Writing Your College Essay:

A Twelve-Step Program from Grady’s CCC

**Step One**: Read sample essays. Find more online or in the CCC.

**Step Two**: Learn two important elements of a strong narrative essay.

A narrative essay begins with or includes a **story**, or anecdote, from your past. This story should **illuminate a personal quality** that will show admissions officers why you’d be an asset to their school. The best stories involve a problem of some sort (an obstacle, mistake, fear, accident, etc.) that you had to overcome. Bonus: Revealing a quality or characteristic not otherwise obvious from your application or something unexpected about you will help you stand out.

After you tell the story, it’s important to explain its significance: **what you learned, how you grew.** This step shows that you are thoughtful and reflective and have gained some self-understanding. There’s more to writing a good essay than telling a story and explaining what it means, but it’s a good place to start.

**Step Three**: Choose a personal quality you want to highlight in your essay. Here are some to consider. Circle five qualities you have (or add your own).

Able to work alone, Accepting, Active, Adaptable, Adept, Adventurous, Ambitious, Analytical, Articulate, Artistic, Assertive, Attentive, Authentic, Bold, Brave, Broad-minded, Cautious, Charitable, Cheerful, Committed, Compassionate, Competent, Congenial, Conscientious, Cooperative, Courageous, Considerate, Creative, Curious, Decisive, Dedicated, Dependable, Determined, Diligent, Diplomatic, Disciplined, Discreet, Effective, Empathetic, Energetic, Enterprising, Entertaining, Enthusiastic, Extroverted, Fair, Fearless, Fierce, Firm, Focused, Forgiving, Frank, Friendly, Generous, Genuine, Graceful, Helpful, Honest, Humble, Humorous, Idealistic, Imaginative, Industrious, Independent, Innovative, Insightful, Inventive, Joyful, Judicious, Kind, Late Bloomer, Leader, Logical, Loyal, Mature, Methodical, Motivated, Motivational, Natural, Nonconforming, Nurturing, Objective, Observant, Open-minded, Optimistic, Orderly, Organized, Outgoing, Passionate, Patient, Peace-maker, Persistent, Perseverant, Personable, Persuasive, Pleasant, Poised, Positive, Practical, Precise, Productive, Progressive, Rational, Reliable, Reserved, Resilient, Resourceful, Responsible, Self-confident, Self-controlled, Self-reliant, Sensitive, Sharp, Shy, Sincere, Sociable, Steady, Strong, Successful Supportive, Sympathetic, Tactful, Talented, Tenacious, Thorough, Thrifty, Tolerant, Tough, Understanding, Vibrant, Wise

Or add your own:

**Step Four**: Think of a story from your life (preferably the last few years) that illustrates a time when you demonstrated each quality (or when that quality was tested). Good stories are not necessarily life-changing events. Go for the mundane—it often makes the most memorable essay. **Hint: you may think of a story first and then pick the characteristic it illustrates.**

Can’t think of a story? Here are some ways to jog your memory:

* Consider objects that are important to you. Look around your room. What do you display? Look in your pockets or drawers. What have you saved? What object are you never without (not counting your phone)? Do you always have a ponytail elastic on your wrist? No object is too trivial to inspire a story. It can have sentimental value, or it can be utilitarian.
* Do you have any quirky habits? (Quirky as in charming—not alarming.) Do you always wear two different color socks? Doodle incessantly?
* Do you have any special “talents” or hobbies not on your resume? Can you flip a crepe just by tossing the pan? Ride a unicycle? Wrap presents beautifully? Do impressions? Fold origami? Recite Pi to 100 digits?
* Ask your parents or friends for favorite stories about you.
* Think about specific instances at jobs or extracurricular activities, especially challenging or uncomfortable times.
* Think about traditions (formal or informal) you enjoy with family or friends.
* Look through old photos.

**Step Five**: Jot down the five qualities you possess that you might write about, and a story from your life that illustrates each. (Example: Nurturing. The time I took in a stray kitten and found it a new home. Or Calm. The time my brother had a bike wreck but I surprised myself by not panicking at the blood.) Remember, a story usually involves some sort of conflict or problem. Tip: your story could involve more than one quality.

**Step Six:** Finalize your topic. Choose the best quality/story from above, and you have it. **Hint: Make sure your topic is something you care about.**

Any topic can make a great essay, however, some are more challenging than others. As a general rule, avoid topics that show poor judgment or bad behavior (drug or alcohol use, illegal activity) or anything that’s just too much information (your love life or bathroom habits). Avoid topics that could anger your reader (pontificating about religion or politics, for example). Some topics are done so often they’re clichéd (sports injury, sports victory, mission trip, death of a pet or grandparent), however if you can bring something fresh and original, give it a try.

**Step Seven**: Develop your anecdote. Once you’ve chosen the personal quality and story you’re going to write about, flesh it out with detail. Your story is the hook to get the reader interested and caring about you. Spend some time on it.

Defining quality: (Fearless)

What’s the problem in the story? (She’s put on the spot and freezes)

What were you doing? (Performing in a clowning class)

Where were you? (Onstage in front of the class)

When did it happen? (Last July)

Any dialogue? (“Alright, do something funny.”)

Add sensory details: sights, smells, sounds, etc. (clown nose, flushing cheeks)

How did you feel? (On the verge of tears)

At what point in your story do you begin telling it? In the middle of things at the height of the action is always effective.

**Step Eigh**t: Outline your essay. It doesn’t have to be a formal outline, but rather a loose roadmap that will keep you focused and on track. There’s lots of room for variation, but a basic approach will have these elements:

* Introduction: This is where you put the story or anecdote you worked on. Remember that the strongest story will have a problem or conflict. Bonus: an opening line that grabs the reader’s attention.
* Back Story: If you started your story at the highest point of the action, you’ll need to go back and explain, briefly, how you got there, or what led up to the story.
* Dealing: Explain how you felt about the problem and what you did to handle it. How did this work out? Hint: you didn’t have to succeed.
* Lessons: What did you learn (about yourself, others, or life in general). Reflect on what this incident meant to you.
* Conclusion: Restate the main point you’re making about yourself, and say how this lesson will be useful in the future. If you can link back to the opening anecdote, you’ll have a really strong ending.

**Step Nine**: Write your rough draft. Don’t worry about going over the word count at this point—write as much as you like. You’ll tighten and polish later.

**REMEMBER THESE POINTS**

**DO:**

Write in the first person (this essay is about you) and use the past tense.

Use vivid action verbs (sputtered, froze, raced)

Use casual, conversational style to show your own voice (but avoid texting abbreviations, slang, technical jargon the reader won’t know, and curse words).

Use specific naming words: don’t say “shoes,” say “stilettos,” “Chuck Taylor All Stars,” or “saddle oxfords.” Don’t say “dancing,” say “doing the nae-nae.” Don’t say “my neighbor’s dog,” say “my neighbor’s Yorkie, Gus.” Get specific.

**DON’T:**

Use fancy words just to impress; this seriously doesn’t work. Write like you talk.

**Step Ten**: Revise and polish. This is part of the process. Every revision makes your essay stronger. Strike unnecessary words; don’t use three when one will do.

**Step Eleven**: Proofread! Do this several times and ask someone else to as well.

**Step Twelve**: Before you finish, print out your essay and read it out loud. This can help you catch mistakes and omissions.

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