



AMERICAN LIVED
ISMAILI FAITH

ALIF Program, Week 5:

Essay Strategies for your College Application



Introduction



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Introduction

- ▶ **Focus Areas**
 - ▶ What will we cover today?
 - ▶ Where is this in the application process?
 - ▶ What if I've already written a draft?





Agenda

- 1 Overview
- 2 Beginning the Process
- 3 Writing Strategies
- 4 Impact of Covid-19 on your Essays
- 5 Guiding Principles and Best Practices
- 6 Next Steps





Quote

"...there is no better investment that individuals, parents and the nation can make than an **investment in education of the highest possible quality**. Such investments are reflected, and endure, in the formation of the kind of social conscience that our world so desperately needs."

– Mawlana Hazar Imam in Osh, Kyrgyz Republic (2002)





Overview



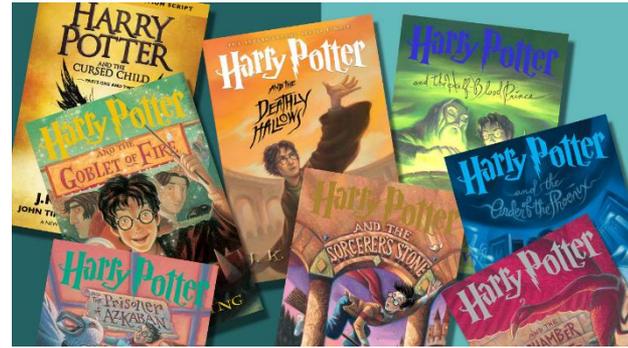


Why Are Essays Important?

Make this...



... feel like this!





What are Stories?

What are Components of a Story?

What Makes Stories Effective?





Storytelling and the Writing Process

What is the difference between story-telling and writing?



Story-telling is the broader **goal** of getting a point across in a way that engages the audience.



Writing process is a concrete **way** of using the elements of language to tell your story effectively

Story-telling is the goal; writing is the tool!





Qualitative Parts of the Application





Admissions Committees are looking to understand...



“Can we satisfy this applicant’s interests, passions and pursuits?”



“Will this applicant enhance the community at our school?”



“Does this individual bring a unique voice or perspective?”



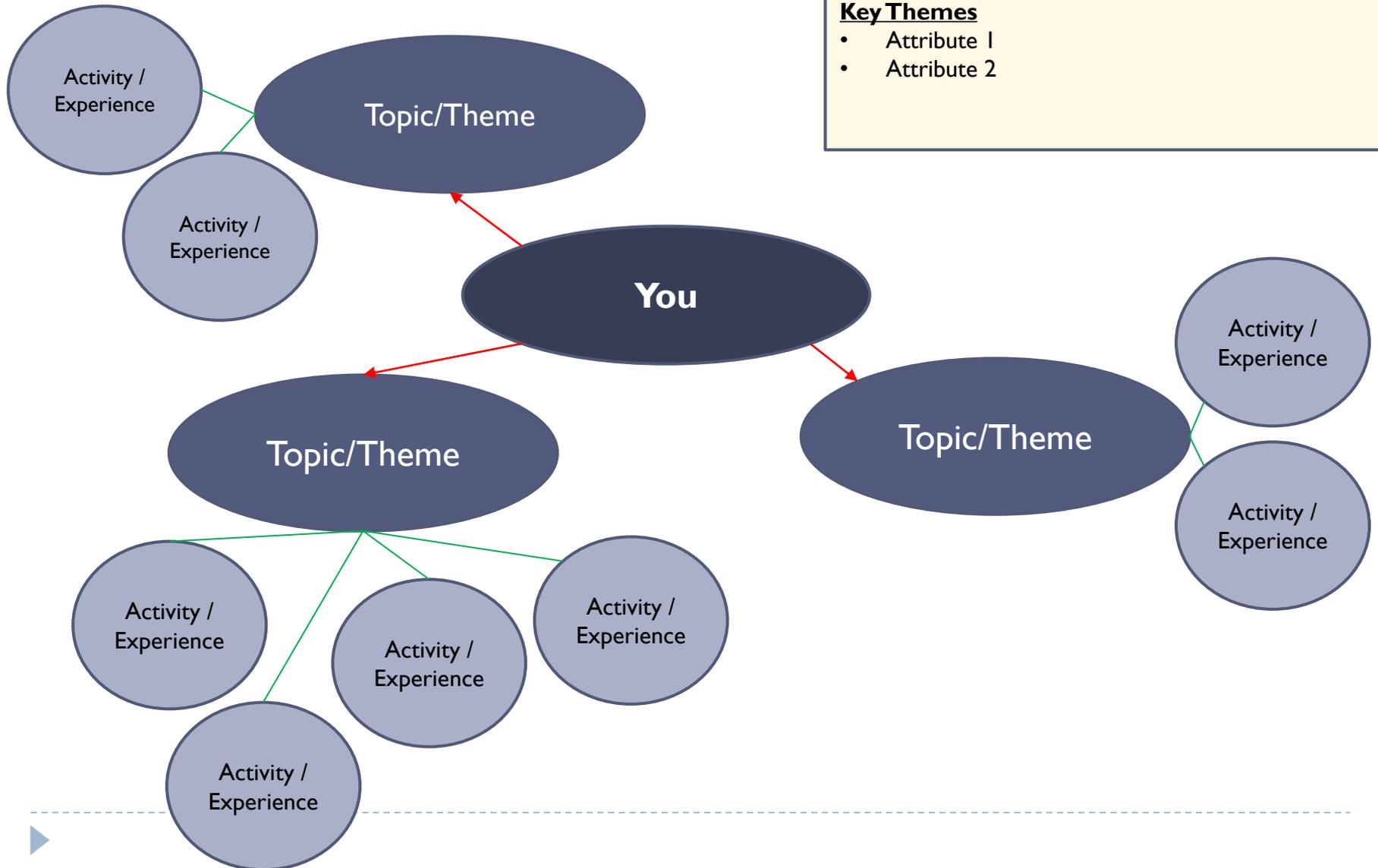
“Would I want to be this applicant’s roommate?”



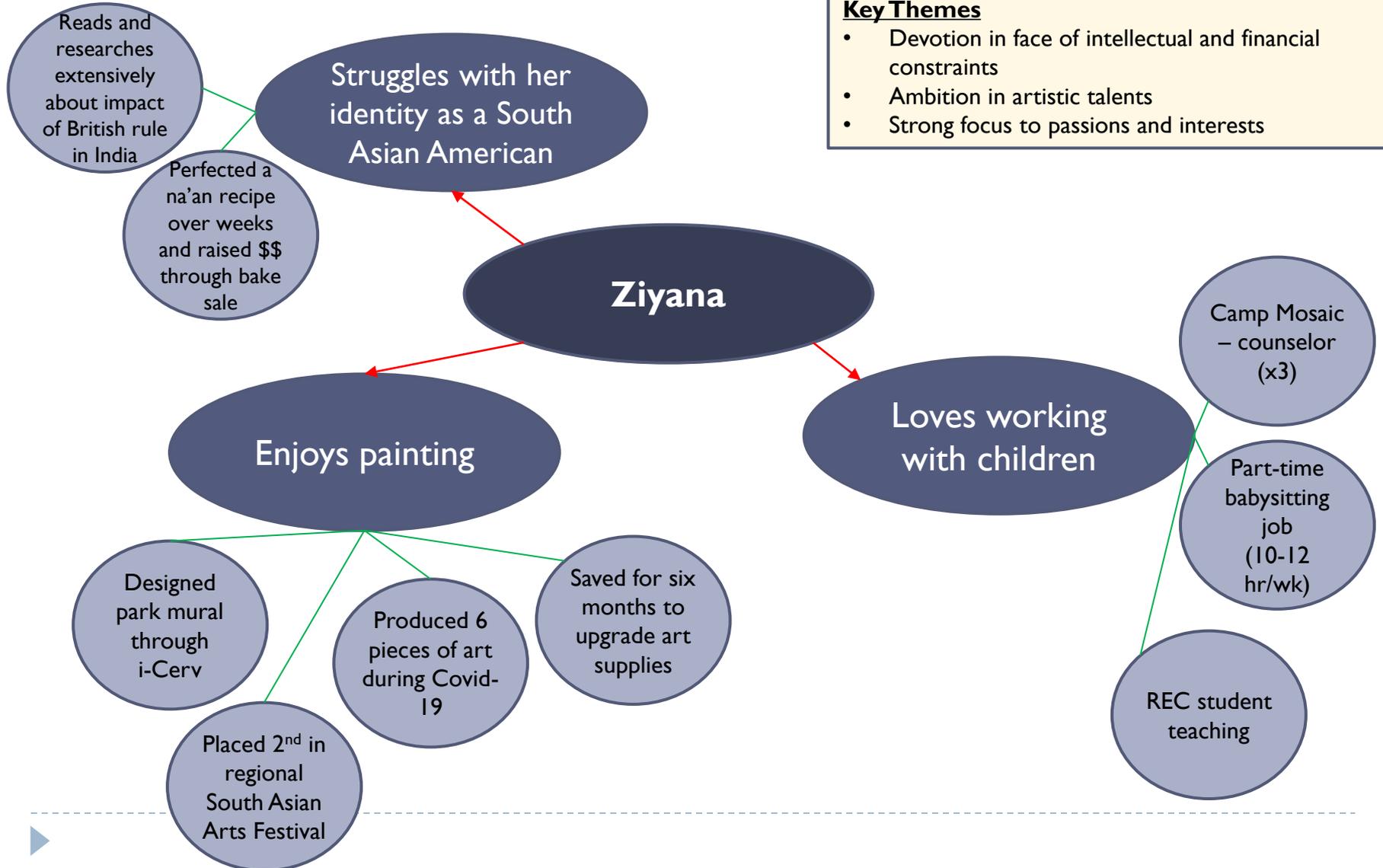
2 Beginning the Process



Approach 1



Approach 1 - Example



Overall Narrative

Ziyana is a driven and committed, first-gen American building a broader identity through culture, service and the arts

Key Themes

- Devotion in face of intellectual and financial constraints
- Ambition in artistic talents
- Strong focus to passions and interests



Approach 2

Writing About You

We need to uncover the real you, your truest essence, and that which uniquely describes you

5 Sentences that Describe You

Write 5 sentences that uniquely describe you.

- *I only eat salads with my hands and never with a fork.*
- *I once fell asleep on the city bus heading to school and ended up 65 miles away from home.*
- *The only thrill I live for is watching my free throw shots sink through the basketball hoop.*
- *It's hard for me to understand why different architecture styles are allowed to co-exist on a city block.*
- *10 years of my life have been spent caring for three younger siblings, and I've had it with Big Bird.*

Be sure to remain honest. Be funny. Be serious. Be both. Be you!

Essence Bag

Imagine a bag that holds 5 objects that represent your truest essence. Ex. "A green highlighter". Specify why you have chosen this object. Ex. "Because like a highlighter, I want to underscore the issues I care about, like man-made climate change." List 5 objects and explain why below.





Approach 3

- ▶ For each activity or attribute in your background, reflect deeply on three things:
 - ▶ What impact did I have in _____?
 - ▶ What did I learn or take away from _____?
 - ▶ How has this shaped or influenced who I am?



*This is what makes your
essay personal*





Approach 3 - Example

- ▶ For each activity or attribute in your background, reflect deeply on three things:

Yusuf is a Boy Scout who redesigned the local soup kitchen activity

- ▶ What impact did I have in _____?
- ▶ What did I learn or take away from _____?
- ▶ How has this shaped or influenced who I am?



*This is what makes your
essay personal*



2

Approach 3: Start With Reflections (cont.)

EXAMPLE
STRATEGY

	Academics				Activities					Personality			
	Favorite Subject(s)	Research	Project	Project	Activity 1	Activity 2	Activity 3	Hobby 1	Hobby 2	Strength 1	Strength 2	Imp Value 1	Imp Value 2
What impact did I make?													
What did I learn?													
How has this shaped me?													

- ▶ Build a list of all your (meaningful) academic, extracurricular and personal activities
- ▶ Attempt to answer the three key questions for each entry in your list
- ▶ Consider your most meaningful and substantive experience for the primary essay



3 Writing Strategies





Opening Strategies

- ▶ Zoom in, zoom out – *drop the reader into the scene*
- ▶ Declaration – *say something unexpected*
- ▶ Structured – *generally tell the reader what they should know*
- ▶ Reflection(s) – *looking back on an experience or event*
- ▶ Any other approach





Zoom In, Zoom Out - Examples...

▶ Boy Scouts

Plop... plop... plop. For two hours, all we did was plop rice and beans onto the sturdy Styrofoam plates of Houston's homeless. The smile that graced my face at the start of our shift was quickly replaced with sadness after realizing I myself could never come to eat the lumpy pile of faded brown mush. And as the hours passed, I became frustrated by how this entire event lacked what I thought we were trying to do here.

▶ Traveling Overseas

I scanned over the sea of heads in front of me, quickly trying to locate the exit sign, all the while dragging behind me the handle of a suitcase with one clicking wheel. If this was an emergency, I guess I would follow the gentleman a few yards ahead, his stride revealing the confidence of a person who regularly passes through this arrival hall...





Declaration - Example...

▶ Stock Club

“Where is everyone? And how much money do I need?” I should have answers to the questions Tom was asking, an eager freshman who registered after seeing my flyer for the Stock Club’s inaugural meeting. He and two other people waited impatiently for me to get started, but there were dozens of empty chairs that I thought should have been filled; after all, learning to navigate the market is a first step in appreciating capital structures in society. Now the questions came from my own head – “Should I have used more currency icons on the flyer?”, “Why are people ‘shorting’ this new club?” and “What would Warren Buffet do?” I left after five minutes, feeling less bullish on the future potential of Stock Club.





Structured - Example...

▶ Engineering

As an intern at a construction engineering firm this past summer, I learned first-hand about the challenges of building a twenty-story apartment building: not just the structural or mechanical challenges, but also the intricate ways in which groups of people interact to complete a project on-time. While I am primarily interested in core structural and civil engineering subjects, I have learned that engineering needs to be approached in a holistic manner that incorporates economic, environmental, and interpersonal systems. I want to be taught engineering in a way that encompasses all of these different frontiers. I hope to one day build technologically innovative and environmentally friendly skyscrapers designed for a rapidly urbanizing world.



3

Don't devote word count to defining something for your reader...



▶ Camp Mosaic

“At Camp Mosaic, our spirits are always up; and never ever halfway up, or never ever down.” I had the privilege of serving as a counselor at Camp Mosaic for the past three summers. **Mosaic is a summer camp for Ismaili students ages 6-12 years old taking place at locations all across the U.S. The day is filled with arts, sports, swimming and more to help participants understand problem-solving, risk-taking and personal development...**

40 extra words

▶ My uncle

I thrashed in the water, trying to find the other life raft that also fell out of the boat. The second raft was supposed to hold my Uncle Amyn. He was a lean, glasses-wearing, non-swimmer, but I wasn't any better at dealing with water. **Amyn is my father's youngest brother who professionally works as a pharmacist, and lives about 30 minutes from us. He doesn't have a spouse, children, or any pets, so we are his only family.**

34 extra words

Story disruptor!





The Common App Prompts

2021-2022 Common Application Essay Prompts

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 were challenged in an unexpected way. Describe how you grew and your thinking? What was the outcome?
4. Reflect on **something** you have done that you are proud of and how it has made you a better person. How has this gratitude affected others around you?
5. Discuss an **accomplishment** you are proud of and how it has impacted your life. Be creative, if you wish. Would you prefer to be challenged in a different way? What would you do and what would you learn?
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.

*What if we told you
to ignore the prompt?*



The Common App Prompts

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 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.
-



4 Covid-19





Effects of Covid-19 On Your Essays

- ▶ **If your application was previously a weather map with many data points...**
- ▶ **... you might now have fewer things to present if tests are optional...**
- ▶ **... which means your essays have to be strong and influential in order to persuade the admissions committee**





Covid-19 optional essay

Common App:

Optional

250 words

Separate from Additional Info section

*Community disruptions such as COVID-19 and natural disasters can have **deep and long-lasting impacts**. If you need it, this space is yours to describe those impacts. Colleges care about the **effects on your health and well-being, safety, family circumstances, future plans, and education, including access to reliable technology and quiet study spaces.***

General Guidelines

- *Take a fact-based approach*
 - *Avoid listing general situations*
 - *Be specific*
 - *Focus on the impact to you and your situation*
-
- 

5 Guiding Principles





The Writing Process

Telling good stories requires writing well – practice everyday!

Writing is an Iterative Process



Learn to plan. Use an outline.



Write everyday. Like playing tennis/piano, can be strengthened with practice.



Being able to write brief, well-reasoned pieces will help in college essays.



Learn to write truly rough drafts; only polish a piece at the end of the process.





Guidance and Best Practices

Keep the focus on you!

- What if essay is about someone else?
- What if I have to explain context?



- How were you transformed?
- What did you learn?
- What didn't you learn?

Work and Re-work Drafts

- Do you know anyone who got accepted with a first or second draft?
- Who can you ask for feedback? (self, teachers, advisor, others)

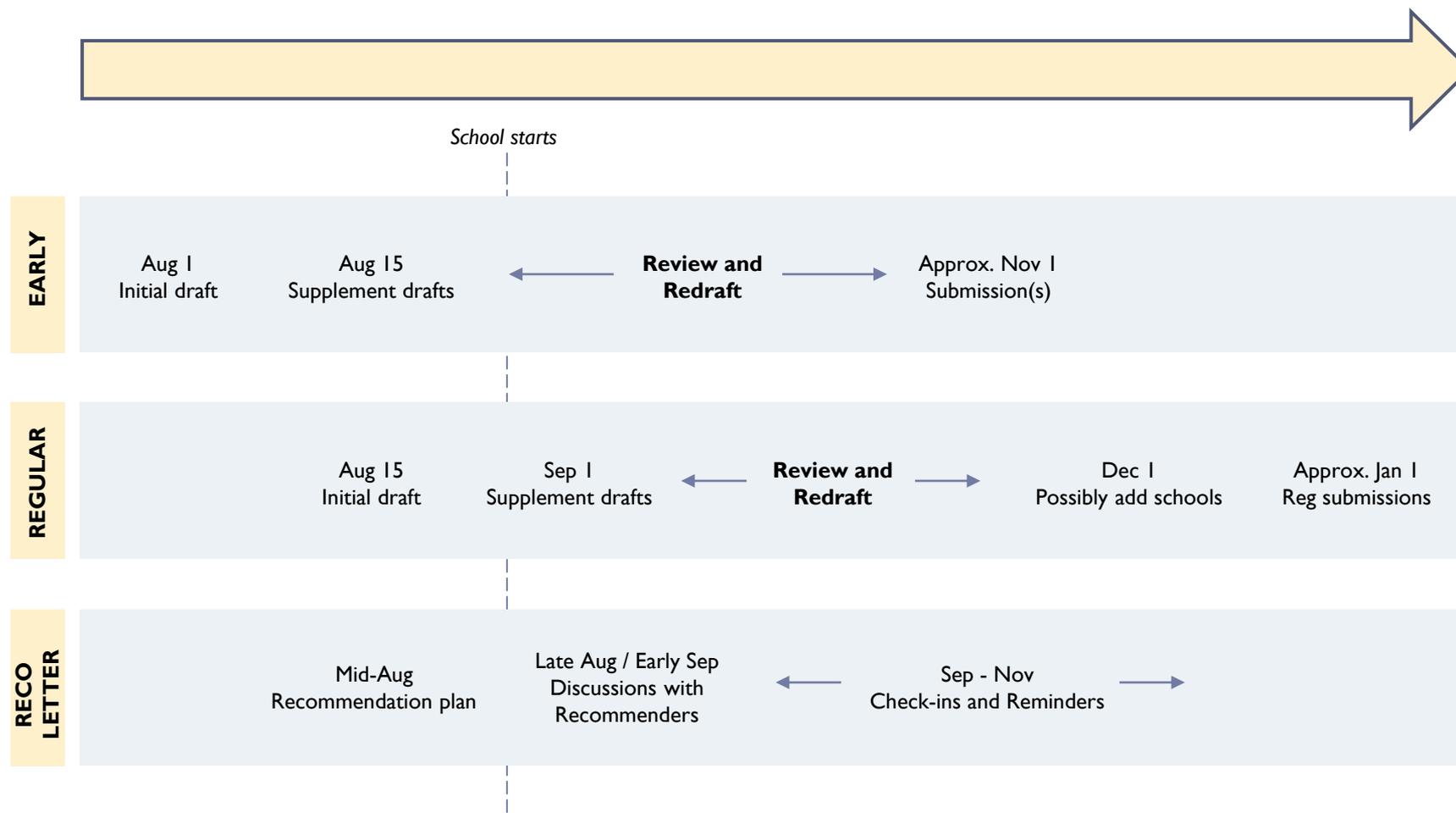


- Is your topic unique? If not, can the angle of your story be unique?
 - How have you shown increasing levels of leadership, maturity, responsibility?
 - How have you shown resilience/ grit against adversity? What have you learned from failure?
-





Timelines and Touchpoints





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