



Tips For Writing College Essays

Over the years of awarding college scholarships, our **Gaines-Jones** Board of Directors has read hundreds of college essays. Many could benefit by improving the craft of writing: grammar, spelling, content, structure, and style. We strongly believe that *process* is your reward. The fact that *you are writing* is worthy in and of itself, so give yourself credit. Rather than speaking in terms of bad or good, we consider whether an essay is ineffective or effective. To help students hone their writing skills, we offer these tips from years of experience and collective wisdom.

An effective college essay can either go deep—discussing one moment or event that fundamentally changed your life—or go wide, discussing various elements of your life. Either way, your job as writer is to skillfully show and bring emotion to your story. An efficient technique for doing this is to add sensory details: use colorful language to ignite your readers’ sense of touch, taste, sight, smell, and hearing. Readers will feel an empathetic connection, as if they are walking with you on your journey.

Although there are other essay structures, we will focus on two: The **Narrative Structure** will help you go deep, while the **Montage Structure** will help you go wide.

Narrative Structure

Time-tested and reliable, *The Hero’s Journey* is an archetypal narrative story format common in ancient myths as well as modern day stories, especially films. This may work well for you if you have faced challenges in your life: main character embarks on an adventure, encounters trouble, and in a decisive crisis, wins a victory to return home transformed.

Narrative Beginning: (WHO/WHERE/WHEN) Introduces you (the main character) and establishes the world/sets the place(s) where your story happens. By the end of your beginning, something big must happen (TROUBLE: every story needs it): a new club, your family moves to a new city, a death in the family—this event will change your life forever.

Narrative Middle: (HOW) Time to raise the stakes, expand your conflict. The new club loses funding, you’re getting bullied in that new city, that death in the family leads to financial difficulties. This step is important because it raises the dramatic tension. The reader is left wondering “*How will this person get out of this situation?*” The end of the middle is your story’s climax (reader must learn WHY the story is important enough to tell). The “moment of truth” that will decide whether or not you will overcome your problem. Will your club win that scholarship competition? Will you confront the bully and make a new friend? Will you discover a passion or solution that will help you manage depression or grief?

Narrative End: (WHAT) What happens after, or the “so what” of the story. You must show change (every story needs it) and end up with a few things you didn’t have before—

talents, skills, values, better health, insight, or a new perspective. Answering “so what” in a compelling way is the key to an effective college essay (X led to Y led to Z).

The Montage Structure

This format works best when you prefer not to focus on a specific challenge, but perhaps on 3-7 different qualities/skills/values and find a way to connect them. How? By using a focusing lens—or thematic thread/central idea—to string together several ideas. These ideas may seem unrelated until you magically link them by juxtaposing parts to show a larger whole; to compress time and convey a lot of information using vignettes or scenes (in your essay, scenes=paragraphs).

Montage Beginning: (WHO/WHERE/WHEN) Introduces you (main character) and establishes setting where story happens. Introduces your focusing lens (central idea).

Montage Middle: (HOW) Here’s where you expand your story with vignettes, anecdotes, or fragments of your life to create the overall message you want to leave with your reader.

Storytelling is a visual medium so paint with your words! Avoid trying to write “soundtrack” or “mix-tape” essays using your favorite songs. This is problematic because readers can’t hear—and may not know—*your* music, or have the same emotional connection to the songs referenced. Try entering through a more *universal* lens – something many can see and understand. Are you a foodie? Play chess? Have a spirit animal? Use objects that have special meaning: a snow globe your grandma gave you; a heart-shaped rock you found on a hike. These can become symbols in your essay, used to represent and evoke emotion. Find a focusing lens that allows you to “go wide” and reveal different aspects of who you are.

Montage End: (WHAT) What happens after, or the “so what” of your story. You must show change and end up with a few things you did not have before. In the Montage Structure, X, Y and Z are all connected because, for example, they are all qualities of a Super Statistician or Sax Player or Champion Bowler or...(fill in the blank).

Blend these two essay formats with others if you can find a compelling way to do so.

More Tips

Spell Check is your friend—and your enemy. It’s not smart enough to catch such errors as “where” instead of “were” or “there” instead of “their” and that oh-so-popular “your” instead of “you’re”. Nor will it catch names spelled incorrectly. So once you have used Spell Check a few times, run it again and check for yourself.

Third Party Editing. EXTREMELY IMPORTANT: after you have spell-checked, then have two or three people you trust read your essay for typos and grammatical mistakes. Spell check AGAIN! Mistakes often happen while correcting mistakes. Don’t have your application rejected be due to misspelled words and grammatical errors. This important attention to detail is what will set you apart from essay authors who don’t take the time.

Trite Phrasing.* Beware of overworked, flat, often unnecessary phrases: “There is,” “There are,” “There was” can lend a clichéd quality to your writing. For instance:

BEFORE: *There was a time when I would have hesitated to speak up when I witnessed somebody being bullied in front of me.*

AFTER: *Until my baby sister was picked on by that group of girls who were supposed to be her friends, I might have hesitated to speak up when I witnessed someone being bullied in front of me. Not now.*

Over-used words.* What would you guess is the most overused word in our written English language? That three-letter word, “the” wins, hands down. Go ahead—search a piece of your writing and see how many matches you get. You may be astonished. Obviously, “the” is necessary at times, but more than likely you can eliminate half and end up with fewer words and more resonant sentences. For instance:

BEFORE: *Hector stood outside of **the** room and listened to **the** din of grouchy voices in **the** room. When he entered **the** room, **the** squabbling quickly ended.*

AFTER: *Outside, Hector listened as bickering voices reached a fever pitch. Then, he entered and raving was replaced by a still, bitter quiet.*

Not a single “**the**.” More dramatic, four fewer words. Fantastic exercise. Give it a try.

Final Word

Fortunately, no surefire, single approach exists for *any* writing. Therefore, we have as many possible college essays as there are students writing them. You alone see the world through your experience, and only you can shape your experience into a coherent narrative for those of us eager to read your story. We hope these tips will sharpen your writing. Our selection committee places much value on your essay.

Enjoy your journey!

References & Resources

- **A helpful site for college essay writing offering many FREE resources and sample essays:**

<https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/college-essay-format>

- **Twelve college essays that worked:**

<https://www.collegeessayguy.com/blog/college-essay-examples#Burying+Grandma>

- ***Valuable tips for editing fiction (that can help with any writing) from The Faulkner Society:** <https://faulknersociety.org/william-faulkner-wisdom-competition>

Books

- ***Sin & Syntax* by Constance Hale** ~ An absolute must; full of humor, wit and sound advice. *The Bad Girl of Grammar* shows how to craft wickedly effective prose.
- ***Story* by Robert McKee** ~ Focuses on screenwriting but works for all types of writing. A lesson in style, substance, structure and storytelling.
- ***Simple & Direct* by Jacques Barzun** ~ celebrated author/educator distills from a lifetime of writing & teaching his thoughts about craft.
- ***Make a Scene* by Jordan E. Rosenfeld** ~ Crafting a powerful story one scene at a time.
- ***A Writer's Guide to Persistence* by Jordan E. Rosenfeld** ~ How to create a lasting and productive writing practice.



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