

## **Structure in a Personal Statement**

College essays should vary as much as the people who write them; that means that no two essays should have the same structure or sound the same. However, there is a common structural plan that can be used if you are wondering how to organize your essay. If a college essay were about six paragraphs, the typical structure would be:

### **Paragraph 1—Hook your reader (1/4 page)**

- ✓ Grab the reader's interest
- ✓ Sometimes give background information
- ✓ Give a hint about the meaning or importance of the event
- ✓ Use a general statement or description to pull the reader in

### **Paragraphs 2-4—Narrate the story (1 ¼ pages)**

- ✓ Describe important events, people and/or places
- ✓ Use LOTS of imagery and figurative language
- ✓ Describe your thoughts and feelings during the event

### **Paragraph 5—Analyze what you learned from the event (1/4 page)**

- ✓ What did you end up learning about yourself?
- ✓ How did you learn this?
- ✓ What changes occurred to help you see this?
- ✓ How did what you learned change you or your life?

### **Paragraph 6—Look to the future (1/4 page)**

- ✓ How will your learning/this experience continue to change you?
- ✓ What or who do you hope to be?
- ✓ What place does college hold in your future? Why is it important to you?
- ✓ Connect back to your introduction to provide a sense of closure.

## **Hooking your reader**

Some techniques you may want to try in your introductions are:

### **Describe a scene/setting in detail**

The sharp, icy wind tore through chapped skins and crept into my bones.

### **A short, direct (maybe startling) statement**

No matter what people say, growing up rich is not easy.

### **A sound (onomatopoeia)**

Poof! The smoke from the blast filled my nostrils and made my eyes water.

### **A confession/honest reflection**

Growing up, I never envisioned myself to be a thief, but that's exactly what I had become—a sixteen year old criminal.

## Adding or removing detail in your writing

One of the struggles we often have when telling our story is knowing which details would help the reader to experience our story better and which may be distractions; there needs to be a balance between the two.

At times, it is important that you give an **overview** or broad picture—this requires you to step back and summarize the events. Other times, it is important that we give very specific detail about a piece of our story. We **zoom in** and add the imagery that brings our reader to the story. We add in figurative language (similes, metaphors, personification, etc.) to make the story come alive. The trick is knowing when to give an overview and when to zoom in. One thing you want to consider is which details will help the reader to **empathize** or connect with you and which are just background that help propel your story.

One thing that often separates writers who take time to craft their words and those who simply want to convey information is that writers use imagery to **show** scenes rather than **tell** what happened.

Tell	Show
I was really tired and couldn't move.	The lids of my eyes hung heavy, like wet bags of sand. I flopped down upon the couch, exhausted and defeated. Motionless, I sat for hours. The tick of the clock and the hum of the refrigerator mocked me with every passing second.
My mom tried to make me, but I didn't want to go.	Though my mother pulled with the strength of a locomotive, my feet remained rooted into the ground. If she wanted me to go, she would have to rip me from the house.

## Common Errors in Personal Statement Drafts:

### **Issues of Grammar/Punctuation:**

- ✓ Capitalize proper nouns (the NAME Mom is capitalized. The noun my mom is not.)
- ✓ You are over using or incorrectly using semicolons—learn to use them well and sparingly.
- ✓ Do not use numerals for numbers under ten and do not use abbreviations like hr. (for hour) or pg. (for page). Spell these things out. Also spell any numbers under ten.

### **Issues of Voice:**

- ✓ Stay in PAST TENSE when telling your story. Do NOT switch to present tense. So, it should read “I stood on the block for three hours” NOT “I stand on the block for three hours.”
- ✓ SHOW, DON'T TELL! You need to use imagery to show the mood, rather than telling the mood or your feelings.
- ✓ Play around with sentence length (syntax). Consider using a few short sentences to grab the reader's attention. Consider how using long sentences, especially to describe things, could be effective. Blend long and short sentences together to give your piece an interesting rhythm.
- ✓ Avoid “you” (2<sup>nd</sup> person point of view) in your personal statement. Say “I” or “we.”
- ✓ Don't use words you don't know. It's okay to look up words in a thesaurus; however, don't CHOOSE a word you don't know. Even more powerful is using common words in unexpected ways— “my mother barked orders at me” or “the window wept with raindrops.”
- ✓ Lots of clichés used, especially in conclusions. Do not say that “time stopped” or that “tears fell like rain,” “change happens,” or “I climbed the mountain,” or “my path to learning is long.” If

you want to say something profound or use an analogy, put it into your original, unique voice. Say something that hasn't been said before.

- ✓ Try on different transitions. Instead of just, "Then I," and "later I," try transitions like "therefore," "however," "furthermore," or "thus," etc.

### **Issues of Content:**

- ✓ Focus your personal statement around what you want your reader to know about you. Do NOT tell your whole life story. Know which details the reader needs to know and which are superfluous. EDIT!
- ✓ Don't be the victim. If you are telling a sad story about things that happened TO YOU, you must show reader that you somehow took control and do not see yourself as a martyr.

### **Clean it up! Does your essay suffer from any of the following mistakes?**

**Double talk:** repeating yourself

"I woke up about midnight because of a loud sound that woke me up." I get it, you got woken up.

**Excess baggage:** unnecessary words

"I am sitting down on the chair." Duh, of course you are. "I am sitting on the chair." Better.

**Garbage words:** KISS (Keep It Short and Simple)

"At this point in time I really think that I need to start getting more of some kind of physical exercise." I tuned out after "I really think." You could have just said, "I need to exercise more."

**Weakling vs. Powerhouse:** punch up your vocabulary

**Double negatives:** "I don't hardly see any mess in my room." Vs. "I hardly see any mess in my room."

**Run-on Sentences:** Use periods for goodness sake! They won't bite, I promise.

**Slang:** "What up bro? How you be?" "Cool chillin'."—Ugh! Don't do this.

**Repetition=Boredom:** "It was a dark and stormy night. During the night, I had a nightmare about storms. I saw dark thunderclouds all night in my dreams." We get it, you had a dark and stormy nightmare. How many times do you need to say 'dark'?

**Clichés:** you all know how I feel about these; don't use them...EVER!

### **Check list:**

- ✓ Spelling
- ✓ Punctuation
- ✓ Tense agreement
- ✓ Unnecessary words
- ✓ Colloquialisms
- ✓ Illogical statements
- ✓ Paragraphs length
- ✓ Syntax

**Other Tips:**

1. Talk about it first. Ask your friends to describe you. What do they think are your best qualities?
2. Ask for editors in advance—people want to help you but need time to do a thoughtful job.
3. Give *yourself* time—time to think and time for multiple drafts.
4. Research—know the school, its mission, the typical student, etc....
5. Get help—no good writing is ever done in isolation.