inevitable: of course they'll reconcile.
- \* Also surprising: even if I suspected they would reconcile, I didn't expect it would happen in this way.

#### 4. The ending makes the reader do a little bit of work.

Again, look at that ending--what does it mean?

*Smiling, I open Jon's Jansport backpack and neatly place this essay inside and a chocolate taffy with a note attached.*

*Twenty minutes have passed when the door abruptly opens.*

*“Guess what the doctor just said?” my brother cries, unable to hide his exhilaration.  
I look up and I smile too.*

I won't spell it out. Just think about where his relationship with his brother started and think about where it is now.

## **Analysis of the “Dead Bird” essay:**

### **1. Unusual elements**

- a. Unusual content (the “what”): Who gets the chance to save a dead bird? Who makes a connection to a friend while the bird is dying? Not many people.
- b. Unusual structure (the “how”): The non-chronological opening: she starts with an arresting image then does a flashback to fill us in on the context.
- c. Unusual style (the “how”): The clipped style of the writing. Like a series of snapshots, or a film with very quick takes.

### **2. The “wow” moment:**

The moment when she realizes that her struggle to let the bird go parallels her struggle to let her friend go. It's not explicit, so you have to look for it. But it's there.

### **3. The ending is both surprising and inevitable**

- \* Why surprising? We didn't expect her to make peace with the bird's death, or her friend's.
- \* Why inevitable? Now that I think about it, of course she'd have to accept the bird's death, and her friend's.

### **4. The ending makes the reader do a little bit of work.**

Look at that ending again--what does it mean?

*The wind, the sky, the dampness of the soil on my hands whispered to me, “The bird is dead. Kari has passed. But you are alive.” My breath, my heartbeat, my sweat sighed back, “I am alive. I am alive. I am alive.”*

It's not explicit. I would call this a “poetic” ending, and I'll define “poetic” in this way: it leaves something unaccounted for. To get the meaning you have to think about it a bit, and different people may have different interpretations. Note that it's easy to do this poorly and hard to do this well. In terms of what the ending to this essay means, I won't ruin it by trying to explain it. I'll let you decide for yourself. (And that's not a tease, by the way, that's a gift.)

Also--and I just noticed this--both of these essays end with some kind of redemption. I'm not saying that's required for an amazing essay, but I think it's part of what makes my heart swell every time I read these two.

Keep in mind that these are not the only qualities of an amazing essay or even required to make your essay amazing, these are simply qualities that I have observed in two essays that I find amazing.

## **For Those of Us Who Haven't Shot Our Brother or Watched a Bird Die and Realized it Was a Metaphor for Life**

I acknowledge that not everyone has a story like the ones we just read. So here are some practical techniques for the rest of us.

### **Five Ways to Bring Your College Essay to Life: Mediocre Advice Made Better**

Sometimes writing advice is mediocre not because it's wrong but because it's either not specific enough or not presented with clear examples. Below are five ways to make your essay better, plus examples, inspired by some of the mediocre advice I've seen on blogs or heard from my students via their well-meaning English teachers. (And I love English teachers.)

#### Mediocre Piece of Advice #1:

"Choose a great opening!"

Um. Yes, of course. But how?

#### Better advice:

Begin with a problem that must be solved.

Why do this?

It gives the reader something to figure out. And showing us how you figured it out demonstrates how much of a genius you are.

## **The Porcelain God Essay**

*Bowing down to the porcelain god, I emptied the contents of my stomach. Foaming at the mouth, I was ready to pass out. My body couldn't stop shaking as I gasped for air, and the room started spinning.*

(Read the whole Porcelain God essay [here](#).)

## The "I Shot My Brother" Essay

*From page 54 of the maroon notebook sitting on my mahogany desk:*

"Then Cain said to the Lord, "My punishment is greater than I can bear. I shall be a fugitive and a wanderer on the earth and whoever finds me will kill me." - Genesis 4:13

*Here is a secret that no one in my family knows: I shot my brother when I was six. Luckily, it was a BB gun. But to this day, my older brother Jonathan does not know who shot him. And I have finally promised myself to confess this eleven year old secret to him after I write this essay.*

(Read the whole "I Shot My Brother" essay [here](#).)

## The "Rock, Paper, Scissors" Essay

Dear Christian,

The admissions staff at the University of Chicago would like to inform you that your application has been "put on the line." We have one spot left and can't decide if we should admit you or another equally qualified applicant. To resolve the matter, please choose one of the following:

Rock, paper, or scissors.

You will be notified of our decision shortly.

*Rock beats scissors, scissors beats paper, and paper beats rock. Wait... paper beats rock? Since when has a sheet of loose leaf paper ever defeated a solid block of granite? Do we assume that the paper wraps around the rock, smothering the rock into submission? When exposed to paper, is rock somehow immobilized, unable to fulfill its primary function of smashing scissors? What constitutes defeat between two inanimate objects?*

(Read the whole "Rock, Paper, Scissors" essay [here](#).)

## Mediocre Piece of Advice #2:

"Show, don't tell."

"Show don't tell" is an invitation to use images (i.e. create a pretty picture) to illustrate ideas, which is a good starting point. But I think a college admissions officer is interested in not only the pretty picture you paint, but also your reflections and insights on what the pretty picture means.

# Better advice:

Show first, then tell.

Here's an example of a nice "show":

*Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing a car's standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch.*

Great start. But if the writer stops there, we're not sure what the author's perspective on these details is. That's why I advocate for a little "tell" after the "show."

Example of show followed by tell:

*Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, **as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.***

The "show" demonstrates you're a talented writer.

The "tell" demonstrates you're a critical thinker.

**Be both.**

**Important note:** I like putting the "show" before the "tell" because to me--and this is a personal preference--the above paragraph is more interesting if the show comes first. Compare these two:

Version A:

*Many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch, **as I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art.***

Version B:

***I believe a few small changes can transform a generic product into a personalized work of art** which is why many nights you'll find me in the garage replacing standard chrome trim with an elegant piano black finish or changing the threads on the stitching of the seats to add a personal touch.*

See how Version A is a little better? (Read it again, if not.) And the “show before tell” principle works not just on individual sentences and paragraphs, but for the essay as a whole.

Two more reasons it's a good idea to describe the images (show) before giving your interpretation (tell):

1. Doing so creates an interesting puzzle in the reader's mind: What do these images mean? What will it add up to?
2. Doing so allows the reader more freedom of imagination to come up with his or her own interpretation before you deliver your own.

Both of these will engage the reader more.

## Mediocre Piece of Advice #3:

“Write what you know.”

Yeah, sure. But a little more specific, please?

Better advice:

Use geeky language.

What do I mean? If you know something really well, and can speak about it in ways that are shining, shimmering and splendid, then go for it.

### **Example 1:**

*The first project that I was involved with investigated the extraintestinal manifestations of IBD. Patients who suffer from IBD often have diseases called extraintestinal manifestations that also affect multiple other organ systems and can be just as, if not more debilitating than the intestinal inflammation itself. My contribution involved examining data in Dr. Shih's clinical database, which led me to discover that the skin is one of the most commonly affected organ systems in patients who suffer from IBD. I contributed to Dr. Shih's review article to give an overview of the types of skin diseases typically seen with IBD and their respective pathogenesis, proposed mechanisms, and treatments, and my contributions were significant enough to earn recognition as a second author.*

Boom.

### Example 2:

*Through switch-side policy debate I not only discuss a multitude of competing ideas, but also argue from both sides of widely disputed issues. By equipping me with Protogoras' antilogic and Dissoi Logoi, switch-side policy debate has provided me with a forum to cultivate a diversity of intellectual perspectives that has informed my own intellectual growth.*

Winning.

### Example 3:

*I'm the math geek who marvels at the fundamental theorems of Calculus, or who sees beauty in  $A=(s(s-a)(s-b)(s-c))^{1/2}$ . Again, it's in the details: one bracket off or one digit missing and the whole equation collapses. **And details are more than details, they can mean the difference between negative and positive infinity, an impossible range of solutions.***

Super geeky, and I love it. Note how, as above, he's following up **the geeky language (show)** with **the insight (tell)**.

## Mediocre Piece of Advice #4:

"Use lots of details."

Really?

Better advice:

Use the right details.

But wait:

- \* Which are the right details? The answer: the details that, in the larger context of your story, illustrate the essential point your trying to make in a particular paragraph.
- \* How can you tell what the essential point of a paragraph is? Use [this exercise](#) to clarify what the main point of each paragraph is. Then decide which details will best illustrate that point.

\* Often, students are focused on perfecting the wrong details. What makes a detail “wrong”?

Sometimes details are:

1. illustrating a minor or tangential point that will eventually get cut, or
2. illustrating a point could be stronger and will eventually get cut.

Here are two examples from recent student essays:

### **Example 1: a detail illustrating a minor or tangential point... that will eventually get cut**

*I learned the importance of teamwork in elementary school when I worked with my friends to do a parody of Pokemon.*

The author asked me, “Do you think Pokemon is a good example or should I use Super Mario?” But debating Pokemon vs. Super Mario here was beside the point because, ultimately, the student discovered that the word limit wouldn’t allow her to go all the way back to elementary school. I suspected this would happen, and instead of wasting time obsessing over Pokemon vs. Super Mario, I asked the student what the purpose of the Pokemon detail was. She said she wasn’t sure. (See where I’m going with this?)

Before asking “Which detail should I use?”, ask “Why am I choosing this detail?”

I suggested this earlier, but it’s worth repeating: before you begin tweaking details, make sure you have the right big pieces (content) in the right order (structure).

### **Example 2: a detail illustrating a point that could be stronger... and will eventually get cut**

*Drops of sweat roll down our faces like glass beads as Nicole accuses Allison for the third time in a row. Without missing a beat, Ally retorts: “Believe me Nicole, if I was Mafia, you’d be dead by now.” All eyes turn to Nicole running with suspicion; she knew she was in peril now. This... is Mafia.*

After I read this aloud with my student, he asked, “Do you think dialogue is a good idea?”

My response: “Generally, yes. But I have some bigger questions first: What inspired you to open the essay with a description of the game Mafia? What larger point are you, or will you be, illustrating? Is Mafia the best way to do it? (I didn’t ask in this very stilted way, but this is what I was thinking.) Another way of asking this is: if you have 3-5 minutes with the reader--because that’s about how long it takes to read an essay--is this Mafia opening the best use of your time?” Ultimately he decided it wasn’t and changed the opening.

You get my point. There's no need to add random details simply for the sake of adding details--ask instead, which details do I need? Start big, then drill down.

## Mediocre Piece of Advice #5:

"Finish strong!"

Better advice:

Aim for an ending that's surprising, but inevitable.

I introduced this concept above, but here are a few more resources:

- \* The concept is derived from Aristotle, who has much more to say about it [here](#).
- \* David Mamet reminds us [in this quotation](#) that the better the story is the more surprising and inevitable its ending.

Two more illustrative examples:

- \* [Example Essay A](#), the "On Debate" essay: we knew the author would ultimately overcome her shyness, we just weren't sure how.
- \* [Example Essay B](#), the "Machines" essay: we knew the author would end up doing something related to "machines," but we didn't expect the kind of "machine" he reveals in the end.

# When to Scrap What You Have and Start Over

When is it time to start over? Simple:

Any time you want.

As long as it's before the deadline, you have time.

## Really?

In the words of Shrek, Really, really. Sometimes as writers we can grow pretty attached to what we've written. We think, "But I've spent so much time on it!" or "I'm invested" or, my favorite, "If I start over now I'll lose everything I've written!"

But it's not true. You won't lose anything. Just because you choose new examples, a new structure, or even a new topic doesn't mean you lose everything from before. The work you've done clears the way for the work you've yet to do.

*Sacrifice the essay of yesterday to the essay of tomorrow.*

- Me (I think)

If you're feeling kind of "eh" about your essay, or like you haven't found your deepest story yet, just remember:

There's an extraordinary story inside you waiting to be told.

And [you're the only one who can tell it.](#)

## A Quick Note to Those Who Feel Like They're Falling Behind

I want to acknowledge that some of you are whizzing right along and are hard at work refining your details. Good for you. Some of you, though, are not quite there yet--you're still struggling to find your structure or maybe even your topic. Let me say this: it's totally fine. You aren't falling behind. Writing is a strange and unpredictable process. There's no step-by-step method that works for everyone. My advice is to keep at it: keep reading, keep trying new things, above all, keep writing. You'll get there. Having said that...

## If you're still struggling to find your topic:

Try this Guided Meditation Exercise.

If you've gone through all the exercises I've suggested, plus the meditation above, and you're still having trouble:

- \* What's wrong with you? (I'm kidding.)
- \* Try writing [Morning Pages](#), as Julia Cameron suggests in *The Artist's Way*.
- \* Have you tried brainstorming with a partner yet? If not, try it.
  - Oh, you tried it and it didn't work? Try someone else.
- \* Just pick something and start writing. That simple? Yup. Better than doing nothing.

### **If you've got your topic, but aren't sure the structure is right or that the essay flows:**

- \* First, go back to Session 3 and do the [How to Revise Your Essay in 5 Steps](#) exercise.
- \* Next, get feedback from someone else. Didn't get useful feedback? Try someone else.
- \* Once you've tried both these things (and you have to promise you've tried both of the first steps above first) you might try uploading what you've written to a Google doc and sharing it with me (Ethan) via email. I'll email you back. Really.

### **Want more structure help?**

Check out the next section:

[How to Write Each of the Four Types of Essays: A Step-by-Step Guide](#)

### **Just need some inspiration?**

Good thing I created [this whole page of stuff to inspire you](#).