

Marcus' super-summary of college essay pearls of wisdom

Goals for your essay:

- Distinguish yourself from others with similar grades, activities, and ACT/SAT scores
- Paint a picture of your personality and character
- Show the admissions officer what you can contribute to their institution

Narrative Structure

This is for questions that ask you to tell them a story. This style works with most but not all questions for all college or scholarship essays. Follow these steps:

- Define your defining qualities and try to connect them to a potential major or career
- Find a time you displayed, developed, or tested your best three qualities. Think about your extracurricular activities, hobbies, summer jobs/camps, LINK internship, community service, trips, time with friends, or school clubs.
- Choose a story with a problem or obstacle to overcome. Sometimes your defining quality is the problem and the solution. The problem creates a question for the reader about what will happen and keeps the reader interested
- Find the unexpected twist or surprising detail about yourself within the story and evaluate your story for its potential to be a metaphor for something deeper
- The point of highest drama in your story the intro and set the scene by describing the five W's: who, what, where, when, and why right away. Use descriptive details that call upon the five senses.
- After the intro, back up and tell how you got into the situation; give the necessary background
- Next describe your reaction to the situation integrating thoughts or feelings you had, dialogue, examples, and specific, killer details
- Tell how you dealt with the problem or obstacle and what you learned about yourself, others or the world during the process; describe how this changed you
- Try to summarize the point about you and what you learned in one sentence
- Use this as the basis for your conclusion. Try to circle back to the original story; end on a broad positive note with a snappy last sentence.

Montage Structure

An essay that encompasses several events or experiences united around a particular theme or focus. The montage essay should still show using specific details, tell about your thoughts and feelings, illustrate growth and learning. Using metaphors are especially important for the “montage essay.”

For more tips on choosing a structure see: <http://www.collegeessayguy.com/>

Things to do

- Answer the question
- Get to your main point fairly soon
- Avoid clichés like the plague
- Explain any acronyms (e.g. SLCs, POLs)
- Write like you talk
- Use transitions between paragraphs
- Tie together the beginning and end of your essay

Things to avoid

- Going over the word count
- Trying to impress the reader with great accomplishments; struggles of normal people are more compelling than the victories of super-students
- Overly sensitive topics such as death, divorce, or illegal activity that can pull the focus from you and how you dealt with a problem or obstacle (BUT if a particular challenge has had a profound impact on who you are, you can write about it)
- Cliché topics such as mission trips, sports events, injuries, and especially pets
- Trying to be funny
- “The most important person/thing in my life...”
- “I’m so lucky...”
- Do-good experiences unless used a background for a more specific and revealing moment or event (BUT if these experiences have been crucial to your development, think about original ways to highlight them.)
- Preaching about a topic or issue
- Avant-garde, experimental, so –clever-it’s-confusing essays
- Making excuses for test scores or lower grades than you would like
- Rewriting your resume in prose form

Mechanics

- Use positive language
- Write in the simple past tense and first person
- Vary your sentence structure
- Use as few words as possible
- Avoid qualifiers: just, about, kind of, somewhat, I think, I believe...
- Avoid the passive voice