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**Introduction:**

**Welcome:**

Story Works Alaska believes that sharing stories supports understanding –of self, of narrative, and of community. Your personal statement is just that: it’s your story. We look forward to working with you and hearing your stories.

**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.

**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).

***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?

**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.

**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.**
	* 1. See Sample College Essay #1 and #2.
		2. This structure focuses on *transformation.*
		3. 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.

1. **The story of a longer process, background, or identity that is important to you.**
	* 1. See Sample College Essay #3 and #4
		2. This essay can describe a larger idea/concept/transformation, like developing a relationship with something, or learning a language.
		3. 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:**

**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.

Introduction

**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 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.”

Thesis

**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.

 Body Paragraphs

**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:**