



**Stand  
Out**  
*with  
an  
Outstanding  
Essay*

# Susan Schaurer

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**ACT**

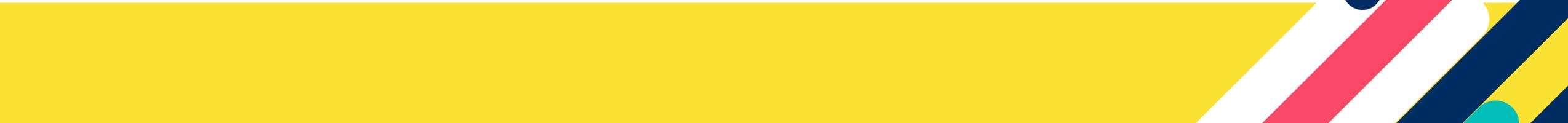
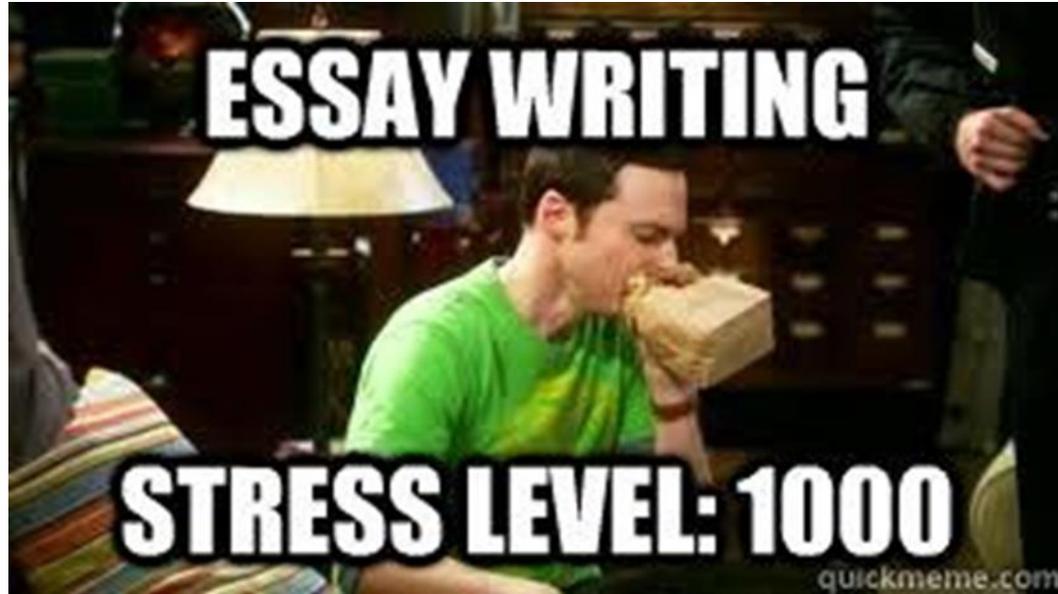


- High school English teacher
  - 13-year career at a large public university
  - Director of admission and associate vice president for enrollment management
  - Thousands of applications for admission and scholarship essays reviewed
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- **The Role of the Essay**
- **Getting Started**
- **The Prompts**
- **Find Your Voice**
- **Important Tips & Insights**
- **Next Steps & Takeaways**



**Contents**



# Admission Considerations

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## The Role of the Essay

- Academic Fit
- Standardized Test Score(s)
- High School Performance (GPA)
- Rigor of Curriculum
- Activities
- Leadership

- Work Experience
- Volunteerism
- Diversity
- Talent
- Life Experience
- Overcoming Adversity
- Contributions to Campus

# The Role of the Essay



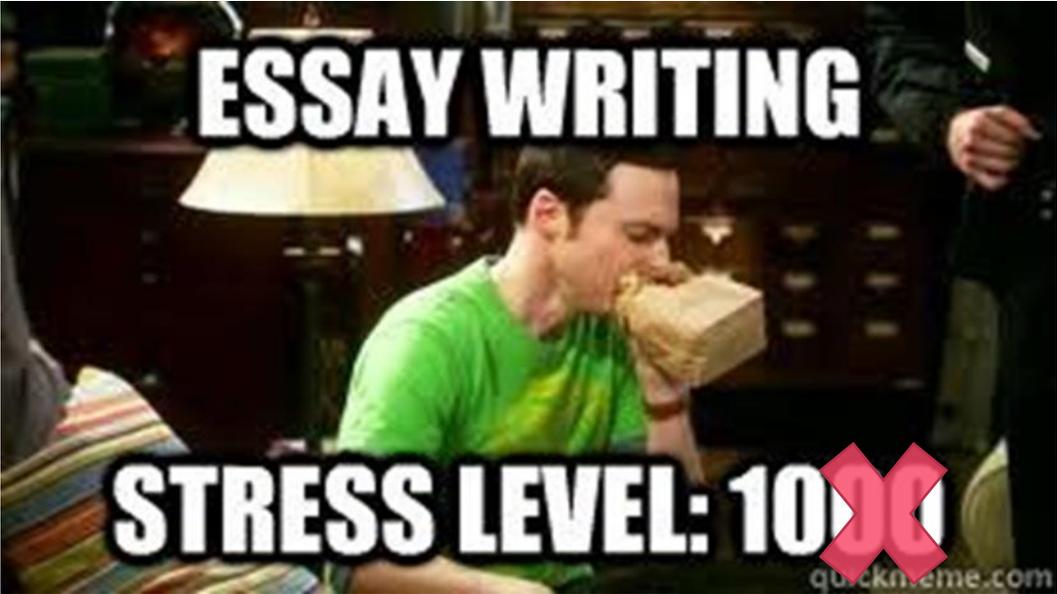
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- Insights not revealed in the application
  - Writing skills and abilities
  - Personal qualities and values
  - Societal views, opinions on global issues
  - Contributions to a community of learners
  - One of **many** factors and considerations
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**“Essays help lift candidates at the margins; they very rarely are the thing that gets an applicant in. The essays that stick out do so not because of *what* the applicants write but *how* they write it – with an authentic voice that gives the reader a sense of what the student sees, feels, and thinks.”**

Jeffrey Selingo, *Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions* (2020)





# Getting Started

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- Get organized – deadlines, word limits, optional or required
- Plan ahead – look at the calendar and schedule time to engage in the writing process; draft, revise, edit
- Brainstorm: look at old photos, scan your bulletin board, pull out the box from under your bed, look through your playlist



# Essay Considerations

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## Idea Generator Exercise

- Vivid childhood memory
- Hobby, passion or intense appreciation
- Something you will greatly miss when you leave

- The thing that can always make you laugh
- Your Achilles' heel
- Your favorite day (thus far!)
- Most prized possession

# Getting Started

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- Give thought to which aspect(s) of your character or personality can't be learned from your transcript and list of activities
- Do your research - know the weight and importance of the essay to the school/scholarship/program to which you are applying
- Review **every** prompt/question for **every** application



# Common App

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.

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?

Reflect on a time when you **questioned or challenged a belief or idea**. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

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**?

Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that **sparked a period of personal growth** and a new understanding of yourself or others.

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?

# Common App

**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.**



# University of California

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- Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes or contributed to group efforts over time.
- Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
- What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
- Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.
- Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
- Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
- What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
- Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?



***Essay Option 1***

**What if the moon were made of cheese?  
Or Neptune made of soap? Pick a  
celestial object, reimagine its material  
composition, and explore the  
implications. Feel free to explore the  
realms of physics, philosophy,  
fantasy...the sky is the limit!**



*Essay Option 2*  
**What's so easy about pie?**



## *Essay Option 3*

In Homer's Iliad, Helen had a "face that launched a thousand ships." A millihelen, then, measures the beauty needed to launch one ship. The Sagan unit is used to denote any large quantity (in place of "billions and billions"). A New York Minute measures the period of time between a traffic light turning green and the cab behind you honking. Invent a new unit of measurement. How is it derived? How is it used? What are its equivalents?

# Find Your Voice

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- Write about what matters to **you** – not what you think they want to hear or what would impress them
- Focus on you – not an event, injury, or trip
- Be willing to show emotion or vulnerability
- Imagine how the reader would describe you after reading your essay – is it accurate?



# Important Tips & Insights



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- Proofread – and then do it again
  - Do not recycle an essay you completed for a school assignment
  - Approach humor with caution
  - Spend time on developing a **strong start**
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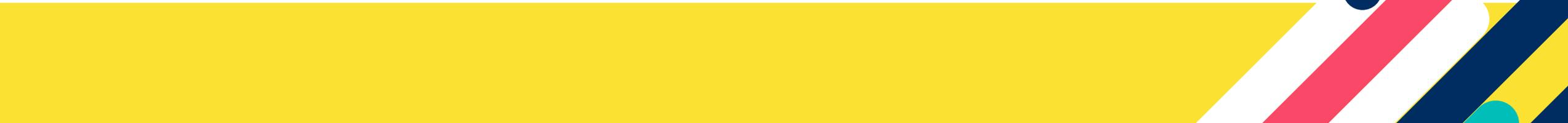
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Jim Rawlins, University of Oregon, *USA Today* (October 23, 2014)



# Next Steps & Takeaways



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- Organize and make a plan
  - Keep it focused
  - This is about you – not the game, not the town, not the other person
  - There is no **perfect** essay
  - **Share** a memory, **paint** the story, **reflect** on an experience - don't just *write an essay*
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**“The best essays are honest, slice-of-life stories, both entertaining and serious, that tell admissions officers something they don’t learn from another part of the application. They’re essays that aren’t trying to shoehorn seventeen years into 650 words.”**

Jeffrey Selingo, *Who Gets In and Why: A Year Inside College Admissions* (2020)





**What story do you  
want to tell?**



**QUESTIONS?**



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