

How to Write The Short Personal Narrative For An Audience Of Strangers or “the college essay”

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College admissions officers often read hundreds of application essays a day. They spend only minutes per essay. Therefore, it is imperative that your essay stand out. Here are some guidelines to help make your essay memorable.

General Guidelines

- Remember that your audience judges both you and your writing. Not only are they judging your style, but also your content. **Your topic is important.**
- Tell a story even though not all questions ask for one. All audiences are suckers for narrative.
- CREATE A BRILLIANT LEAD SENTENCE.
- Often it works best to start your story in medias res (at the climax).
- Provide plenty of exposition (who, what, where, when) because your audience doesn't know your story or any background.
- Show; don't tell.
- When (if) you make your explicit claim, don't say “This story shows that I am....”
- Use figurative language and sensory and descriptive detail.
- No more than two pages, double-spaced: brevity is important.

In most academic essays, your audience is judging your skill as a writer. However, in this case, your audience is judging both your writing and what your essay shows about you as a person. Keeping this in mind, choose a topic that will allow you to portray your best qualities to the college. Your topic can be anything from surviving an outward-bound experience to running in a track meet to an emotional struggle.

Because your audience is reading so many essays, so quickly, you're more likely to capture their interest with a story than with a dry list of your personal qualities. Also you must grab them with a brilliant lead. If your lead is not engaging, they will most likely skim over the rest of your paper. Often it is easier to create a great lead sentence if you start with the action of your story or the climax. Your goal should be to have your reader remember your essay later in the day and mention it to a coworker at the water cooler.

While your essay needs to be suspenseful and brief, you also must provide your audience with enough background so that they can follow the essay clearly. Answer the five journalist questions: who, what, where, when, why early enough in the essay that they understand what is going on.

Showing is always more interesting than telling. For example it is always more interesting to hear about the time you were left alone on mountain to eat squirrel meat than hearing that you are adventurous or flexible.

Your claim is your thesis. It's what your story shows about you and what you want the admissions officer to remember about you as a person. However, the transition to the claim must be smooth. You don't want them to feel that they are reading a claim or are being forced to believe what you're telling them. You want them to come to the right conclusion but feel as if they made that conclusion on their own.

Often it is helpful to have a teacher review your essay, so schedule a time with them and ask if they would mind reviewing your paper. This may take several meetings to finish the polishing process.

Here's an actual example essay. Notice the use of present tense, which makes the reader feel closer to the actual event. Early on in the essay the author uses onomatopoeia, which adds to the descriptive detail of the piece.

We are singing another round of "Will you light my candle?" from the musical production of "Rent" that Kate, Teal, Liz and I have just seen. My mind is flooded with scenes from the musical and I cannot get that song out of head, when, SLAM! My whole body lurches forward at the sound of screaming wheels, and my head rocks on my neck like a buoy being tossed around by waves. And then it stops.

We have been rear-ended by a monstrous green pick-up truck. I am so shocked that I can't say anything. And then I scream. In slow motion I turn around to see if Teal and Liz have survived in the back seat; the whole rear window is shattered, metamorphosed into tiny specks that cover the back of the car like diamonds. But everyone is okay, so I open my door and climb out of the car. The others follow and we find the rear of the car smashed into a 'u' shape. I realize, that with a little luck, we could all be dead, crumpled by the truck.

The people who hit us are kinds, no older than we are. A boy was driving with a girl sitting next to him. After we pull the vehicles to a parking lot at the side of the road, the boy is whimpering next to the truck. They come over to talk, apologizing profusely. The boy can't figure out what went wrong. I thought I hit the brakes, he said, but I must have hit the gas instead. Then he asks us if we mind if he tells the police that the girl was driving, because it is her father's truck and the boy doesn't have a license. Silence. I say I'm not comfortable lying. More silences as we split apart to wait for the police.

A large policeman questions us about the accident, making sure that we are okay before he talks to the driver of the truck. I hear the girl say she was driving. My stomach clenches, I walk over to my friends sitting by the side of the road, and tell them what I heard. Liz is crying and Teal's eyes are bloodshot, but they say nothing. No one wants to tell o the kids. There is a feeling, a voice, eating away at me and whispering inside my head.

It is hard to look into the eyes of that boy and girl-two teenagers like me-and tell them to tell the truth. Set things straight with the police, I say, and if you don't, I can't remain silent. I see fear, regret, and a boy and girl who knew they had done something wrong, but I don't know what to do about it. They are just two kids who "borrowed" Dad's car for a day trip. They meant no harm; they just made a mistake. I want to help them, I want to comfort them and tell them nothing is wrong, but I can't. The boy was driving without a license, there was an accident, and there are consequences.

I keep imagining what it must fee like for those two kids. Being hauled off in handcuffs in the back of a police par is probably the scariest experience of their lives. How can they face their parents, what can they tell them? What will become of them? What would have happened if I had simply let them claim that the girl was driving? Does it actually make a difference? Have I ruined two children's lives by doing what I thought was right? I start to cry, wondering if doing the right things is always the right thing to do. Frequently it is my compassion that prompts me to stand up for my ethics; but sometimes, the two don't see eye to eye.

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Although the writer briefly describes the scene of the accident and the characters involved her paper lacks sufficient descriptive detail. She should have incorporated more sensory detail. What sounds did she hear? Was there a distinct odor in the air? Also, her claim is not subtle enough. She tells the audience, versus showing them. Lastly, while her introduction is strong, her lead sentence is not captivating enough to grab the reader's attention.