

TWO APPROACHES TO STRUCTURE

Narrative Structure

You can think of Narrative Structure as classic Hollywood movie structure, focusing on a challenge that fundamentally changed your life. You can think of this approach to writing an essay as breaking down into three basic sections:

Challenges + Effects

This part gets into specific detail regarding a specific challenge the student has faced, and the various effects of that challenge. Tough stuff you've been through. Big experiences. Their subsequent impacts. Various obstacles you've had to overcome.

What I Did About Them

Actions you took to overcome those challenges and their effects, often to meet specific needs. These actions help to illustrate your values and growth.

What I Learned

Lessons and insights you've gained through these experiences. Reflection on how your experiences have shaped you and why that matters.

Montage Structure

What is a montage?

Montage is something you've likely all encountered before, but some may not be familiar with the word itself. It's a technique that involves using separate elements (pictures, words, music, etc.) to create a new whole. In filmmaking, the montage effect is used to condense space and time so that information can be delivered in a more efficient way.

Take the classic "falling in love" montage, commonly used in romantic comedies. We don't see every single interaction. Instead, we see: one surprises the other at work, probably with flowers; they walk through the park; they dance in the rain; they pass an engagement ring store. You get the idea.

Finding a Thematic Thread

If you're going to build a montage, you need to find a way to make the different experiences you'll use feel connected. Think of it this way: if I just had a paragraph on growing up in Latin America, speaking of which religion, speaking of which literature is important to me, speaking of which... you're going to feel understandably confused. So I need to have something that threads the pieces together.

The sample essay below ("Laptop Stickers") was written by a student who collected stickers on her laptop. Each sticker connected to different values and experiences. Stickers are her thematic thread.

WHAT HAD TO BE DONE (NARRATIVE)

At six years old, I stood locked away in the restroom. I held tightly to a tube of toothpaste because I'd been sent to brush my teeth to distract me from the commotion. Regardless, I knew what was happening: my dad was being put under arrest for domestic abuse. He'd hurt my mom physically and mentally, and my brother Jose and I had shared the mental strain. It's what had to be done.

Living without a father meant money was tight, mom worked two jobs, and my brother and I took care of each other when she worked. For a brief period of time the quality of our lives slowly started to improve as our soon-to-be step-dad became an integral part of our family. He paid attention to the needs of my mom, my brother, and me. But our prosperity was short-lived as my step dad's chronic alcoholism became more and more recurrent. When I was eight, my younger brother Fernando's birth complicated things even further. As my step-dad slipped away, my mom continued working, and Fernando's care was left to Jose and me. I cooked, Jose cleaned, I dressed Fernando, Jose put him to bed. We did what we had to do.

As undocumented immigrants and with little to no family around us, we had to rely on each other. Fearing that any disclosure of our status would risk deportation, we kept to ourselves when dealing with any financial and medical issues. I avoided going on certain school trips, and at times I was discouraged to even meet new people. I felt isolated and at times disillusioned; my grades started to slip.

Over time, however, I grew determined to improve the quality of life for my family and myself.

Without a father figure to teach me the things a father could, I became my own teacher. I learned how to fix a bike, how to swim, and even how to talk to girls. I became resourceful, fixing shoes with strips of duct tape, and I even found a job to help pay bills. I became as independent as I could to lessen the time and money mom had to spend raising me.

I also worked to apply myself constructively in other ways. I worked hard and took my grades from Bs and Cs to consecutive straight A's. I shattered my school's 100M breaststroke record, and learned how to play the clarinet, saxophone, and the oboe. Plus, I not only became the first student in my school to pass the AP Physics 1 exam, I'm currently pioneering my school's first AP Physics 2 course ever.

These changes inspired me to help others. I became president of the California Scholarship Federation, providing students with information to prepare them for college, while creating opportunities for my peers to play a bigger part in our community. I began tutoring kids, teens, and adults on a variety of subjects ranging from basic English to home improvement and even Calculus. As the captain of the water polo and swim team I've led practices crafted to individually push my comrades to their limits, and I've counseled friends through circumstances similar to mine. I've done tons, and I can finally say I'm proud of that.

But I'm excited to say that there's so much I have yet to do. I haven't danced the tango, solved a Rubix Cube, explored how perpetual motion might fuel space exploration, or seen the World Trade Center. And I have yet to see the person that Fernando will become.

I'll do as much as I can from now on. Not because I have to. Because I choose to.

MY LAPTOP STICKERS (MONTAGE)

My laptop is like a passport. It is plastered with stickers all over the outside, inside, and bottom. Each sticker is a stamp, representing a place I've been, a passion I've pursued, or community I've belonged to. These stickers make for an untraditional first impression at a meeting or presentation, but it's one I'm proud of. Let me take you on a quick tour:

"We <3 Design," bottom left corner. Art has been a constant for me for as long as I can remember. Today my primary engagement with art is through design. I've spent entire weekends designing websites and social media graphics for my companies. Design means more to me than just branding and marketing; it gives me the opportunity to experiment with texture, perspective, and contrast, helping me refine my professional style.

"Common Threads," bottom right corner. A rectangular black and red sticker displaying the theme of the 2017 TEDxYouth@Austin event. For years I've been interested in the street artists and musicians in downtown Austin who are so unapologetically themselves. As a result, I've become more open-minded and appreciative of unconventional lifestyles. TED gives me the opportunity to help other youth understand new perspectives, by exposing them to the diversity of Austin where culture is created, not just consumed.

Poop emoji, middle right. My 13-year-old brother often sends his messages with the poop emoji 'echo effect,' so whenever I open a new message from him, hundreds of poops elegantly cascade across my screen. He brings out my goofy side, but also helps me think rationally when I am overwhelmed. We don't have the typical "I hate you, don't talk to me" siblinghood (although occasionally it would be nice to get away from him); we're each other's best friends. Or at least he's mine.

"Lol ur not Harry Styles," upper left corner. Bought in seventh grade and transferred from my old laptop, this sticker is torn but persevering with layers of tape. Despite conveying my fangirl-y infatuation with Harry Styles' boyband, One Direction, for me Styles embodies an artist-activist who uses his privilege for the betterment of society. As a \$42K donor to the Time's Up Legal Defense Fund, a hair donor to the Little Princess Trust, and promoter of LGBTQ+ equality, he has motivated me to be a more public activist instead of internalizing my beliefs.

"Catapult," middle right. This is the logo of a startup incubator where I launched my first company, Threading Twine. I learned that business can provide others access to fundamental human needs, such as economic empowerment of minorities and education. In my career, I hope to be a corporate advocate for the empowerment of women, creating large-scale impact and deconstructing institutional boundaries that obstruct women from working in high-level positions. Working as a women's rights activist will allow me to engage in creating lasting movements for equality, rather than contributing to a cycle that elevates the stances of wealthy individuals.

"Thank God it's Monday," sneakily nestled in the upper right corner. Although I attempt to love all my stickers equally (haha), this is one of my favorites. I always want my association with work to be positive.

And there are many others, including the horizontal, yellow stripes of the Human Rights Campaign; "The Team," a sticker from the Model G20 Economics Summit where I collaborated with youth from around the globe; and stickers from "Kode with Klossy," a community of girls working to promote women's involvement in underrepresented fields.

When my computer dies (hopefully not for another few years), it will be like my passport expiring. It'll be difficult leaving these moments and memories behind, but I probably won't want these stickers in my 20s anyways (except Harry Styles, that's never leaving). My next set of stickers will reveal my next set of aspirations. They hold the key to future paths I will navigate, knowledge I will gain, and connections I will make.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Q: How do I begin to write my essay?

A: If you're reading this, you've already begun. In this guide you'll find some ideas on how to brainstorm and structure your essay. Our favorite exercises are the Essence Objects and Values Exercises.

Q: How long should my essay be?

A: It depends. Your main Common App essay can be up to 650 words, while the essays for the University of California (UC) schools are around 350 words each, and your supplemental essays will vary.

Q: How many essays will I need to write?

A: Around 15 is average. You'll likely write a main personal statement for your Common App, perhaps some separate essays if you're applying to public schools (the UCs require four, for example), plus you'll write supplements for most selective schools, which number anywhere from 6-20, depending on the number of schools you apply to.

Q: What should my essay be about?

A: In a word, you.

Q: What are college admissions officers looking for?

A: They're looking for the answers to these three questions:

1. Who is this person?
2. Will this person contribute something of value to our campus?
3. Can this person write?

Q: How do college admissions officers evaluate my essay?

A: Each school has its own criteria and different readers will prefer different elements. Michael Gulotta (Associate Director of Admissions at American University) for example, has told us he most looks to the essay to assess a student's writing ability. But Rick Diaz (Regional Director of Undergrad Admissions at SMU) is less interested in writing ability and more interested in a student's story.

Q: So which is more important: your story or your writing skill?

A: Both are important. A good story, well told. That's your goal.

Q: When should I start writing my essay?

A: Today. Right now.

Q: How do I structure my essay?

A: You'll learn about two options in this workshop: Narrative Structure and Montage Structure.

Q: How much do essays matter?

A: It depends on the college, but generally between 10%-30%. Essays tend to matter more for small schools, or schools who look at applications holistically.

Q: If my grades are bad, can I get into Harvard with a great essay?

A: Nope. Schools look at your GPA, course rigor and test scores more than anything. When you're being compared to other students with similar GPA/SAT scores, that's when the essays can make or break your chances. Harvard is great, but there are a lot of other awesome schools too. For a list of Colleges That Change Lives, Google "Colleges That Change Lives." (Really.)

Q: Can a bad college essay negatively affect my application?

A: Yes.

COMMON APPLICATION PROMPTS

Choose one of the following prompts. 650 words, strict limit

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 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.

COALITION APPLICATION PROMPTS

Choose one of the following prompts. 500-550 words.

1. Tell a story from your life, describing an experience that either demonstrates your character or helped to shape it.
2. Describe a time when you made a meaningful contribution to others in which the greater good was your focus. Discuss the challenges and rewards of making your contribution.
3. Has there been a time when you've had a long-cherished or accepted belief challenged? How did you respond? How did the challenge affect your beliefs?
4. What is the hardest part of being a student now? What's the best part? What advice would you give a younger sibling or friend (assuming they would listen to you)?
5. Submit an essay on a topic of your choice.

THE GREAT COLLEGE ESSAY TEST

Is your essay great? The criteria below will help you decide. And, as with all the resources on my website, these are not the only qualities of a great essay—these are just a few qualities that I have observed in essays that I find to be great. How might you use these criteria? Read your essay aloud, or have someone else read it aloud, then ask these questions:

1. Core Values (aka Information)

- a. Can you name at least 4-5 of the author's core values?
- b. Do you detect a variety of values, or do the values repeat?
 - * Examples of NOT varied values: hard work, determination, perseverance
 - * Examples of more varied values: autonomy, resourcefulness, healthy boundaries, diversity

2. Vulnerability

- a. Does the essay sound like it's mostly analytical or like it's coming from a deeper, more vulnerable place? Another way of asking this: Does it sound like the author wrote it using mostly his or her head (intellect) or his or her heart and gut?
- b. After reading the essay, do you know more about the author AND feel closer to him or her?

3. "So what" moments (aka Important & interesting connections)

- a. Can you identify at least 3-5 "so what" moments of insight in the essay?
- b. Are these moments kind of predictable, or are they truly illuminating?

4. Craft

- a. Do the ideas in the essay connect in a way that is logical, but not too obvious (aka boring)?
- b. Can you tell that the essay represents a series of carefully considered choices and that the author spent a lot of time revising the essay over the course of several drafts?
- c. Is it interesting and succinct throughout? If not, where do you lose interest? Where could words be cut or which part isn't revealing as much as it could be?

If you're feeling bold...

Give your essay to someone else and ask him or her to evaluate it based on these elements.

Want to read some example essays that incorporate all these elements?

Check out my book, *College Essay Essentials*, in which I provide more than two dozen example essays, plus a step-by-step guide for bringing more of each of these qualities into your essay. And I'm offering some really cool bonuses too, just go to:

www.collegeessayguy.com/book



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How to Revise a First Draft in Five Steps

1. **Go through your essay and highlight the first lines of each paragraph in bold.**

Then,

2. **Read the bolded lines aloud.** (Side note: I once read that Chekhov used to read all his work aloud to his wife to check for sense and errors--it's a great practice. Even if you have no wife.)

As you read, you'll probably notice that some parts make sense and some parts don't. So

3. **Write a new outline in which all the lines flow together.** Like a mini version of your essay. Essentially, you'll be creating what I like to call Outline 2.0.

IMPORTANT NOTE: the new outline that you create does not have to precisely reflect what's currently in your essay--it can be *aspirational*, in other words, *what you want the paragraphs to say*.

Once you've written this new outline, paste the bolded lines onto a brand new blank document And

4. **Rewrite your paragraphs so that each paragraph fleshes out the topic sentence.** This may not sound like a very romantic/creative way of writing an essay, but it works. It'll also help you clarify what you're trying to say. "Foggy writing is foggy thinking," one of my writing teachers used to say.

And why do I suggest you paste the new outline onto a new document and start over? Because, in short, it'll take longer if you don't. Chances are you'll have fallen in love with some old way that you've phrased something but, once you've written the new outline, *that old way of phrasing it is dead*. And if you're trying to create a new and living thing out of old, dead parts, you're no better than Dr. Frankenstein. And [we all know what happened to him](#). (Spoiler alert.)

5. **Step away from the essay for at least 30 minutes.** Go for a walk, get something to eat, do something else to clear your mind. Come back to it and read it aloud.

When you come back:

- a. Put the first sentence of each paragraph in bold.
- b. Read them aloud in order to see if they tell a very short version of your essay. (If not, rewrite them.) If they do,
- c. Read the whole essay aloud, checking to see if what's in each paragraph supports the sentences in bold.

If so, you should have a very solid revision, maybe even one that's ready for feedback.