

# STORY WORKS ALASKA

## **Introduction: Personal Statement/Essay Workshop**

### **Welcome:**

Story Works Alaska believes that sharing stories supports understanding –of self, of narrative, and of community. Your personal statement is your story. We look forward to working with you and supporting you as you tell this story.

### **Lofty Goals:**

#### **Be Brave.**

Storytelling can be challenging and, for some of us, even scary. Be as brave as you want to be. But don't feel pushed. Please let your teacher know if any of this feels like too much for you.

#### **Be Honest.**

Please be honest not only about the content of your story (it should be true, not made up) but also be honest about what you are comfortable sharing. Just because you have a story, does not mean you have to share it.

#### **Be Open.**

This applies to the choices you make about how you respond to the stories – your own and others. It can be hard not to judge sometimes but our role as listeners is to open our minds and keep our more judgmental selves in check. Stay open to new understanding about yourself and others.

# Example Essays

Please read these two example college application essays.  
You will be discussing them in the lessons that follow.

## #1 Sibling Success

From: <http://www.collegeconfidential.com/admit/great-common-application-essays/>  
Great Common Application Essays

I vividly recall asking my mother why her waistline was steadily expanding. She took my hand, placed it on her stomach, and said, "Meet your baby sister!" I was six years old and family life had always been focused on me and my needs. Suddenly, I felt uncertain about my future. How would my life change? Would my new sister and I like each other? My father assured me that I would be a kind, loving brother, but I was not so sure!

Hours after Lauren's birth, on a snowy February day, my dad took me to the hospital to meet her. I insisted on wearing my souvenir Burger King crown because I liked it, and thought that she'd like it, too! Amid all the fanfare and excitement, somehow there was a special gift from Lauren to me: a shiny red fire truck! As I opened my gift, I wondered how she could have known that trucks were among my favorite toys (although I didn't ponder that too long).

Daily life quickly changed for me in ways I hadn't imagined. Initially, my big-brother role was mostly that of helpful assistant, who dutifully gave her a bottle or held her. After I had been assisting with her physical care for some time, I volunteered more meaningful contributions, such as encouraging her to crawl and walk. To my surprise, I secretly started to enjoy my new role. I was getting unexpected pleasure from my increasing responsibilities and from my rising family status. No longer was I simply the older brother; now I was also her close friend, teacher, and coach. Her respect for me made (and makes) me feel more mature, capable, adult-like. I treat her questions seriously and trust that she finds the lessons I teach her from my experience helpful and relevant. I welcome the opportunity to mentor her and she shows me her appreciation.

Lauren has definitely benefited from my help, and I can see that our relationship is more mutually beneficial than I had anticipated. The lessons that I have taught Lauren have shown me the benefits of compassion, patience, communication, and understanding the so-called feminine "mystique." When she broke her collarbone, I helped her with daily duties, such as getting dressed and carrying her books. I was pleased to be able to help her during this difficult and awkward time. I'm also patient with her when we're active in shared interests like music,

swimming, or tennis.

As Lauren matures into more of a peer, I value her feminine point of view. Despite our age and gender differences, my parents enabled a lifelong bond between us, and I foster that bond as we grow. I appreciate Lauren's opinions about things. She feels sufficiently comfortable to comment on my friends ("they dress funny"), my clothes ("too preppy"), and my haircut ("grow it out; it's too short!"). We laugh and sometimes get angry with each other, but we always resolve our differences, which serves to strengthen relationship.

Thinking back to the year she was born, I realize that my dad's prediction was accurate. I have become the wise older brother, with a greater appreciation for the dimension and richness that a positive sibling relationship can bring. Our mutual support, trust, and love have brought out the best in me, and I know that the best is yet to come.

## #2 Breaking Into Cars —Stephen

From: <https://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays-that-worked/#essay1>  
Johns Hopkins' Essay's That Worked –Class of 2019

I had never broken into a car before.

We were in Laredo, having just finished our first day at a Habitat for Humanity work site. The Hotchkiss volunteers had already left, off to enjoy some Texas BBQ, leaving me behind with the college kids to clean up. Not until we were stranded did we realize we were locked out of the van.

Someone picked a coat hanger out of the dumpster, handed it to me, and took a few steps back.

“Can you do that thing with a coat hanger to unlock it?”

“Why me?” I thought.

More out of amusement than optimism, I gave it a try. I slid the hanger into the window's seal like I'd seen on crime shows, and spent a few minutes jiggling the apparatus around the inside of the frame. Suddenly, two things simultaneously clicked. One was the lock on the door. (I actually succeeded in springing it.) The other was the realization that I'd been in this type of situation before. In fact, I'd been born into this type of situation.

My upbringing has numbed me to unpredictability and chaos. With a family of seven, my home was loud, messy, and spottily supervised. My siblings arguing, the dog barking, the phone ringing—all meant my house was functioning normally. My Dad, a retired Navy pilot, was away half the time. When he was home, he had a parenting style something like a drill sergeant. At the age of nine, I learned how to clear burning oil from the surface of water. My Dad considered this a critical life skill—you know, in case my aircraft carrier should ever get torpedoed. “The water's on fire! Clear a hole!” he shouted, tossing me in the lake without warning. While I'm still unconvinced about that particular lesson's practicality, my Dad's overarching message is unequivocally true: much of life is unexpected, and you have to deal with the twists and turns.

Living in my family, days rarely unfolded as planned. A bit overlooked, a little pushed around, I learned to roll with reality, negotiate a quick deal, and give the improbable a try. I don't sweat the small stuff, and I definitely don't expect perfect fairness. So what if our dining room table only has six chairs for seven people? Someone learns the importance of punctuality every night.

But more than punctuality and a special affinity for musical chairs, my family life has taught me to thrive in situations over which I have no power. Growing up, I never controlled my older siblings, but I learned how to thwart their attempts to control me. I forged alliances, and realigned them as necessary. Sometimes, I was the poor, defenseless little brother; sometimes I was the omniscient elder. Different things to different people, as the situation demanded. I learned to adapt.

Back then, these techniques were merely reactions undertaken to ensure my survival. But one day this fall, Dr. Hicks, our Head of School, asked me a question that he hoped all seniors would reflect on throughout the year: "How can I participate in a thing I do not govern, in the company of people I did not choose?"

The question caught me off guard, much like the question posed to me in Laredo. Then, I realized I knew the answer. I knew why the coat hanger had been handed to me.

Growing up as the middle child in my family, I was a vital participant in a thing I did not govern, in the company of people I did not choose. It's family. It's society. And often, it's chaos. You participate by letting go of the small stuff, not expecting order and perfection, and facing the unexpected with confidence, optimism, and preparedness. My family experience taught me to face a serendipitous world with confidence.

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*"We liked Stephen's essay because it catches your attention right away and continues to demonstrate critical thinking, initiative, and problem solving. His personality comes through as he naturally conveys humor. Through his anecdotes from growing up, we got a sense of how he might approach his studies here at Hopkins."*

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee

## Essentials: What kind of narrative should you tell?

For the purposes of a personal statement, your story should:

### **Feature YOU as the main character.**

This means the story is about YOU and your experiences/feelings/thoughts; you are not just a spectator. Write in first person, and give us a clear understanding of your inspirations, ambitions, beliefs, life experiences and perspectives. Be open. Be reflective. Find your individual voice and express it honestly. YOU are what colleges want to know about.

### **Answer the prompt, but also matter to YOU.**

Yes, your goal is ultimately to convince a committee that you deserve scholarship money or to be accepted into their college. But, make sure you care about your topic and make sure that is obvious to your reader. If you don't care about it, odds are that you won't be able to convince your reader to care either.

### **Involve a transformation of the main character (you).**

Some of the best essays tell a story that involves some positive change for the main character (you). This transformation may involve learning to accept something, coming to understand something better, surviving an ordeal, or changing your perspective. It can be the result of a specific moment (moving to a new place), or over a longer period of time (developing a relationship with a sibling).

### **Highlight personal strengths.**

Think of what you'd like the admissions committee to know about you.

Some characteristics you may want to highlight include: perseverance, integrity, commitment, critical thinking, a willingness to challenge yourself, grit, and compassion.

*Please choose one of the essays you just read and respond to these questions:*

What were the *stakes*? (What was at risk for the main character? Why did the outcome of the story matter to him or her?)

What transformation did the main character undergo during the story?

## **Structure: This can be the tricky part.**

Depending on the essay's prompt, and the timeframe of your story (losing a baseball game vs. working in your family's store), you may get creative with the structure of your story.

Here are two possible ways to think about your narrative:

### **1) A short event or anecdote that illustrates a trait, transformation, or insight into some truth about yourself.**

- i) See Sample College Essay #1 and #2.
- ii) This structure focuses on *transformation*.
- iii) Even though your essay describes a specific event, you want to include enough background information that the reader gets a broader understanding of who you are.

### **2) The story of a longer process, background, or identity that is important to you.**

- i) See Sample College Essay #3 and #4
- ii) This essay can describe a larger idea/concept/transformation, like developing a relationship with something, or learning a language.
- iii) Even if your topic isn't a specific story, you want your introduction to be a short anecdote that represents or highlights the broader narrative, and have a beginning, middle, and end throughout the essay.

**A note on prompts:** *If you have a specific prompt, the most important thing is to answer it. However, still try to tell a story. Whether it's a catchy anecdote as a 'hook,' or a story in your conclusion that emphasizes your answer, engage the reader with a short narrative.*

*Remember- rules are made to be broken.*

*Don't stress too much about the structure.*

*Be reflective, candid, and pretend you're telling a great story to an old friend.*

## A Sample Structure:

### Introduction

**Hook:** Start your essay with a statement about your story that catches the reader's attention, for example: a question, fact, or definition. Or, start your story "in the action" by describing the situation in vivid detail.

**Set the Scene:** Provide the information the reader will need to understand the story: Who are the major characters? When and where is it taking place?

### Thesis

**Thesis Statement:** Usually located at the end of the introduction, a narrative thesis is a different than an academic thesis. It can begin the arc of the story: "It was sunny and warm out when I started down the path"; offer a moral or lesson learned: "I'll never hike alone again"; or identify a theme that connects the story to a universal experience: "Journeys bring both joy and hardship."

### Body Paragraphs

**Supportive Evidence:** In a personal statement, your experience serves as your evidence. The events of the story should demonstrate the lesson learned, the transformation achieved, or the importance of the event to your character.

**Passage of time:** Writing about events chronologically, from beginning to end, is the most common and sometimes clearest way to tell a story. Whether you want to write chronologically or not, make sure the reader understands the sequence of events.

### Conclusion

**The Moral of the Story:** Your concluding paragraph can close the action of your story, but should also include some reflection or analysis of your transformation. What did you learn? How has this story affected your life now? What does this story mean for your future?

## Writing Strategies: Take your time

Style and Humor:

- Show; don't tell. Good story telling includes details and descriptions that help the reader understand what the writer experienced. Use ALL of your senses.
- Bring on the lively details: "The circus smelled like popcorn and children." Be *specific*.
- You can be funny, although humor can be hard to perfect in writing. Make sure you are tactful and won't be misunderstood.
- Don't hesitate to make fun of yourself. But beware of mocking others.

Verb Tense:

- Reporting vs. Reflecting: Events of a narrative should be told in past tense ("As I stepped foot into the class, I felt my heart thumping in my chest"). Use present tense when *reflecting* on the events ("Now I know how to make light of any situation").

Revise, Proofread, Repeat:

- The best narratives don't happen in one draft. Be ready to let go of parts and start over.
- Make sure multiple people read over and edit your essay before submitting it. You absolutely do NOT want typos or grammatical errors in your essay.
- Write your personal statement; then don't look at it for a few days. When you come back to it, you'll be able to see it through a new lens.

### Conclusion:

It would be easy to deduce from the suggestions above that a formula for writing a narrative exists. That is false; there are all kinds of stories, and many successful ones will violate more rules than they will follow. That said, it's easier to start with a structure and divert from there.

Of course, there is one rule to always follow: PROOFREAD!

### Additional Notes:

## Your Assignment:

For the purposes of a college/scholarship essay, please choose a story that...

**Features YOU as the main character.**

**Answers the prompt, but matters to YOU.**

First, make sure YOU care about it.

Then, make sure your reader will understand WHY you care about it.

**Involves a transformation/growth.**

This can involve you learning to accept something, changing your perspective, surviving a big (or tiny) ordeal, or just learning something really basic.

(See Transformation handout for more info on this.)

**Highlights personal strengths.**

Think of what you'd like the admissions committee to know about you.

Some characteristics you may want to highlight include: perseverance, integrity, commitment, critical thinking, a willingness to challenge yourself, grit, and compassion, among others.

**Is full of lively details.**

Work to bring your story to life with details.

But avoid details that might put your readers to sleep.

"The circus smelled like popcorn and children." vs.

"I got popcorn, and I ate it, and I kind of wanted more, but I wasn't sure if I should get more, because maybe I would feel sick if I ate more, but then again I really wanted more so I thought about buying more and..."

**Reminders:** It can be OK to make fun of yourself. But beware of mocking others.

Genuine humor emerges from conflict and truth.

Be aware of your verb tenses.

Be concise- you have a word count limit.

Answer your prompt.

And proofread, proofread, proofread.

One of expectations is that your story will involve some sort of **Transformation**? What does this mean?

**What it does NOT mean:**

This does not mean that you HAVE to tell a story that is about something heart breaking or earth shattering. Sure, you can tell a story like that if you want. But you do not have to.

**What it DOES mean:**

1. Really, when we say TRANSFORMATION, we also mean OUTCOME.
2. You will be able to find some sort of outcome in **any story that matters** to you.
3. You do NOT need to know what that outcome is when you first choose the story you **want** to tell.
4. An outcome can be big or tiny. Some examples include:
  - a. **You survive something** (big or small) such as:
    - i. Tackling an ostrich.
    - ii. Terrible gas pains.
    - iii. Or...
  
  - b. **You realize something** such as:
    - i. You LOVE football.
    - ii. Your mean older brother actually loves you a ton and would do anything for you.
    - iii. Or...
  
  - c. **You come to understand something** such as:
    - i. Why your little sister is always bothering you.
    - ii. Why your mom is crazy about safety.
    - iii. Or...
  
  - d. **You change your mind about something** such as:
    - i. Maybe you were wrong about your neighbor; he is a nice human and not a complete jerk.
    - ii. Maybe that tattoo wasn't such a great idea after all.
    - iii. Or...

# Short-Short Storytelling

## A Warm Up Exercise

Please share quick responses to the prompts (in bold).

Use the follow-up questions (in italics) if you're having trouble thinking of what to say.

### **1. A favorite piece of clothing.**

What is it? What does it look like? What does it feel like?

When did you get it?

How did you get it?

Why do you like it so much? Does it remind you of anything? (If so, please explain.)

Anything else?

### **2. A time you tried something that you had been scared to do.**

What was it? Why were you nervous?

What made you eventually take action?

What happened afterward? Is it what you expected?

Anything else?

### **3. A relationship that is important to you.**

How long have you known this person? How did you meet?

Why are they important to you?

How has your relationship changed over the years?

How has this person affected who you are?

### **4. A time you felt embarrassed as a kid.**

When did it happen?

Where were you and who else was there?

What happened?

How did you get over the embarrassment?

### **5. A place you loved to go to when you were younger.**

Note: This can be a real or imagined place. Also, you can still love it.

Where was it?

What was it called? (By you or by others.)

What is so wonderful about it?

How did it make you feel?

What did it smell like? Sound like?

Do you still go there? (And why or why not?)

## Getting Started:

Choosing your topic can be the hardest part.

Use the prompts from the Common Application as a jumping off point.

(Or you can use whatever prompt you've brought for the workshop.)

### Prompts:

Please write about...

- A. ... a time or incident when you **experienced failure**. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
- B. ... a time when you **challenged a belief or idea**. What prompted you to act? Would you make the same decision again? How did it feel?
- C. ... an event or experience that marked your **transition from childhood to adulthood** within your culture, community, or family. When did you realize you were becoming an adult? What changed?
- D. ... a **problem you've encountered and 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. Why is it significant to you? What steps could (or did) you take to solve it?
- E. ... a **background, identity, interest, or talent** that is so meaningful to you that your application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.

### Reminders:

- Make sure this is a story YOU want to be telling.
- Make sure it's real.
- Make sure it shows growth or transformation, and highlights your positive attributes.

## Getting Started: Brainstorming Ideas

Use this page to help you generate ideas in response to some or all of the prompts.

Prompt:	Brainstorm Ideas Here:
... a time when you <b>experienced failure.</b>	
... a time when you <b>challenged a belief or idea.</b>	
... an event or experience that marked your <b>transition from childhood to adulthood.</b>	
... a <b>problem you've encountered and solved</b> , or a <b>problem you'd like to solve.</b>	
... a <b>background, identity, interest, or talent</b> that is so meaningful to you that your application would be incomplete without it.	

## Getting Started: Story Notes

Use this page to help outline your essay as a story.

<b>Introduction:</b>	
<p><b>What's your hook?</b> A hook can be an anecdote that frames your story, or a statement, fact, definition, or question that grabs the readers' interest. Start in the action!</p> <p>Make sure you <b>set the scene</b>. Where were you? How old were you? Provide information.</p>	
<b>Thesis:</b>	
<p>State your thesis (what you learned, or how the event is significant to you):</p>	
<b>Body Paragraph 1: Beginning Action</b>	
<p>Beginning Action: This is how your narrative begins and builds.</p>	
<p>Brainstorm powerful details that relate to the beginning action: Smells? Sounds? Touch? Light? Other?</p>	
<b>Body Paragraph 2: Middle Action</b>	
<p>Middle Action: This is the main conflict or climax of your story.</p>	
<p>Brainstorm powerful details that relate to the middle action: Smells? Sounds? Touch? Light? Other?</p>	
<b>Body Paragraph 3: End Action</b>	
<p>End Action: This is how the story resolves.</p>	
<p>Brainstorm powerful details that relate to the end action: Smells? Sounds? Touch? Light? Other?</p>	
<b>Conclusion:</b>	
<p>Analyze and reflect on the actions in your story. How did you change? What did you learn?</p> <p>Revisit your stakes: why is this important now?</p>	

## Getting Started: Continued Going Beyond

### Note:

Your responses to these questions might end up in your story or they might remain implicit. But thinking about them could help you strengthen your essay.

Is there anything else that changed for you because of this story?  
Or is there anything else you learned about yourself/others/the world?

Do you have any regrets? Hopes for next time? Wishes?

Are there any other reasons that this story matters a lot to you?

What do you want the reader to learn about you?