

Lesson 04: Preparing Your College Essay

Lesson Objectives:

- Students will articulate the goals of the college essay.
- Students will identify the structure of narrative.
- Students will plan the 'hook' and the 'climax' of their essay.

A lot of students think that they need to sound really smart in their college essay, using big words and long sentences. Although you DO have a lot of control over how smart you actually are (neuroscience is constantly making new discoveries about just how much influence our choices make on this), you don't have much control over how smart you *seem*. To be honest, you always end up sounding about as smart as you actually are.

So don't bother with trying to sound smart.

Instead, use your essay to sound...wait for it...FASCINATING! (You knew I was going to say that, didn't you!) There's actually a huge amount of technique to this that you can totally hack even if you're so not-smart that you're eating glue and sticking crayons up your nose as you read this.

The Power of Story

Our brains are hard-wired to respond to the structure of story. Human's reliance on stories dates back 100,000 years, even before our development of language itself, and approximately 99,909 years before the invention of the five-paragraph-essay!¹ Give or take a few years. 😊 We cannot help but to respond at a gut level to stories; we are made that way. And that is exactly what you want to happen to the admissions person who reads your essay. You want their gut to insist that they want *you* at their college.

A "story" is a very particular way of telling about a change. Stories unfold the change in a way that builds tension toward a climax. The tension is generated from a problem and the climax is the point at which the change happens. This website does a great job of explaining how to create a story: <https://writingcooperative.com/fundamentals-of-story-structure-e199f131a891>

You are the protagonist of this story. The climax is some significant (or symbolic) achievement. And the 'moral of the story' has to illustrate something great about your character. The readers should say to themselves (and *feel* in their gut), "Wow, this kid is really determined!" or "Wow, this kid totally gets the point of what life is really about!" or

"Wow, this kid is amazingly compassionate!" or something else *wonderful* about you. Instead of telling them "I am a very determined person and here's why," you tell them a story about a thing that happened that *shows* how determined you are. "Show; don't tell" is the mantra of all great writing.

This sounds like something you can't do, doesn't it? But I swear to you it's just a matter of figuring out the parts in a backwards fashion and then connecting the parts in a frontwards fashion. You *can* do that.

Here are the parts you've got to figure out in this order (the backwards fashion):

- What is the moral of the story? (What is your character trait that makes you wonderful?)
- What is the event/climax that drives that moral home?
- What is the difficult stuff that nearly prevented that climax from happening?
- What hook will get your reader to care about it?

Well, I said you *can* do it; I didn't say it would be a piece of cake, though.

1. Krashen, Stephen. *Story Proof: The Science Behind the Startling Power of Story*. Libraries Unlimited, 2007, pg. 4.

The Truth

Look, I *know* you're not completely wonderful and fascinating. I know that your room is a wreck ^{and/or} you're completely awkward around people ^{and/or} you fight with the people who love you most ^{and/or} you're spoiled and ungrateful ^{and/or} you procrastinated and 'phoned it in' through much of school while binging on Netflix or video games. No, that's not okay. But the truth is like a dodecahedron; it has so many sides to it. In addition to that un-wonderful stuff we know is true, there is also really wonderful, fascinating stuff about you that is *equally* true. It's completely truthful to allow the dodecahedron of *you*-ness to land rose-side-up in this essay (and in life).

Don't ever, ever, ever even consider the notion of lying! Just NO. You don't even need to. The truth is more interesting.



Sample Essay Questions

These are the 2019-2020 Essay Prompt from the Common Application:

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. Describe a problem you've solved or a problem you'd like to solve. It can be an intellectual challenge, a research query, an ethical dilemma - anything that is of personal importance, no matter the scale. Explain its significance to you and what steps you took or could be taken to identify a solution.
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.

(If you're in a later application cycle, please write to us to remind us to update this list. The questions come out in late January for the following school year.)

See how these questions all beg for stories?

Identify the Values of Your Top Choice College

If you immediately know the answers to the questions regarding the parts of your story, like it's been inside you just waiting to be told, definitely write *that* story! Don't second guess it! However, some of us (including me!) have a little more trouble coming up with those story parts. If that's you, do some exploration of the values of your top choice colleges, and take your cues from them.

Start at the "About" page on your favorite college's website. Then do some reading between the lines to tease out their values. Let me give you some examples of what I mean.

Here is some text on Columbia University's "About" page:

Columbia University is one of the world's most important centers of research and at the same time a distinctive and distinguished learning environment for undergraduates and graduate students in many scholarly and professional fields....It expects all areas of the University to advance knowledge and learning at the highest level and to convey the products of its efforts to the world.

Hmmm. It seems like what Columbia values is coming up with new ideas. They seem to really like discovery through research. Is there any time when I made a novel discovery about something, especially after approaching a topic empirically? If not, is this something that I think I can do? What about me makes me think I can make cool discoveries or innovations?

Now let's look at Stanford University's "About" page and "Academics" page:

A place for learning, discovery, innovation, expression and discourse.

Stanford students create and apply knowledge by thinking and doing, preparing for leadership in a rapidly changing world.

Hmm. How is this different from Columbia? It's less focused on products and a little more focused on ways of thinking. It seems they want quirky, edgy, out-of-the-box thinkers. Maybe they want someone whose point of view is different from mainstream. Is there anything about me that makes my perspective different or out-of-the box?

One Essay to Woo Them All

(Sorry. That was a *Lord of the Rings* pun: "One ring to rule them all." Uhg! I can't help myself!)

Even though you can take your cues for what to write from your top choice school, your essay has to be relevant to *all* the schools you are applying to in the one application system. That's the thing about Common Application and similar shared systems: you can't address a single school when the application is going to multiple schools. Nothing is more offensive to UCLA if you write in your essay, "I have wanted to attend Stanford since I was 5 years old." That's a quick way to make an enemy!

Let's Discuss...

We're going to *prepare* to write your college essay in this lesson by thinking though all the parts that I mentioned in 'The Power of Story'. It will be the next lesson that you actually write it.

1. What character trait makes you wonderful that will be highly valued by the colleges that you want to go to? (This will be the moral of your story.)

2. What is something that has happened in your life that really illustrates this characteristic? (This will be the climax of your story.)
3. What is the difficult stuff that nearly prevented that from happening? (This will be the plot of your story.)
4. What hook will get your reader to care about the character (you) and the plot? (This will weave into the opening of your story.)
5. Which of the Common Application essay prompts will be the best fit for the story that is shaping up about you?

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