



FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

• How do I choose a writing consultant?

Ask yourself: is this is 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.

Beyond that, it's sometimes a good idea to have a prospective writing consultant edit a small sample of your writing. This should be a no-obligation, modestly-priced exchange that will give you an idea what to expect with a longer manuscript.

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• 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 mellow, 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.

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- **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.

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- **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 email. When a conversation is called for, we'll set up a time to talk by phone.

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- **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.

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

No. I love fiction, and read a great many novels, but my strength as a writing consultant, editor, and coach is with nonfiction material.

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- **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 hard when dashing off to Costco for laundry detergent sounds much more appealing.

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- **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.

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- **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 my 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.

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- **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 Ann 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. I'll read anything, in any genre, by Lorrie Moore.

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- **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 which captures the essence of an applicant, the writer does well to cut quickly to the core. Facilitating this process is a privilege.

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

College counselors, or consultants as they're sometimes called, are able to help zero in on colleges which offer the most promising fit, and often help guide students through 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. I know what makes an excellent essay. I also know what colleges consider an acceptance-worthy essay. I know how to coach a student through the process of creating an essay that will blast a hole through the ceiling in the admissions office, an essay that makes them turn to their colleagues, and say, “Whoa, wait a minute. Read this one.”

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• 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 this critical composition 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 noodle around before you find your topic. 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.

Find opportunities and experiences, perhaps during the summer, to push yourself beyond your personal zone of comfort, where seismic insights and events are waiting for you to show up. Keep a journal.

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.

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• 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.