



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

- **How do I choose a writing consultant?**

Ask yourself: is this someone with whom I can form an alliance? Is this someone I can talk with easily and frankly? Does she treat me with respect and a sincere desire to be of service? Does she read my work with deep but objective attention? Does she understand my intention and honor the uniqueness of my voice? Does she seem sympathetic to my material? Does she add to my excitement about my project? Do I admire *her* work?

Read testimonials. Speak with other writers who have worked with this editor.

- **How do I decide if I'm ready for a writing consultant?**

If you've already written the piece in question, and you've set it aside for a time to marinate, and you've come back to read it with fresh eyes, and you've polished it more, and you've done everything you can think of to make it your best work, you're ready for someone like me.

If you're a student facing the often daunting process of composing the personal statement or essay portion of your college applications, and you need help getting started, I will help you from the start of the process to the finished essay. I will

help you identify your most compelling material, recognize the themes most worthy of exploration, find your authentic voice, and finally, write the thing, from first draft to final, radiant result.

- **Once I give you my manuscript, what kind of turnaround time can I expect from you?**

It depends on how many manuscripts I'm working on at the time, but I won't take on a project if I can't meet your deadlines.

- **What's the best way to communicate with you? How do we stay in touch?**

After an initial meeting or phone call during which we'll discuss your project, your goals for your manuscript, and any deadlines or time constraints you may have, the best way for us to stay in touch is through e-mail. When a conversation is called for, we'll set up a time to talk by phone or Skype.

- **Why are you drawn to narrative nonfiction and the personal essay?**

I take great pleasure in observing real people in real circumstances, and aspects of the world around me in all its delicious complexity. I especially love the process of translating into words what I see, what moves me, as accurately, completely, and as honestly as I can.

- **Do you work with writers of fiction?**

I love fiction, and read a great many novels and short stories, but my strength as a writing consultant, editor, and coach is primarily with nonfiction material.

- **What is the most satisfying aspect of the writing process for you? The most uncomfortable?**

I'm always delighted when I finish an essay, often after many drafts, and I know, in a very visceral way, that it communicates my intention as clearly as possible. I'm thrilled when a free-write, or a very rough first draft, begins to reveal something that surprises or amazes me. I love finding myself in a state of effortless flow, when a confluence of imagery and insight makes it suddenly clear that I'm writing from a larger self, as if something is being written through me.

I'm always gratified when an essay finds a home in a publication I respect—acceptances from editors are as exhilarating as rejections are discouraging.

What's uncomfortable? Sitting down to face a blank screen is sometimes hard when dashing off to Costco for laundry detergent sounds more appealing.

- **How would you define a successful personal essay or work of narrative nonfiction?**

Ah. I'm a sucker for essays that manage to both amuse and move me, essays that make me smile and weep. I appreciate voices that vibrate with personality and authenticity. I love well-crafted essays written by writers who appreciate both an elegant sentence and a clear narrative arc, and who write about something that feels both personal and universal.

- **How do you decide what to write about?**

The process feels mysterious to me, but often it begins when a series of bright synchronicities leap out of the pastel fabric of daily life. I feel a story in there somewhere. I like a good rant, especially if it can exaggerate my outrage over the edge into comedy. Mostly I follow feeling.

- **Who are some of your favorite writers of nonfiction?**

I'm fond of writers like Joan Didion, Vivian Gornick, Virginia Woolf, George Orwell, E.B. White, MFK Fisher, Janet Malcolm, Jo Ann Beard, and Annie Dillard, as well as writers who make me laugh, like Anne Lamott, David Sedaris, David Rakoff, Brian Doyle, John Hodgman, and Sarah Vowell. I'm also a big fan of medical narratives written by people like Jerome Groopman, Atul Gawande, Abraham Verghese, Oliver Sachs.

- **What made you decide to work with students in the process of preparing essays for college applications?**

When I work with a young person during the time this essay composition is undertaken—right at the edge of launch into an independent life—I am witness to an emergence, a kind of birth. Because colleges generally ask for a short essay that captures the *essence* of an applicant, the writer does well to cut quickly to the core. Facilitating this process is a privilege.

- **How is what you do different from a private college counselor?**

College counselors, or advisors as they're sometimes called, are able to help identify colleges that offer the most promising fit, and often help guide students through junior and senior year preparations, as well as the testing process. Many also assist with the application essay as part of their overall offering. I, on the other hand, am an essayist. I focus my attention on the essay, and the essay alone.

That said, I work in happy collaboration with excellent college advisors in the Bay Area. They focus on everything BUT the essay, so there's no duplication of effort. We refer clients to one another, as well as share notes about how best to assist individual students.

• I'm a student just starting to think about my college application essays. What's the most important advice can you offer me?

Begin early. Don't leave these critical compositions until a last, panic-filled moment. Even if you're one of those people who does her best work under extreme pressure, for this particular capital-E essay, you'll need time to find your best topics. You'll need time to write a rough draft, time to let that draft marinate, time to develop your piece over repeated drafts, time to polish and polish and polish, before your essay is ready for send-off. It's a rare writer indeed who cranks out something brilliant and perfect in a single sitting.

Conduct some research about yourself. Quite often parents, friends, and teachers are able to illuminate essential characteristics and strengths you are simply too close to see.

Start with a scene. Fill it with sensory detail.

Let your readers see you BEING the qualities in yourself you want most to project.

Show, don't tell. But be sure to analyze and reflect on the deeper meaning of your scene or story.

• How much will it cost for you to help me create my application essays?

Oh how I wish I could tell you exactly! It depends on so many factors:

- ❖ The point in the essay-writing process at which a student contacts me
- ❖ The number of essays to be written
- ❖ The number of revisions necessary to take an essay from rough draft to final version
- ❖ How strong the writer is
- ❖ How familiar the student is with personal essay as a form

- ❖ How willing the student is to dig below the surface
- ❖ How quickly the student is able to respond to advice
- ❖ Whether the student needs help managing time and deadlines

But call or e-mail me for a graph of the costs for last year's students.

• **What if I started late and only want feedback on one or two final drafts?**

No problem. I work with students at any point in their essay-writing progression and am happy to provide only one comprehensive set of recommendations.

• **Do you work with people developing a personal statement for graduate schools and professional programs, like aspiring medical and law school students?**

I do.

• **Do you work with non-native English speakers?**

Definitely. About 15% of my students live in countries other than the US, and for many of these, English is a second or third language.

• **Besides your love of language, what other experience do you bring to the process?**

Project management, stress management, time management, how to consume a large but unspecified four-hooved animal, not by running toward it full-speed with your mouth open, but by carefully carving it into manageable, bite-sized pieces.

• **For writers who live in the Bay Area and want to meet in person, where is your office?**

I meet with most clients in the Glenview district of Oakland (just north of the Mormon Temple).