The Practice *Draft*

From an idea to a draft worth exploring

The first draft helps you discover the essay. Choose one possibility that feels alive: interesting, surprising, unresolved, funny, difficult, or simply vivid. You can change direction later.

Start with what you have

My working idea, memory, or question:

An application prompt it might address (if I have one):

Application prompts may suggest a direction, but you can begin without choosing a prompt or school. The draft may take you somewhere unexpected.

A loose sketch before drafting

Jot a few beats. This is a starting map, not a required structure or a final outline.

01	**Before**	What was the situation? What did I want or assume?
02	**Something happened**	A moment, question, pressure, decision, or discovery.
03	**I responded**	What did I do, try, avoid, misunderstand, or notice?
04	**Afterward / now**	What changed, and why do I still think about it?

Permission to change course: An idea that does not become your personal statement may still lead to a supplemental essay, interview story, or better idea.

Write the practice draft

Set aside one to two hours if you can, with an uninterrupted first stretch of at least 45-60 minutes. Write in a separate document or notebook so you have room to wander.

1–2 *hours total*

45–60 minutes, first stretch

Rules for this session

Forget the 650-word limit. Do not try to write a polished opening, follow the Nine-Part Structure, sound impressive, or edit each sentence as you go. Follow the story as it unfolds. Dictation is fine if speaking helps you discover the material.

Questions that can keep you moving

01 **Where does this begin?**
What happened just before? Where were you? Who was there?

02 **What did you want?**
What made the situation difficult, puzzling, or important to you?

03 **What did you actually do?**
Include a mistake, hesitation, avoidance, or misunderstanding.

04 **What shifted?**
Was there a moment of choice, surprise, connection, or realization?

05 **Why does it stay with you?**
What do you understand now? What still feels unresolved?

Your first line, if you need a place to start:

Save the whole rough draft. Give it a clear filename and leave it alone for a day or two before your next pass.

What else?

Make a generative edit

After a day or two, make a copy of your practice draft. Reread it without judging the sentences. Ask "What else?" and write additions beside or beneath what is already there.

Expand before you cut

This is a generative pass. Add scenes, memories, complications, feelings, reflections, and tangents. Preserve the first version. Do not delete whole sections, shorten, or line-edit yet.

Ask three kinds of "what else?"

01

What else do I remember noticing, doing, or saying?

Return to the actual scene: people, sounds, objects, gestures, words, and what happened next.

02

What did I believe then? What do I believe now?

Consider expectations, emotions, misunderstandings, contradictions, and what changed or did not.

03

What other memory, question, or feeling does this bring up?

Follow associations, even if they seem unrelated or lead toward a different essay.

One more thing

What did you leave out because it seemed too ordinary, embarrassing, funny, confusing, or irrelevant?

See what you discovered

Your practice draft is a place to learn what material you have. Read the expanded version with curiosity, then make notes for a conversation or the next writing session.

01 **A detail, scene, or connection that surprised me:**

02 **What happens outwardly in this story? What changes inwardly?**

03 **A question a reader might want answered:**

04 **The part I would like to explore further:**

Decide what to carry forward

There may be several paths. Circle one or make your own: develop this idea; try a new angle; save a scene for a supplement; return to the Story Bank.

Keep two versions

Save the untouched practice draft and the expanded version. Mark new passages rather than replacing old ones; they may be useful later.

Your next writing session

When you have a promising draft to develop, open the Nine-Part Essay Structure guide. If the direction feels unconvincing, try another angle or return to your Story Bank.

Your experiences belong to you. Keep memories private, choose a smaller moment, or change direction. You decide what belongs in your essay.