

LESSONS

How to Write a College Essay

College Essay Guy and
826 National

GRADES 11–12

TYPE

MEMOIR
NARRATIVE

This lesson from College Essay Guy introduces students to two types of effective college essay structures: Montage and Narrative.

SESSION 1 : HOW TO WRITE A COLLEGE ESSAY USING MONTAGE STRUCTURE

YOU WILL NEED

- [College Essay Guy – Montage Session Handout](#)
- • 1 copy per student
- Writing journal and writing utensil
- Optional: 3 highlighters or pens in different colors (for peer review)

BEFORE YOU START

One way to think of the college essay is as the heart of a student’s application—as in, it helps an admissions officer see who they are, what they value, and what they bring to their campus and community.

Before you guide students through how to write their college essays, we recommend that you first acknowledge with them that there’s something fairly strange about this process: namely, that this is a kind of writing that they’ve maybe never been asked to do before.

In that sense, college essays are a bizarre bait-and-switch—in high school, students are taught a few different ways to write (e.g., maybe some historical analysis, or how to analyze literature, or creative writing), and then to apply to college, they’re asked to write something fairly different (or maybe completely different) from any of the things they’ve been asked to write in high school.

In this lesson, we’ll walk students step-by-step through how to write a college essay, and introduce two effective essay structures, so that their essay can help them stand out in the application process.

Let’s dive in.

BUT FIRST, TWO IMPORTANT QUESTIONS:

At the start of the essay process, ask students to reflect on two questions:

- Have you faced significant challenges in your life?
- Do you want to write about them?

It’s helpful for students to reflect on #2, especially, because here’s an important qualifier:

- Even if you’ve faced challenges, *you do not have to write about them in your personal statement.*

We recommend you name this with students early, because many students are under the impression that they *have* to write about challenges—that it’s either expected, or that it’s somehow better to do so.

Neither is true. (And to be sure it’s clear: [you do not have to write about trauma in your college essay to stand out.](#))

We’ve seen many, many incredible essays—ones that got students into the schools they were hoping to get into—that had no central challenge.

***Educator Note:** Almost inevitably, a student’s answer to #1 is “Maybe. . .?” because they’re not sure what qualifies as a significant challenge. In this case, it may be helpful to share that a significant challenge is one that stays with you, long after the event has ended. You can also raise this question with students and create a shared definition of “significant challenge.”*

If students have had a significant challenge, ask them if they feel ready to reflect on and communicate about the event, without it causing any unnecessary stress or harm.

It’s possible to use Narrative Structure to write about a challenge that isn’t significant, but it’s much, much harder to write an outstanding Narrative Structure essay about a less significant challenge (which is why we recommend session two only for those students who are ready to write about a significant challenge).

Sometimes students pick the hardest challenge they’ve been through and try to make it sound worse than it actually was. We recommend that students avoid writing about a challenge merely because they think these types of essays are inherently “better.” Focusing myopically on one experience can sideline other brilliant and beautiful elements of your character.

In this lesson, **all** students will experiment with Montage Structure in session one. We only recommend session two, which focuses on Narrative Structure, for those students who are ready to write about a challenge.

WHAT DO YOU VALUE?

Before diving into essay structure, tell students that they’ll begin by focusing on who they are and what they value.

Pass out the [College Essay Guy – Montage Session Handout](#) (you can also make a copy of the [digital version here](#) to edit the handout as needed). Invite students to complete The Values Exercise on pages

1-2.

This exercise offers a simple, approachable way for students to identify their core values, which will be paramount to communicate in their writing, and a helpful frame for the rest of the session.

Students should take 5-10 minutes to work through the handout independently (we recommend you complete the exercise with them!). Once students have reached their top core value, you might have them write it on a post-it that they put on the board, or notecard they keep at their desk, or at the top of their notebook—wherever they put it, they should keep that value in mind as they work through the rest of the session.

THE MONTAGE STRUCTURE, AKA, “THREAD AND BEADS”

In this session, all students will experiment with a **Montage Structure** college essay.

Share with students that a “montage” is, simply put, a series of moments or story events connected by a common, thematic thread.

- **Montage:** A series of moments or events in a story that are connected by a common theme or idea.

Well-known examples from movies include “training” montages, like those from *Mulan*, *Rocky*, or *Footloose*, or the “falling in love” montage from most romantic comedies. Or remember the opening to the Pixar movie *Up*? In just a few minutes, we learn the entire history of Carl and Ellie’s relationship.

Ask students if they can think of another example of a montage scene from a movie. Then, ask students to consider why so many movies incorporate the montage effect—what is its purpose?

A few ideas that students may touch upon:

1. One purpose is to communicate a lot of information fast.

2. Another is to allow you to share a lot of different kinds of information (as the example essay they'll read in this session shows)

At this point, it's helpful to display both essay structure definitions, which help to clarify how these two structures are different. Keep these displayed for the duration of the essay writing sessions:

- **In a Narrative Structure essay, story events connect chronologically.**
- **In a Montage Structure essay, story events connect thematically.**

Next, share a metaphor to illustrate a montage approach:

Imagine that each different part of you is a bead and that a select few will show up in your essay. They're not the kind of beads you'd find on a store-bought bracelet; they're more like the hand-painted beads on a bracelet your little brother made for you.

The theme of your essay is the thread that connects your beads.

FIND YOUR THREAD: THE 5 THINGS EXERCISE

Students can find a thread in many, many different ways. One way we've seen students find great montage threads is by using the 5 Things Exercise, which they'll try next.

Share with students that for a Montage Structure essay, it helps to think of 5 thematically connected things that thread together different experiences, or moments, or events in students' lives. For example, 5 T-shirts they collected, 5 homes they've lived in, 5 patches on their jean jacket, etc.

Students should work independently on page 3 of their handout, looking at the example on page 3 and the values chart on page 1 for guidance as they go.

MONTAGE STRUCTURE MENTOR TEXT

Next, students will see the Montage Structure in action by reading an example essay, or Mentor Text. Students can find the mentor text on page 4 of the handout.

For the first reading, it's helpful to have a few volunteers read the essay aloud. When you finish, ask students to read through a second time. This time, they should star or underline lines that stood out to them as memorable, effective, or important.

When they finish, ask students to share 1 or 2 lines that stood out to them, and why, with a partner or in small groups. Then, going back to that “thread and beads” metaphor, ask students:

- Q: What is the “thread” (i.e., the theme that ties everything together)?
- A: Her “swears” or identity statements. Each one represents a different aspect of the author’s identity.

- Q: What are the “beads” (i.e., different parts of the writers’ identity)?
- A: Latina, introvert, “profiler”, cook/granddaughter, activist and ally. Each part of her identity links to her values: self-awareness, family, analytical mind, inclusion and equality.

THE OUTLINE THAT GOT HER THERE

Now that students have identified the thread of this essay, they’ll work in pairs or small groups to find the beads by creating a backwards outline from the Mentor Text, found on page 6 of the Montage Structure — Handout. For each bead, ask them to consider what details the author shares about her background and what insights the reader can draw from those details.

THE “BEAD-MAKING” EXERCISE

Next, students will try another approach to finding *their* thread. This exercise asks you to start with the thread of something you know well and *then* create the beads. Here's how it works:

1) On a blank sheet of paper, make a list of five or six things you know a lot about.

For example, I know a lot about ...

- Words/language
- Games
- Productivity
- Voices/accents
- Self-help books

If you can only think of 3 or 4, that's okay.

2) Pick one of the things you wrote down, flip your paper over, and write it at the top of your paper. This is your thread, or your potential thread.

3) Underneath what you wrote down, name 5-6 values you could connect to this. These will serve as the beads of your essay. You can even draw a thread connecting your beads, if you want (see handout).

4) For each value, write down a specific example, memory, image, or essence object that connects to that value.

Example:

- My thread: Games
- My beads: Connection, creativity, fun/laughter, family, competition, knowledge

- Here are my examples/memories/images/essence objects:
 - Connection: One memory I have is playing “I love” in a circle at camp with 20 friends and strangers. I still marvel at how quickly it helped us bond.
 - Creativity: After I understand how a game works, I like to try to improve it by tweaking the rules. Two examples: 1) I remember when I was young trying to find the right amount of money for the Free Parking space in Monopoly, and 2) recently, I learned the game Guesstimation is so much better if you add wagers. I see my 4-year-old daughter tweaks games too, which drives my wife crazy, as she likes to play by the rules of the game.
 - Fun/laughter: As I’ve aged, so much of my life has become planned/programmed, but I can still enjoy losing track of time with board games. Two weeks ago, for example, I laughed so hard I cried while playing Drawful with Lisa, Andy, and Sage.
 - Family: We played games like Charades and Jeopardy when I was young. (My dad was the Game Master who would come up with the categories. As I grew older, I took over the role of Game Master.)
 - Competition: People don’t know this about me because I seem so chill, but I am *incredibly* competitive. Things I rarely lose at: ping pong, Tetris, foosball, and corn hole. I’ve gotten much better over the years at hiding my competitive side, but it’s still there.
 - Knowledge: Can’t really think of much on this one—maybe something related to Jeopardy?

This is an example of an actual brainstorm from this exercise. Note that they couldn’t come up with something for the last one, “knowledge,” which is fine.

The point is this: If you know a thing well, odds are good you’ll be able to make a lot of connections to your values. And if you can find specific examples for each value, that can make for interesting paragraphs in your personal statement.

If you're willing to spend a few more minutes, ask "so what?" of each example to see if a specific insight emerges.

And, in case you want a formula for this practice, here you go:

- **One paragraph = one bead = value + example + insight**

THREAD AND BEADS OUTLINE

By now, students will have generated a good amount of ideas and should be ready to choose their thread and beads (if not, they can try out the above exercise with a different starting thread, or have them return to their 5 Things Exercise).

Once students have their thread in mind, it's time to map out the order of their beads using the Threads and Beads, or Montage Outline, found on page 7 of the Montage Structure — Handout. Students should spend the most time reflecting on their insights for each bead, or the "so what?" of each bead.

DRAFTING

Now, students are ready to write a first draft! Using their brainstorm and outline as a roadmap, students can begin to write their Montage Structure essay.

Remind students that this first draft is a "down" draft: the goal is to get all of their beads, details, and insights down on paper. They will pay attention to transitions in the next step, revision. To a decent degree, they shouldn't worry about building a strong introduction or conclusion in their first draft—they can add and/or revise these pieces later.

REVISING FOR TRANSITIONS

The transitions between paragraphs, or “beads,” are often the toughest part of this essay type. One exercise that works well is called [Revising Your Essay in 5 Steps](#), and it basically works like this:

1) Highlight the first sentence of each of your paragraphs in bold, then read each one aloud in order. Do they connect, creating a short version of your essay? If not:

2) Rewrite the bold sentences so that they do connect (i.e., flow) together. Once you’ve done that ...

3) Rewrite each paragraph so it flows from those bolded sentences.

4) Read them aloud again. Wash, rinse, repeat until the ideas flow together.

5) (This step they do later) Step away from the essay for at least 30 minutes. Go for a walk, get something to eat, do something else to clear your mind. Come back to it and read it aloud. When you come back:

• •

Put the first sentence of each paragraph in **bold**.

•

Read them aloud in order to see if they tell a very short version of your essay. (If not, rewrite them.) If they do, then:

•

Read the whole essay aloud, checking to see if what’s in each paragraph supports the essay in **bold**

•

This is a great way to figure out the “bones” (i.e., structure) of your essay. You can model this approach by highlighting and reading aloud the first sentences of the Mentor Text essay, or workshop the first

sentences of your own Montage Structure draft, if you're writing along with students.

Next, students will work independently or in pairs, and go through the same steps to focus on their transitions between “beads”.

If students finish early, point them back towards their introduction and conclusion. They can explore different approaches for introducing their essay on [How to Start a College Essay](#), and see 10 ways to improve their conclusion on [How to End a College Essay](#).

CONCLUSION:

By the end of this session, students should have a complete first draft and a solid start on revision. Remind students that writing is a process, and writing a college essay can be an especially daunting process that takes time and effort. To that end, we encourage students to:

- Share their essay with a few trusted readers.
- Read as many excellent examples of college essays as possible—the College Essay Guy is a great place to start!
 - [Common App examples](#)
 - [College Essay examples](#)
 - [Personal Statement examples](#)
- Read their essay out loud, and continue to experiment with transitions and word choice until it sounds like the best version of themselves.
- Return to their essay often, at different times of day, to check their writing for flow and readability.

SESSION 2 : HOW TO WRITE A COLLEGE ESSAY USING NARRATIVE STRUCTURE

YOU WILL NEED

- [College Essay Guy – Narrative Session Handout](#)
- • 1 copy per student
- Writing journal and writing utensil
- Optional: [College Essay Guy video](#)

BEFORE YOU START

This session focuses on Narrative Structure and is recommended only for those students who are ready to write about a significant challenge, or answered “yes” to both questions at the beginning of this lesson.

This session is **not** recommended for all students because, as we covered in Session One, if students haven’t experienced (or don’t want to write about) a significant challenge, it can be difficult to write an outstanding college essay using Narrative Structure.

Read more about why students *do not* need to write about a significant challenge to produce an excellent college essay [here](#).

THE FEELINGS AND NEEDS EXERCISE

Students will start by completing the Feelings and Needs Exercise, found on pages 1-2 on the [College Essay Guy – Narrative Session Handout](#) (find the [digital version here](#) to edit the handout as needed).

Students should take about 15-20 minutes to work independently on this content-generating exercise.

You can also play the [College Essay Guy video](#) during this time, pausing as needed for your students (and you, if you're writing along!) to generate ideas.

At the 20-minute mark, bring students together and ask them if they've noticed how the Feelings and Needs chart connects to a potential structure for their personal statement. If they're not seeing it, ask them to turn their paper so that the challenges are at the top of the page and the effects are below them.

Voila! A rough outline for a narrative essay.

To clarify, this isn't a complete outline for an essay. They may not want to spend an entire paragraph describing their feelings, for example, or they may choose to describe their needs in just one sentence.

And now that students see how the chart helps to frame their story, they may want to expand on certain columns. However, the sideways Feelings and Needs chart can help them think about how the chronology of your experiences might translate into a personal statement.

NARRATIVE ESSAY MENTOR TEXT

Next, students will see how one student who completed the Feelings and Needs exercise turned their ideas into a Narrative Structure essay. The Mentor Text can be found on page 3 of the handout, or direct students to access their digital copy.

For the first reading, it's helpful to have a few volunteers read the essay aloud. Before you begin, ask all students to star lines and phrases that stand out to them—don't worry about identifying the structure or elements of the essay just yet!

For the second reading, read the essay out loud or ask students to read independently. This time, students will mark up the essay where they notice elements from the Feelings and Needs Exercise:

- Challenge
- Effects
- Feelings
- Needs
- What I Did
- What I Learned

Display or project a copy of the essay, if possible, and ask for students to share where they noticed the above elements in the essay, marking the displayed text as you go.

NARRATIVE STRUCTURE CONTENT SECTIONS

Now that they've mapped the Mentor Text to the Feelings and Needs Chart, it's time to zoom out a bit. Share with students that they can think of a narrative college essay as having three basic sections:

- 1) Challenges + Effects
- 2) What I Did About It
- 3) What I Learned

The word count should be pretty evenly split between the three, so for a 650-word personal statement, 200ish words for each section.

It's worth taking some time to emphasize that most of the essay should focus on "What I Did" and "What I Learned"—a common mistake with narratives is to spend most of the word count on the challenge + effects, when what the reader gets the most out of regarding the student's values/insights/skills/qualities/interests/world view is their actions in response to the challenge, and how they grew through their experiences.

To get a little more nuanced, within those three basic sections, a college essay narrative often has a few specific story beats:

- **Status Quo:** The starting point of the story. This briefly describes the life or world of the main character (in your essay, that's you).
- **The Inciting Incident:** The event that disrupts the Status Quo. Often it's the worst thing that could happen to the main character. It gets us to wonder: *Uh-oh ... what will they do next? or How will they solve this problem?*
- **Raising the Stakes/Rising Action:** Builds suspense. The situation becomes more and more tense, decisions become more important, and our main character has more and more to lose.
- **Moment of Truth:** The climax. Often this is when our main character must make a choice.
- **New Status Quo:** The denouement or falling action. This often tells us why the story matters or what our main character has learned. Think of these insights or lessons as the answer to the big "so what?" question.

Educator Note: Note that depending on the class, it can be fine, or even beneficial, to skip the story beats above and just stick with the three-part structure, especially if students are learning about or not as familiar with more traditional narrative elements such as rising action, climax, etc.

To illustrate this further, return to the “The Little Porch and a Dog” essay.

Notice, and mark on the displayed text, that roughly the first third focuses on the challenges she faced and the effects of those challenges.

Roughly the next third focuses on actions she took regarding those challenges. (Though she also sprinkles in lessons and insight here.)

The final third contains lessons and insights she learned through those actions, reflecting on how her experiences have shaped her. (Again, with the caveat that What She Did and What She Learned are somewhat interwoven, and yours likely will be as well. But the middle third is more heavily focused on actions, and the final third more heavily focused on insight.)

Mark these thirds on the displayed text as you go.

If applicable, ask students to pair up to identify the beats of her story, within those three sections. On their copy of the text, they should find and mark the following elements, or “beats”:

- **Status Quo**
 - • • Growing up “giggling” with siblings and mother; father was away for work.
- **The Inciting Incident**
 - • • Father was arrested due to immigration status; family savings spent on his bail.
- **Raising the Stakes/Rising Action**
 - • • Family moved to a rented house, money became tight, and they helped out as much as possible to help save money.

- **Moment of Truth**

- • • They learned their entire family’s immigration status was in jeopardy; they agreed to testify in court.

- **New Status Quo**

- • Father won his case and was granted residency; their parents are supportive of their education and dream of a financially independent future.

Bring everyone back together to review what students found, which should loosely follow the explanations above, and raise any questions that came up in the process.

At this point, students should connect that the Challenges and Effects columns of the Feelings and Needs Exercise ... are the *Challenges + Effects* portion of your essay. Same with What I Did and What I Learned.

But where do details from the Feelings and Needs columns appear in the essay?

Share with students that details in your Feelings and Needs columns can be spread throughout the essay, and—this is important to remember: **Some of your feelings and needs should be stated directly in your essay, and some should *not* be included—but rather, implied.**

Ask students to notice how, in “The Little Porch and a Dog” the author doesn’t explicitly name every single effect, feeling, or need in their essay. Why not? First, they’re working within a 650-word limit. Second, not naming every feeling or need makes room for her reader’s inferences, which can often make a story more powerful.

Before students start their draft, give them a moment to return to their Feelings and Needs chart and mark which of their feelings and needs they want to state directly in their draft, and which they'd like to imply, or suggest.

DRAFTING THE ESSAY

At this point, some students may be ready to write directly from their Feelings and Needs chart and can begin drafting their essay.

If students would like to spend more time planning their narrative “beats” before writing, they can begin with the Narrative Beats Outline on page 7 of their handout.

OPTIONAL: PEER REVIEW AND REVISION

***Educator Note:** We recommend all students get feedback on and revise their draft started in this session. However, since students who have selected Narrative Structure have chosen to write about personal, significant challenges, we recommend first checking in with students individually before planning any in-class peer review. Are students comfortable sharing their writing with a partner? Who in your group do they feel comfortable pairing up with, if anyone? If not, make another plan: they can work independently to review their writing, but also encourage them to share their work with a trusted reader—a college counselor, teacher, friend, family member, etc. They can ask the reader to answer the peer review questions on the handout.*

For those students participating in peer review, once students have a complete first draft, they should swap essays with a partner and review each other's writing with narrative structure in mind.

Page 8 on the Narrative Structure — Handout provides directions to guide students through this peer review, which includes:

- Identifying Challenge/Effects, What I did, What I learned, and Feelings/Needs
- The rule of “thirds”
- Two questions and two golden lines

Give students 10-15 minutes to review. We like to encourage students to read the essay at least twice: once, from start to finish without making any notes. The second time, they should start to mark up the essay with the peer review questions in mind.

After the review period, provide students another 10 minutes to meet with each other and discuss what they found (about 5 minutes per essay; prompt them to switch half way through).

In the remaining time, students can return to their work and revise with their peer’s feedback in mind. You can also display the following questions to guide their revision, if helpful:

- Is there a section you need to develop (and/or more concise) to meet “the thirds” rule?
- Which narrative beat(s) would you like to focus on? How do you plan to make them stronger?
- Which feelings and needs are most important to communicate directly? Which feelings and needs will be implied?

CONCLUSION

By the end of this session, students should have a complete first draft and a solid start on revision. We know that writing is a process, and writing a college essay can be an especially daunting process that takes time and effort. To that end, we encourage students to:

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