



College Essay Writing: *Personal Narrative*

Advice on how to write a personal narrative for an effective college essay

The college application process is already stressful enough, but now you have to write an essay?

It's more likely than you think! Most higher education institutions require applicants to submit essays to bolster their admissions profile. While this means you have to do some extra writing, it gives the university you're interested in attending a chance to see what you could bring to their campus! This preview into you as a prospective student is most often completed through the writing of a college essay that utilizes a **personal narrative**.

This handout will provide you with advice on how you might write an effective personal narrative for your college application essay.

What is a personal narrative?

Simply put, a personal narrative is a story that conveys one's identity through a formative event. Personal narratives are traditionally written in the 1st person point of view (e.g. "I went to the store", "my dog chased her tail") and always communicate a sense of the writers' personality. The subject matter can range from an event in your life that shaped you or one of your interests, a challenge you faced, or a tale wholly unique to you. No matter what you decide to write about, your narrative should leave a lasting impression of your character with your reader.

So far, a personal narrative should:

- Utilize a 1st person point of view
- Pertain to a personal story (about an experience, challenge, hope, etc.)
- Show college admissions workers a preview of your identity/personality

It is **NOT** a story from your imagination that follows characters (who are not you) as they explore a sci-fi fantasy setting. However, that does **NOT** mean you should limit your creativity in your college admittance essay. That will be covered in the next section of this handout.

As your essay is going to be submitted to college admissions, your personal narrative is subjected to an extra set of standards. To better your chances of being accepted by the college of your choice, your personal narrative should:

- Be well constructed and grammatically correct

- Adhere to a prompt, if you were given one

More to the point, when a college application asks for an essay consisting of a personal narrative, you are being asked to create an essay about yourself, through the writing of one of the many stories you could tell about yourself.

What makes a personal narrative effective?

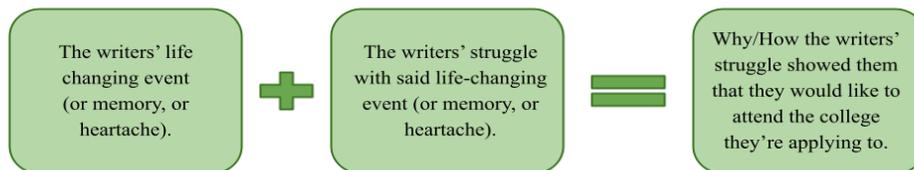
Now that you know what a personal narrative is, it's time to consider what makes a personal narrative effective. As stated above, a personal narrative college essay should:

- Utilize a 1st person point of view
- Be well constructed and grammatically correct
- Adhere to a prompt, if you were given one
- Pertain to a personal story (about an experience, challenge, hope, etc.)
- Show college admissions workers a preview of your identity/personality

An **effective** personal narrative college essay should also:

- Utilize a 1st person point of view
- Be well constructed and grammatically correct
- Adhere to a prompt, if you were given one
- Pertain to a personal story (about an experience, challenge, hope, etc.)
- Show college admissions workers a preview of your identity/personality

...**but with development and style.** Creativity plays a large role in writing an effective personal narrative, especially if it is being submitted as a college admissions essay. Each year, possibly every semester, college admissions workers read through application essays; and each year, possibly every semester, college admissions workers get essays that follow this formula:



It's called a formula because it works. You should follow it when you sit to write your own essay as it's important to develop the personal aspect you're writing about in your narrative, how it affected you, and how it may have influenced your decision to apply to the college you're writing to. That being said, **it's how you apply this formula in your writing that makes your personal narrative college essay effective.**

You have to fill in the gaps left vague and open by the formula. Add details, style, and imagery to make it a true, entertaining story that captures the reader’s attention. Don’t make it all about your choice of college, unless the prompt details otherwise.

Take a look at the condensed essay samples (Essay A and Essay B) and mark the differences in the writing of the personal narratives.

Essay A	Essay B
<p>Last summer, I went on the vacation of a lifetime to Mexico. On the plane there, my sister was planning out what photos she would take for her Instagram. She planned one for each stop the cruise ship would make. I was more concerned about the heat along the coast and in ports along the way. My worries didn’t matter though because a booking error stranded my family far away from the beaches. My dad was angry as we were forced to stay in an old-looking hotel in the city of Acapulco to wait for the next ship.</p> <p>The time we spent there was boring, but at least there was air conditioning. While it was considered a safe city, one night, while staying at the hotel, I witnessed a crime. I was sitting by the window in front of the air conditioning unit to cool off. It was there I saw a man pluck a purse from a woman standing on the street outside the hotel.</p> <p>She yelled and cried out for help, but no one intervened. My father rushed downstairs to tell the clerk while my sister held me back from following him. When I escaped her grasp and made it to the lobby where my father was, I saw him trying to console the woman whose purse was stolen. I felt for her pain because she was a tourist too, and all of her documents, her passport, wallet, everything, was gone! I was angry at the man that stole her belongings, angry that he had escaped.</p> <p>It was that incident that sparked my interest in criminal justice, specifically in the criminal justice program hosted by CSU. I hope...</p>	<p>My last vacation had all the makings of a cliché, block-buster teen-romance. The script began in the Summer before my senior year of high school. In the dense heat of July, my family and I embarked on an picturesque, Instagram worthy trip of a lifetime: a cruise around the coastal cities of Mexico. Melting on a deck of a large, daunting boat, that looked frighteningly similar to the Titanic, was not my original plan for my last Summer as a teenager. Though, it seemed that it wasn’t the original plan of the cruise booking agent either as, when my family arrived at the dock, we were told there had been a mistake. My father blamed the website and it’s confusing interface; I blamed the heat that had warped the plastic thong of my flip-flops while we stood there listening to him bark his complaints.</p> <p>With my sister’s plans for a social media photoshoot at every port stop trashed, my family resigned to a hotel that the cruise line booked for us while we waited for the next boat. Rusted fences lined the entrance to Acapulco’s Hotel Madrid, making it look more haunted-house than safe-haven. According to the booking agent, who had smiled wide despite my father’s less-than-savory comments about the cruise line’s company, Acapulco was a kind city, easy to navigate for tourists. He wasn’t wrong, at least, not entirely.</p> <p>The city wasn’t kind to everyone.</p> <p>One night during our stuffy stay at Hotel Madrid, while I was perched next to the window to soak up all the AC I could, I saw a woman in the street below. It was romantic, with her cast in the moonlight, fair skin and hair standing out like a star against the darkness of night that claimed the city. For a moment, I saw the plot</p>

	<p>of a movie unravel in my mind: our eyes would meet, I would wave, she would smile, we would banter, learn we're traveling on the same cruise, and fall madly, deeply, in love. Yet, just as we were about to lock gazes and start the reel, a shadow lunged towards her in the dark. It was then my teen-romance turned into a crime thriller and sparked...</p>
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Clearly the two essays follow the same event: a cruise vacation in Mexico that went wrong. So, what makes one stand out against the other? What makes that example essay stand out? Why?

Essay B stands out and is considerably more effective than Essay A due to its attention to detail. It paints a vivid, vibrant picture of the setting, characters, and feelings of the writers' story through imagery and emotional appeals. Even the loose introduction of Essay B catches and holds the reader's attention better than Essay A. If the writer of Essay B continued, they would most likely continue to color in the rest of their personal narrative and tie their vacation and witnessing of a crime back to the criminal justice program at CSU, as mentioned in Essay A.

With the number of details included, it's clear the writer of Essay B spent more time developing their personal narrative and allowing their authorial voice (writing style) to shine through. Consequently, that allows the admissions officer reading their essay to evaluate the writer's ability and catch a glimpse of their identity. Not to mention, the entertainment value of the writer's vivid story will be a welcomed break from the more formulaic admittance essays they have to read.

How do I write an effective personal narrative?

Using the examples and information provided above, two lists of tips on how to write an effective personal narrative for a college essay can be formed. One of these lists, **Tips for the Writing**, pertains to aspects of effectiveness that should be incorporated into the writing process. The second list, **Tips for the Writer**, are reminders that you, the writer, should consider before writing and while reviewing your essay after you've finished.

Tips for the Writing	Tips for the Writer
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Outline your essay before writing to ensure that it is well constructed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Select a personal story that was formative, that you impacted so that, through your writing, you can impact your reader ● Don't be scared to be creative and

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Take your time while writing to allow yourself time to go in-depth with your essay ● Make your introduction attention-catching to draw your reader in ● Utilize a 1st person point of view ● Adhere to word counts and prompts provided by the education institution ● Add vivid details ● Review/Read your essay to others to receive feedback (<i>visit a writing center</i>) ● Check that your writing is grammatically correct before submitting 	<p>embellish your personal narrative with entertaining aspects (<i>humor, dialogue, emotional appeals, etc.</i>)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Add variation in the essay's structure (<i>while paragraphs are traditional, you can step outside of them</i>) and formatting ● Tie in your feeling or how your personality was shaped by the experience you're writing about to your motivations for attending the college you're preparing the application essay for <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Don't be too blatant with the connection or else it will throw the reader out of the narrative you've written
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Need more help writing personal narrative?

Writing is challenging, so don't fear asking for more help if you need it!

The Common App provides examples, prompts, and even more tips on how to write an effective personal narrative. You can find information here:

- <https://www.commonapp.org/>

If you're seeking aid with the composition itself, the writing process of the essay, you can visit the Resources page of Illinois Wesleyan's Writing Center! You can find information on grammar and outlining here:

- <https://www.iwu.edu/writing-center/student-resources/>

If you would prefer in-depth help, visit your local/school writing center (or even Peer Tutoring Lab) to get more direct feedback on your essay.