THE NINE-PART STRUCTURE

FOR COLLEGE ESSAYS

How to find the story, hold a reader's attention, and write a personal statement that sounds like you.

1 HOOK
2 RESPONSE
3 CONTEXT
4 REFLECTION
5 MOMENTUM
6 TURN
7 AFTERMATH
8 REFLECTION
9 RETURN



Before you write a word

You've probably heard that your college essay should be personal, memorable, authentic, and compelling. Those words sound reasonable. They become less helpful when you have to write the first sentence.

Students often begin by trying to work out what an admissions officer wants. They search for their biggest achievement, their worst day, or a life-changing experience dramatic enough to deserve 650 words. Then they open a document, type a sentence about how they've always been passionate about something, and wonder why it sounds like it was written for a stranger.

Here's a better place to start: What do you remember? What did you notice? Where did you make a decision, get something wrong, become curious, or see another person differently?

Those memories can give an admissions reader a closer look at the person behind your résumé. Your job is to choose the details that help a stranger understand the experience.

I'll show you how I help students make those choices.

I've used a nine-part structure for years to help students find the important pieces of an experience and arrange them on the page. I reach for it when a student has an interesting story buried in a sprawling draft, an opening that goes nowhere, or an ending that arrives before the reader has seen any real change.

Use the nine parts during brainstorming to discover possible material and during revision to decide what belongs where. I usually have students write the entire story first, however messy it comes out. Then we return to the framework and see what the draft needs. Each part describes a job the writing can do; you might handle several in one paragraph.

The hook, response to the hook, and return to the hook are the three anchors in my method. The six elements between them can be rearranged, combined, or allowed to overlap. You'll see two complete essays that use them differently. There is no prize for fitting your life into a diagram.

I use the three anchors because they help writers establish, sustain, and reward a reader's curiosity. The Common App allows many approaches to the personal statement. This is the structure I use to help students make deliberate storytelling decisions.

Most examples here concern the Common App personal statement, which allows up to 650 words. Check the instructions for the specific application you're completing. A shorter essay may use the same storytelling principles very differently.

The two complete student essays, sample draft sentences, and many short examples in this booklet are fictional. Three brief coaching accounts come from actual student meetings. They have been paraphrased and stripped of identifying information; they reproduce neither students' private writing nor their exact words. They show the questions we worked through. I have left out any claims about admissions outcomes. Your own experiences, thinking, and final application writing must remain yours.



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If you already have a draft: Read the four reader questions, the two complete examples, and the revision checklist. Mark the jobs your draft already does before deciding what to move.

If you have a beginning but the middle goes nowhere: Try Part 5 and the completed revision map.

If you have written five endings and hate all of them: Try Part 9, then put the essay away for a short cooling-off period before you choose.

Use this booklet in the order that helps you write. Try an exercise, come back to a chapter, and make decisions after you have some pages to work with.



Find your route through this guide

You can begin before you know your topic

A lot of students are tempted to read every instruction before writing a word. I understand the instinct. A terrible first draft will give you something to examine. A beautiful empty document leaves you staring at the cursor.

Ten minutes: Write down three moments you've thought about more than once. One should be ordinary enough that it would never occur to you to put it on an application. Choose one and freewrite without correcting yourself.

Twenty minutes: Read your pages. Underline a detail, choice, conversation, or thought that still feels alive. Then ask the four reader questions on the next pages.

Thirty minutes: Read the nine-part map. Find the jobs your material might already do. Don't force a turning point you haven't discovered.

Afterward: Try the exercises in the sections where you're stuck, then come back to the map. A stronger opening or ending often becomes visible only after you've written the middle.

— The difference between a framework and a formula

Here's the formula version of the advice: Begin with a dramatic moment. Describe a challenge. Learn a lesson. Announce that you've grown.

You can probably guess the rest of that essay from the first paragraph.

The framework asks a different set of questions: What makes this particular experience worth following? What does the reader understand now? Which detail changes meaning as the essay progresses? What would be missing if we cut this scene?

You'll see the nine functions working in two fictional essays. One develops a problem through several attempts to solve it. The other follows a habit of listening across different scenes. Compare them as you read: both keep creating new questions, though they arrange their material differently.

A note about hard topics: You are free to keep trauma, health, family conflict, and other private experiences out of your application. Choose an experience you can describe clearly, with enough detail and perspective to make it your own. Ordinary pleasures, questions, contradictions, and routines all belong on the list.



A story has a reader

Imagine telling a friend about something that happened last week. You would probably begin with the interesting part. You'd pause to explain the people involved, then go back to the moment your friend interrupted with, "Wait —what happened?"

You already make these decisions when you tell stories aloud. Writing gives you a chance to make them deliberately.

A college personal statement gives the admissions reader a closer look at the person whose grades and activities they have already seen. The transcript shows courses and grades. An activities list shows some of what you've done. The essay can show *how you think while doing it.*

Suppose you spend Sunday afternoons at a laundromat. That detail gives us a setting. Now suppose you keep noticing one dryer that eats quarters; you try to understand why; and, somewhere in the process, you learn that another person's experience of the problem is different from yours. That might be worth a story.

In storytelling, stakes are the possible consequences of what happens next. At this laundromat, customers keep losing their money. The narrator has a reason to investigate, and a reader can understand the frustration.

The four questions I keep coming back to

At every point in the draft, ask:

1. What does the reader know about me right now?
2. What does the reader need to know about me?
3. What questions does the reader have?
4. When and how am I going to answer those questions?

These questions help you manage narrative tension: the uncertainty or curiosity that keeps someone reading. If you explain everything immediately, the reader has little left to wonder about. If you leave out crucial information, the reader gets lost. Work out when each answer will be most satisfying.

— A quick test

Read these two possible openings:

> A. *Throughout my life, I have always been passionate about helping others and solving problems.*

> B. *The dryer had eaten another quarter, and the little girl beside me was keeping count.*

Opening A states the quality the writer hopes we'll admire. In B, we watch something happen and begin asking our own questions. It raises questions: Who is counting? Why is the narrator there? What will happen to the next quarter?

Opening B provides a scene that the writer can develop.

Begin with an experience you remember

Try remembering the day you discovered you were wrong about something; a moment when a family routine felt different; a problem that kept bothering you long after everyone else had stopped thinking about it. Even a very funny mistake can reveal how your mind works.

On paper: List three moments you remember clearly. Make the third one deliberately ordinary. Under each, write *I keep thinking about this because...* Keep the answers private for now. They are raw material, not pitches to an admissions office.



The nine-part map

Think of the nine parts as narrative functions—jobs that different pieces of writing can do. A single paragraph may do several jobs. Some functions appear in a sentence; others need a scene.

PART	WHAT IT DOES
1. Compelling Hook	Opens a question with a revealing moment, image, line, or action.
2. Response to the Hook	Answers enough to help the reader find their footing.
3. Background Information (Exposition)	Gives the history or circumstances we need.
4. Reflection on Personal Experiences	Lets us see what you thought, felt, feared, assumed, or valued.
5. Building Tension and Momentum	Carries the story through choices, attempts, complications, and discoveries.
6. Climax	Marks the turning point or shift in understanding.
7. Aftermath	Shows what happened because of that shift.
8. Continued Reflection	Explores what the experience means to you now.
9. Return to the Hook and Looking Forward	Brings back the opening in a changed light and gives us a sense of the person going forward.

Parts 1, 2, and 9 form the anchor sequence, even though Part 9 sits at the end. The middle six parts are flexible. That is how I teach the structure. Colleges accept essays organized in many different ways.

A student writing an essay about caring for a sibling might reflect in the opening scene, then supply background, then introduce a second scene. An essay about collecting sounds might move between a present-day list and memories from several years. Either can use the nine jobs without assigning one paragraph to each.

Exposition means backstory. Climax means the turning point. Aftermath means what follows. The narrative arc is the movement of the story through change.



What can move around?

Everything between the response and the return. You might reflect during a mistake, explain some background later, or begin near the end and step backward. A montage is a series of short scenes tied together by an image, activity, or question.

Remember the movement: OPEN A QUESTION → GIVE CONTEXT → DEVELOP THE STORY → SHOW CHANGE → RETURN WITH NEW MEANING.



The map is a way to examine writing you have already begun. The three dark boxes mark the opening, response, and return. The six lighter boxes represent work that might happen in any order, sometimes more than once.

Test the picture: Imagine an essay that opens with your grandmother explaining a recipe, jumps to three different kitchens, and returns to that recipe at the end. Where might reflection occur? Perhaps during each kitchen scene. Where is the turn? Perhaps the accumulated change in what you notice across all three. You can identify all nine functions, even with the reflections woven through the kitchen scenes.

The second complete essay uses sounds to connect scenes that happen in different places and at different times.

Next we'll take these jobs one at a time, using the laundromat and several very different stories.

PART 01 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Compelling Hook

Give the reader something worth wondering about

Imagine your essay as a film. What would the first shot show? A person turning a key that doesn't fit? A notebook filled with crossed-out maps? Someone watching the minute hand approach six while a little brother refuses to put on his shoes?

Start with a moment you can describe precisely and that opens a useful question about your story.

A hook is the opening that invites the reader to continue. A good hook makes the reader curious. Think about those three openings. Why doesn't the key fit? What is the student looking for in those maps? What happens at six o'clock, and why won't the little brother cooperate?

Each scene raises a question, giving the reader a reason to continue. As the story develops, those initial questions can lead to more interesting ones. Perhaps the student watching the clock is responsible for getting their brother to school every morning. Now we might begin to wonder what that responsibility looks like, how the student feels about it, and what it reveals about their life.

The trick is deciding what your reader should know, what they'll be wondering about, and when you'll give them the answers. Answer everything in the first paragraph, and you've taken away some of their curiosity. Leave them confused for too long, and they may lose interest. Give them enough information to follow along while allowing the story to unfold.



REAL COACHING / FROM AN ACTUAL MEETING

— From an actual meeting: looking for a disaster

Paraphrased from a coaching transcript. Personal details and identifying information have been omitted.

A student once told me that the personal statement was the most irritating essay to start. The supplemental prompts at least supplied a question. Here the student had to invent the subject, too.

They had gone through years of memories with family members, looking for a major conflict or crisis. The search had turned up very little. They were grateful for a comparatively peaceful life and beginning to suspect that this made them a terrible college-essay subject.

I had to challenge the premise. Admissions readers don't require a family argument or a tragedy. A story can reveal the way someone thinks, notices, chooses, makes things, or enjoys a subject. We started talking through the student's interests and the ideas emerging in other application responses.

That conversation gave us a way to begin: set aside the search for a crisis and look again at the student's everyday interests and experiences. We could start asking what they noticed, chose, and enjoyed.

For the opening, a well-observed ordinary moment can give a reader plenty to wonder about. It also gives the writer a scene they know from experience.

In this method, the hook also gives you something to return to at the end. An opening detail, image, or unanswered question can take on new meaning once we've experienced the story with you.

A sensory detail is something a person could see, hear, smell, taste, or feel. Useful ones make a scene easier to imagine or reveal something important. Choose details that help us experience the moment as you remember it.



TRY IT: Write down three questions a stranger might have after reading your opening. Which question should you answer immediately? Which could keep the reader interested for another paragraph? Which might lead toward the larger meaning of your essay?

The laundromat: first sentence

> *The dryer had eaten another quarter, and the little girl beside me was keeping count.*

The sentence gives us a machine, a child, an immediate problem, and a question. We meet the narrator in the middle of something specific, and we want to see what happens to that quarter.

Here's a very common alternative:

> *That broken dryer taught me the importance of empathy, problem-solving, and leadership.*

This version announces its lesson before we have seen the incident. The actual quarter and the child counting it give the writer more to work with.

Three openings, three different personalities

Curiosity: *I spent six months trying to determine whether a street on an 1898 map had ever existed.*

Humor: *My first attempt at baking sourdough could have been used as a doorstop, although it might have damaged the door.*

Family: *At 6:12 each morning, the house belongs to whoever finds my brother's left shoe.*

Each opening suggests a different voice and creates a question. The next paragraph will determine whether the writer can build on that beginning.

Ask yourself: What will the reader want to find out? Which detail might return near the ending with a new meaning? What do I actually sound like when I tell this story aloud?

Try three doors

Write three possible first sentences for the same experience: one with an action, one with an interesting detail, and one with dialogue. Read them aloud. Circle the sentence that gives you the most promising second paragraph.

REVISION CHECK: Have you explained the ending already? Have you made the scene impossible to understand? Are you dressing up an ordinary object with adjectives because you don't trust it to be interesting?



PART 02 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Response to the Hook

Answer the first question. Give us a reason to ask another.

Once you've raised a question, the reader deserves some help. A hook can make us curious; the response tells us where we are, who is involved, or what makes this moment worth following. In my version of the structure, it comes right after the hook, often across a paragraph break.

— The laundromat: a place to stand

> *Every Sunday afternoon, my family did laundry at the coin-operated place behind the grocery store. For three weeks, the same dryer had been taking money without starting.*

Now we understand why the quarter appears in the opening. The next question is what the narrator will do.

Watch how quickly the response can go wrong:

> *Ever since I was a child, I have loved technology. This interest began when my uncle gave me a screwdriver set for my eighth birthday, and it has developed through a variety of educational opportunities.*

The writer starts a new biography just when we want to see what happens at the dryer. Save the screwdriver story for a moment when it helps explain the next event.

A useful rule: Give the reader the next necessary piece of information, and keep moving. You can supply the rest when the story needs it.

— The two-question exercise

After your hook, write down two questions a stranger would naturally ask. Answer the one that helps us understand the next scene. Leave the other open for a few lines. If your draft stalls, it's often because the reader is waiting for an answer you assumed they already had.

> REVISION CHECK: Can someone who doesn't know your family, school, or activity understand the situation after the second paragraph? Have you given them a reason to follow you into the middle?



PART 03 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Background Information (Exposition)

How much backstory is enough?

You know everything that led up to the experience. Your reader knows only what you put on the page. Exposition is the background information you choose to share so that the next event makes sense.

The difficult part is knowing when to stop. A student who has been playing the cello since age six may believe the reader needs ten years of music history before reaching the audition where something changed. The audition scene will tell us which pieces of that history belong in the essay.

— The laundromat: what's necessary

> *I knew the dryer because I had spent enough Sundays waiting beside it to memorize the faded instructions. The owner was rarely there, and the handwritten OUT OF ORDER sign kept peeling off the damp wall. People tried the machine anyway.*

This tells us why the narrator noticed the problem and why it kept recurring. The family's other laundry habits can stay outside the story.

— Another story: the history-map problem

Suppose a student opens with a street that appears on one old map and disappears from the next. To understand the stakes, we might need to know that the student volunteers at a local archive, and that the street once connected a neighborhood to a now-demolished train station. A catalog of every map they've studied would slow down the discovery.

Notice the two possible directions here: the essay might be about historical research, or it might become about how cities decide whose histories are easy to find. Background should help the reader arrive at that discovery.

— What to keep, what to postpone

Keep: The people involved; one important constraint; the detail that explains the next decision.

Postpone: Information whose importance becomes clear later.

Cut or relocate: Details that ask the reader to memorize a biography before anything happens.

> **EXERCISE:** Describe the situation in 75 words. Reduce it to 35. Now read the short version to someone unfamiliar with the event. What do they actually need to ask you? Add back the details your listener needs.

> **REVISION CHECK:** If you remove a sentence of background, does the next event become confusing? If not, that sentence may be able to go.



PART 04 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Reflection on Personal Experiences

We need to know what happened inside your head

Imagine two students describing the same experience: both organize a fundraiser, both spend Saturday collecting donations, both raise the same amount. One tells us the schedule and the total. The other notices that the people who stayed to clean up were almost entirely absent from the group photo, then thinks about why.

The second student notices the people left out of the group photo. I want to know what they do with that observation.

Reflection means thinking about what an experience meant, how you understood it at the time, and what you think about it now. It can be uncertain, funny, embarrassed, stubborn, or unfinished. Sometimes the writer is still trying to make sense of what happened. That can be an interesting place for a story to go.

REAL COACHING / FROM AN ACTUAL MEETING

From an actual meeting: the transition wasn't the problem

Paraphrased from a coaching transcript. The student's identity and the academic subject have been omitted.

In one revision meeting, a student told me that the essay didn't flow. Perhaps, they suggested, adding words between paragraphs would improve the transitions.

As we talked, I could see why the transitions felt awkward. The draft contained enough material for several different personal statements: experiences, interests, challenges, and explanations of what the student hoped to study. Some of that material could work beautifully elsewhere in the application. The personal statement itself still needed a clearer center.

So I asked the student to imagine an admissions reader describing them to a colleague after finishing the essay. What would they hope the reader could say? How had the person in the story changed, and what would the reader understand about them?

The student wasn't sure yet. That gave us our next task: return to the experiences behind the draft and identify the story they wanted to tell. Then we could decide how to connect its parts.

Smooth transitions could never supply the missing center. First, the student had to decide what they hoped a reader would understand about them. Once we knew that, we could make decisions about which scenes belonged together.

The laundromat: the narrator notices a difference

> *I kept thinking about the girl's quarters. She had lined them up on the folding table as if the dryer were a game she might eventually win. I was annoyed with the machine; she was counting the money she might lose trying again.*

The narrator notices that the same broken dryer affects two people differently. That observation gives their next choice some weight.

— A very small shift can say a lot

> **Thin reflection:** *Volunteering at the food pantry taught me how important community service is.*

> **Closer to the experience:** *I had organized the boxes by what would be easiest for us to carry. Mrs. Alvarez asked whether anyone had thought about what would be easiest for a parent pushing a stroller.*

In the second version, the writer notices a consequence they had overlooked. They could explore that shift immediately or return to it later, after another scene.

IN PRACTICE:

Ask what you believed at the time. What seemed obvious then? What now looks less obvious? What did you fail to notice until someone else spoke?

TRY IT:

Finish these openings six different ways: *At the time, I thought...* and *What I hadn't noticed was...* Circle the answers that sound like a memory you actually have, and cross out the slogans. Find the one that could only have come from your experience.

REVISION CHECK:

Have you told the reader how virtuous you are? Have you told them how sorry to feel for you? Let your choices and observations carry some of that meaning. Readers are quite good at drawing conclusions.

YOUR NOTES / A REFLECTION WORTH DEVELOPING



PART 05 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Building Tension and Momentum

Give the story somewhere to go

An essay can contain excellent sentences and still feel motionless. One common reason: it explains who the student is for several paragraphs without showing a single meaningful choice.

Tension is the sense that something remains uncertain or unresolved. Momentum is the feeling that one moment is leading us to the next. A question, a difficult choice, a failed plan, or a small misunderstanding can carry a whole essay.

The laundromat: a first attempt that doesn't work

> *I searched for the dryer model on my phone and found a parts diagram that looked like a map of a city I'd never visited. I tried to explain the problem to the owner when he came by, but I could only tell him that it ate quarters. The next Sunday, I arrived with a list of questions and a photo of the error light.*

Look at the sequence: the student investigates, tries to explain, falls short, and returns better prepared. Each attempt leads to the next. We understand why the student returns and what they hope to discover.

A different kind of tension: the six-twelve morning

The student hunting for a brother's shoe faces a familiar morning deadline. The tension might be whether they can get two children out of the house before the first school bus. In a stronger version, their morning routine gradually reveals a change: the student begins by resenting the responsibility and later starts sharing the work with their brother instead of doing everything for him. The choice and the relationship provide the movement.

The ending might be a brother who finally helps organize the morning. The choice tells us more about the writer's developing judgment than a list of accomplishments could.

Follow the decision, not the calendar

Write down three moments from your experience. For each, ask: *What did I want? What got in the way? What did I do next?* If every answer to the last question is "I kept trying," go back and find the actual actions. Did you ask someone? Change the method? Admit a mistake? Leave something unfinished on purpose?

> REVISION CHECK: Could the middle paragraphs be reordered without changing anything? If so, the reader may be seeing a list instead of a developing story.

PART 06 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Climax

The moment the story turns

Climax is a storytelling term for the moment when the central problem, question, or conflict reaches a turning point. In a movie, this might require an orchestra. In a college essay, it might require one sentence someone says while folding socks.

Students sometimes inflate a small change into a life-altering revelation. A believable turning point gives the reader something specific to recognize and remember.

— The laundromat: someone asks the better question

> *The owner finally found a bent coin slide. I was delighted to be near the answer. Then he picked up a damp, curled OUT OF ORDER notice from the counter. "I keep putting this up," he said, "and it keeps falling down."*

The writer expected a mechanical answer. The bent slide is real; so is the notice that keeps falling down. The narrator begins to understand that a person needs reliable information even when a machine has been repaired. The earlier missing sign and lost quarters prepare that shift.

— But what if nothing happened on one perfect Tuesday?

A student who spent a year learning to translate between two relatives' ways of arguing might not be able to identify the exact day things changed. Neither might a student whose understanding of home gradually changed after moving several times. In those essays, the turn can happen across two contrasted scenes: what the student noticed at the beginning and what they could notice later.

In a gradual-change essay, show us how the student thinks or acts differently in the later scene. That shift may be quiet. An epiphany is a sudden realization; many real changes happen slowly.

> **TRY IT:** Complete *Before this, I assumed...* and *Now I pay attention to...* Then underline the actual scene or action that makes the difference visible. If you can't find one, perhaps you've described the moral before you've told the story.

> **REVISION CHECK:** Does the turn arise from what has happened earlier? Does someone else suddenly arrive solely to deliver your lesson? Could the scene be quieter and more believable?



PART 07 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Aftermath

What happened after the important moment?

A student writes: "That's when I learned to listen." Then the essay ends. We might believe the student felt something, but we have no idea what they did with it.

Aftermath means the consequences of a turning point. It gives the reader a chance to see a changed habit, a practical result, an unresolved question, or an effect on another person. The consequence can be modest.

— The laundromat: a sign that stays up

> *After the repair, the owner agreed to put a notice under a clear plastic holder above the coin slot: "If a machine takes your money and doesn't start, please stop adding coins and call this number for a refund." The next Sunday, it was still there. Someone reading it asked the owner about a refund on another machine.*

The owner repairs the dryer, and the narrator helps improve the notice. Customers now have a clear instruction if a machine fails, and we see someone use it. The student's contribution is specific and believable.

— Another aftermath: an unfinished experiment

Suppose the history-map student never solves the mystery of the vanished street. Their aftermath might be a small exhibit that places two conflicting maps side by side and asks visitors what each map leaves out. Visitors would leave with a sharper question about whose stories appear on official maps.

Try two distances: Describe what changed that afternoon. Then describe what, if anything, was different a month later. The second may be more revealing than the first.

> REVISION CHECK: Does the aftermath follow from the turn? Are you claiming effects you couldn't actually know? If someone else did the important work, have you represented their role accurately?



PART 08 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Continued Reflection

What are you still carrying with you?

The first reflection showed us what you were thinking *inside* the experience. Continued reflection asks what it means from where you stand now. What changed in your habits? Where else has the idea appeared? What remains difficult or unresolved?

The laundromat: what stuck

> *I still like solving the part of a problem that can be taken apart on a table. Lately I've been thinking more about the person who has to use the thing after the screws go back in.*

The narrator's interest in how things work is still there. It's gained another dimension. The change builds on an interest the narrator already had, so it feels believable.

Compare two reflections

> **General:** *This experience taught me that communication is the key to success.*

> **Particular:** *When I build a small app for a friend now, I ask them to try it before I explain how it works. Their first confused click usually teaches me more than another hour fixing code by myself.*

The second reflection depends on the story. It also shows a habit carried forward, which helps the reader imagine this person in other settings.

The danger of the universal lesson

Some experiences are still confusing. If a family relationship remains complicated, if an experiment failed, or if your view of a place is divided, the essay can say so. If a relationship is still complicated, give the reader enough detail to see what you have learned and what still puzzles you.

> **TRY IT:** Write what you understand now in a plain sentence. Next, write the most specific piece of evidence that this understanding has influenced you. If you can't find evidence, consider whether the change is something you're still working toward.

> **REVISION CHECK:** Could the same paragraph close a hundred different essays? If yes, return to the nouns, actions, and people that belong to yours.



PART 09 / NINE-PART STRUCTURE

Return to the Hook and Looking Forward

Make the beginning mean something new

Think of a joke with a callback: a small detail appears early, disappears, and returns later with a different meaning. An essay ending can make the same kind of return, with the opening detail carrying a new meaning.

In this method, the return to the hook is the third anchor. The hook creates curiosity. The response lets us enter the story. The ending brings us back to something familiar after we've learned enough to see it differently.

— The laundromat: the quarter returns

> *The dryer still rattles when it starts. Now, when I hear a quarter strike the coin slot, I look up to see who's waiting.*

At the opening, the quarter showed a machine swallowing money. At the ending, the sound draws the narrator's attention to another person. The sound now directs the narrator's attention to another person. We can recognize the change from that action.

— Two other returns

The map essay might open with a blank space on a street map and close with the student leaving room on an exhibit label for a visitor's account of the missing neighborhood.

The shoe essay might begin with the student searching for a brother's missing shoe and end with the brother teaching someone else how to use the morning checklist they made together.

Use these as ways to think about your own ending. An action, question, smell, object, or line of dialogue might return, provided it now carries a meaning the opening could only suggest.

You can mention college when the story naturally leads there. You can also end in the present, showing a habit you intend to keep or a question you want to pursue. By then, the reader has seen how you think.

> **TRY IT:** Take your first sentence and put it at the bottom of the page. What does its image or action mean after the story? Write two possible last lines. In one, repeat a detail; in the other, return to the idea without repeating the wording. Read them aloud. Trust the quieter one if it does the work.

> **REVISION CHECK:** Are you simply summarizing? Is the return so literal that it feels like a trick? Does it belong to the particular story you wrote?

An ending test you can actually use

Find the last sentence of your essay and ask a friend to read it *without* the rest of the essay. Does it sound like a sentence that could conclude almost any application? If so, find a word, action, or object that only belongs to your story.

Then read your opening and ending together. They should speak to each other, but they don't need to rhyme. A satisfying return lets the reader recognize how the opening has changed. If you have to announce the connection, try a subtler last line.

Two possible last lines for my story:

What does the reader understand differently by the second line?



TWO WAYS TO TELL A STORY / FICTIONAL EXAMPLE

The Quarter

A complete sample personal statement

The following essay is fictional and included only to demonstrate writing choices. It is not an actual student's application or an admissions success story. Study how it works; do not reuse its details or language.

The dryer had eaten another quarter, and the little girl beside me was keeping count.

"That's three," she told her grandmother, tracing circles on the folding table with one finger.

Every Sunday, my family did laundry behind the grocery store. I knew the machines by their personalities: number four ran hot, number seven needed its door shoved twice, and number nine occasionally accepted payment as a donation. Its handwritten OUT OF ORDER sign kept peeling off the damp wall. People tried the machine anyway.

I've always liked figuring out how things work. As a kid, I unscrewed toys and arranged the pieces on the floor like evidence. Usually I put them back together. Usually. A dryer seemed like another puzzle, except this one belonged to somebody else, and I had no idea what a coin slide was.

I kept thinking about the girl's quarters after her grandmother moved their laundry to another machine. For me, the jam was an irritating mystery. For them, each try used money they might need for another load.

At home, I searched for the model number and found an exploded-parts diagram that looked like a street map drawn by an engineer in a bad mood. I watched repair videos and wrote down possibilities. The following Sunday, I tried describing them to the owner when he came to empty the change boxes.

"Which part?" he asked.

I couldn't answer. I had learned a vocabulary of broken machines without learning much about this particular one. The owner said I could photograph the panel. At home, I checked the model again and returned the next week with three questions instead of twelve theories.

The owner opened the front panel and showed me a bent coin slide. He said he would replace it before anyone used the machine again. I felt embarrassingly pleased to have named the correct piece. Then he picked up a damp, curled OUT OF ORDER notice from the counter.

"I keep putting this up," he said, "and it keeps falling down."

All my research had been about the metal inside the dryer. Meanwhile, people had been losing money because the machine gave them no dependable warning. I asked whether he could put a notice in one of the plastic holders he used for the price lists.

We tucked the OUT OF ORDER notice into a plastic holder while the owner waited for the new part. After the repair, we replaced it with a permanent instruction in larger letters: *If a machine takes your coins and doesn't start, stop adding money and call this number for a refund.* The next Sunday, it was still there. While I folded towels, someone pointed to it and asked the owner about a refund for another machine.

I still like solving the part of a problem that can be taken apart on a table. Lately I've been thinking more about the person who has to use the thing after the screws go back in. When I make a small app for a friend now, I ask them to try it before I explain the buttons. Their hesitation usually tells me what I missed.

Number nine still rattles before it begins to spin. When I hear a quarter strike the slot, I look up to see who's waiting.

Before you read the analysis

Read the essay again and mark three places: where you first become curious, where the narrator's understanding shifts, and where the opening acquires new meaning. There may be more than one reasonable answer.

The sample shows one arrangement of the nine functions. I invented its details to demonstrate the craft choices we have been discussing. Your own experience may have awkward conversations, uncertain results, and details that refuse to fit the outline. Keep what happened, even when a different structure is needed to tell it.

A detail I would keep: _____

A moment I would question or revise: _____



Read the essay like a writer

Once you've finished the story, look backward. Where did it give you information? Where did it leave a question open? How did it reveal the narrator's mind without offering a list of adjectives?

ELEMENT	WHAT THE WRITER IS DOING
1 · Hook	The quarter and child's counting raise a question. The coin gives the ending an image to return to.
2 · Response	The child's line and Sunday laundry routine quickly place us in the scene.
3 · Background	An unreliable machine and the narrator's habit of taking things apart establish the circumstances and point of view.
4 · First reflection	The narrator realizes a lost quarter has different consequences for different people.
5 · Momentum	Research leads to an incomplete explanation, which leads to a better-prepared return visit.
6 · Climax	The owner's failed sign draws attention to the information people need.
7 · Aftermath	The owner repairs the machine; the narrator helps make a lasting notice; someone uses it.
8 · Continued reflection	The student connects the experience to how they now design and test things.
9 · Return	The sound of a quarter means something different at the end.

A few things worth noticing

The owner fixes the dryer. The narrator notices a communication problem and helps improve the notice. The modest division of responsibility makes the scene believable.

The important change is small. The student still enjoys mechanical puzzles, but now thinks about the person using the thing that gets built or repaired. That is plausible and specific.



The turning point is less cinematic than the first attempt at this sample. The owner finds the mechanical fault and reveals that the warning keeps falling down. Both details shape what the narrator understands. In an actual application, the conversation would have to reflect what the student remembers, including its awkward or inconclusive parts. Invented dialogue has no place in a submitted personal statement.

The writing has some humor. The owner of machine number nine did not collect "donations," of course. A slightly wry way of describing the laundromat makes the voice feel like a person talking.

— Experiment with it

What if the owner never repairs the machine? What if no one ever uses the new notice? What if the narrator misidentifies the broken part? Choose one change and consider how the aftermath and final line would need to change. Watch how each different outcome changes what the narrator could reasonably say at the end. Let the actual events determine the structure.

Read it a third way: follow the questions

Go back through the sample and write down one question raised by the first paragraph, a different question that appears halfway through, and the question the last paragraph answers. This is what it means to *manage* curiosity.

Opening question: _____

Middle question: _____

What the ending makes clear: _____

We leave the laundromat without knowing whether number nine will break again. The essay has answered the question it chose to follow: how the narrator's way of approaching a problem changed.



TWO WAYS TO TELL A STORY / FICTIONAL EXAMPLE

The Sound List

A complete fictional montage essay

This essay follows a recurring curiosity across several places. Its middle develops through a collection of related moments, with the shift emerging gradually. Like The Quarter, it is invented for this booklet and should never be borrowed for an application.

At 5:43 a.m., the refrigerator in our kitchen hums a B-flat. At least, that's what the tuner on my phone says. On humid mornings it slides somewhere between B-flat and the sound of a truck backing up.

My notes app has a list called THINGS OUR HOUSE SAYS. The refrigerator came first. Then the ceiling fan, which clicks every sixth rotation, and the stair where everyone, including the dog, pauses before stepping down. I started recording them because I wanted to know whether sounds repeated exactly. Most don't.

At the bus stop, I counted the interval between the crosswalk's chirps and tried to reproduce it by tapping my water bottle. A man waiting beside me asked whether I was practicing drums. "Sort of," I said, because explaining the list felt longer than the bus ride. Later I added the squeal of the bus door to my recordings. It sounded different on rainy days, though I never figured out why.

The list followed me to school. In the auditorium, before rehearsal, the air-conditioning system makes a soft knocking sound. The stage manager knows which vent it comes from and has named it Gregory. During a school play, I kept a small notebook of noises that microphones picked up: a bracelet brushing against a costume, a sneaker on the painted floor, one actor's habit of tapping twice before saying a line.

I used to delete the recordings with interruptions —someone laughing, a door slamming, my brother asking what I was doing. They seemed like mistakes in a collection of sounds. But after listening to a recording of our kitchen during a thunderstorm, I kept one with my brother singing the first half of a cereal commercial badly in the background. That's how our kitchen sounded that evening. I couldn't replace it with a cleaner version.

My collection is a mess. The recordings have filenames like *fridge maybe Tuesday* and *footsteps not mine*. I have samples of a piano with one sticky key, a grocery-store freezer, and the silence after the gym lights shut off. I sometimes make tiny sound loops on my laptop; most are strange and a few are interesting. My friends are kind enough to listen to the short ones.

Last month, one of those friends sent me six seconds of rain striking a metal awning outside her grandmother's apartment. No explanation, just a note: "For your list." My brother now contributes recordings too, usually without asking first. His latest was three seconds of a spoon tapping a cereal bowl.

At 5:43 this morning, the refrigerator was still somewhere near B-flat. Under its hum, I could hear the spoon again. I added a note beneath the recording: *two people awake*.



How a montage uses the nine parts

First, read it as a reader

What sort of person appears in these scenes? What keeps you curious as the narrator moves from scene to scene? Mark one detail you remember, and one moment that makes you want to continue. Then look at the functions below.

The jobs remain; the order changes

The Sound List moves between home, a bus stop, a theater, and other moments. It isn't a timeline of one event. The montage is the organizing choice: related scenes accumulate to reveal a particular habit of attention.

FUNCTION	WHERE TO LOOK IN THIS ESSAY
1 · Hook	The refrigerator's B-flat gives us an unusual observation and a question: who is listening this closely?
2 · Response	THINGS OUR HOUSE SAYS explains the practice immediately.
4 · Early reflection	The narrator is already investigating the difference between repeated and changing sounds. This thinking appears *before much backstory*.
3 · Background	The history of the list arrives in fragments across kitchen, bus, and auditorium scenes. There is no biography paragraph.
5 · Momentum	New locations and decisions about what to record extend the inquiry. Each scene changes what the list can contain.
8 · Continued reflection	The narrator begins keeping recordings with interruptions, so the change emerges while the collection is growing.
6 · Climax or turn	The change unfolds over several scenes: the collection gradually becomes something others contribute to.



FUNCTION	WHERE TO LOOK IN THIS ESSAY
7 · Aftermath	A friend and a brother begin sending recordings. There is no trophy, project launch, or resolution of a big external conflict.
9 · Return	The refrigerator returns with the sound of the brother's spoon layered beneath it. The same morning now holds more than one listener.

Notice how the decision to keep an imperfect recording shows a shift in the narrator's attention. The curiosity has been visible from the start; by the end, it has become something other people can share.

— Which structure fits your story?

If a single incident contains meaningful decisions and consequences, you may have a scene-driven essay like The Quarter. If several brief scenes reveal a pattern of attention, care, identity, or curiosity, you may have a montage. Many good essays combine the two.

Whichever approach you choose, trace what develops across the scenes. Think about what each paragraph adds to the reader's understanding.

> **TRY IT:** List three experiences that share an object, question, sound, task, place, or habit. If you removed the dates, would they begin to say something interesting about you together? Try writing the three scenes in different orders. Which arrangement creates the strongest curiosity?



Four other essays this structure could hold

The nine-part framework can hold far more than a story about a broken dryer. You've now seen two complete versions: a developing incident and a montage. Here are four more *fictional possibilities* to explore. These brief sketches show how a student might find movement in a topic that initially seems ordinary.

The street that disappears (intellectual curiosity)

A student helps catalog maps at a local archive and notices that one street exists on an 1898 map but vanishes from a 1912 edition. They spend evenings searching newspaper archives and property records. At first, they want to prove that a cartographer made a mistake. Then an older resident recognizes the name: it was what people called the road informally, even after the city stopped printing it.

Possible turn: The student discovers that maps can record official decisions while leaving everyday knowledge out.
Possible return: The opening's blank space returns as room for a handwritten correction on the student's display.

This essay could reveal an appetite for research and a willingness to reconsider the first hypothesis. The scenes of searching and reconsidering would convey the student's interest in history.

At 6:12 a.m. (family responsibility)

For months, a student has been responsible for getting a younger brother ready for school while a parent works an early shift. The opening is comic: the brother's left shoe is always missing. The middle shows improvised checklists, arguments about breakfast, and the student's growing irritation at having to remember everything.

Possible turn: Instead of creating a more elaborate checklist *for* the brother, the student begins designing one *with* him.
Possible return: On a later morning the brother is already waiting at the door, shoe in hand, impatient with the narrator.

The most revealing quality here might be the ability to share responsibility, or the tension between care and resentment. Honesty about the frustration would make the responsibility feel real.



The sourdough doorstop (humor and learning)

A student begins with a loaf so dense it can barely be sliced. Over weeks, they measure water, argue with recipes, and compare notes with a neighbor who seems to operate entirely by instinct. The student is initially sure more precise measurements will solve everything. They discover that small differences in flour, temperature, and timing keep changing the result.

Possible turn: The student stops treating uncertainty as a failure of the recipe and starts recording it as useful information.
Possible return: The last loaf is imperfect, but this time the student cuts it open with curiosity instead of dread.

A few comic details can establish the writer's voice. Give the story room to develop between the jokes.

Two kitchens, one translation (identity and community)

A student often helps family members navigate conversations that move between two languages. During a disagreement at a family gathering, they discover how much tone and family history a literal translation leaves out. The middle explores a few incidents rather than attempting to explain the family's entire background.

Possible turn: The student begins asking clarifying questions instead of assuming that knowing both languages means knowing what each person intends.
Possible return: A phrase from the opening arrives again, and the student chooses to leave it in the original language because the reader now understands what it carries.

This essay might be about listening, belonging, or the limits of certainty. Let particular conversations and family expressions give the essay its own voice.

— What's the shared lesson?

Put these possibilities side by side and you can see the range: some develop a change in belief; others follow a recurring habit of attention. Each gives the reader information at a chosen time. Each can return to its beginning and find new meaning there.



A short revision workshop

A student's first draft often contains a promising story buried beneath general statements. The draft sentences below are invented demonstrations; the coaching account between them comes from a real meeting.

1. The résumé paragraph

> **Draft:** *I have participated in debate, tutoring, and Model United Nations, which have taught me communication, leadership, and teamwork.*

Those activities may have taught the student plenty. The sentence lists them so quickly that we never get to watch the student do anything.

What I'd ask: Which of those activities gave you a choice you still think about? Who disagreed with you? What did you say, and what did you wish you'd said afterward?

> **A more promising beginning:** *The first student I tutored told me I was explaining fractions too quickly. I thought I'd been explaining them slowly.*

This opening places two people in an actual exchange. Now I want to know how the student responded to the criticism.

2. The paragraph that announces its meaning

> **Draft:** *I realized that failure is an opportunity for growth and that true success comes from resilience.*

The sentiment is familiar enough to fit almost any essay. Ask which actual failure prompted it, and what the writer tried next.

What I'd ask: What exactly did you fail to do? What changed the next time you attempted it? Was the second attempt successful? What surprised you about that result?

> **A more promising detail:** *The second time I gave the presentation, I taped the first slide to the wall so I couldn't stare at my laptop whenever someone asked a question.*

The taped-up slide shows the writer adjusting their approach. Inference means a conclusion the reader draws from details you provide. Here, readers can see the change for themselves.

— From an actual meeting: good material, wrong essay?

Paraphrased from a coaching transcript. The subject area and other distinguishing details have been generalized.

A student's personal statement had become unwieldy. They had already tried removing a section about their intended field of study and turning it into a separate *why major* essay, with two versions based on different experiences.

It was a sensible possibility, so I asked them to look at which colleges would actually receive that material. Some schools wouldn't ask for a *why major* essay. Moving the passage could mean some admissions readers would never encounter it.

So we looked at what the passage was doing. Did it reveal the student's personal development, explain an academic interest, or do some of both? The passage's purpose would determine where it belonged.

Good writing can still be in the wrong place. Before cutting or relocating a section, ask what job it performs —and whether the reader you're writing for will ever see it.



3. The ending that delivers a graduation speech

> **Draft:** *In college, I will use these lessons to make a positive impact on the world and become the best version of myself.*

This familiar promise could conclude hundreds of applications. What did this particular student notice or do differently?

What I'd ask: What has changed in what you notice or do? Is there an object, question, or action from the opening that would mean something different now?

> **A more promising ending:** *I still carry a spare pencil to every meeting. Now I leave it on the table instead of keeping it in my pocket.*

The pencil will make a good ending if the earlier scenes have given it a meaning the reader recognizes.

— Your turn

Find three sentences in your draft that claim a quality (*I am creative*, *I learned perseverance*, *I value community*). Under each, write down one action, exchange, or small consequence that might let the reader discover that quality for themselves.

One paragraph, three questions

Choose one paragraph from your essay that feels necessary but dull. Ask what the reader knows at its start, what the reader knows at its end, and what question the paragraph creates or answers.

What changes in this paragraph?

_____

What would happen if I cut it?

_____

If the answer is "very little," the paragraph may be doing work that another sentence could do more efficiently. Save the interesting detail; reconsider the paragraph that currently holds it.



Worksheet · Which story is worth exploring?

Choose the topic that gives you the richest story to tell. Your most impressive accomplishment may be more useful in another part of the application.

Think of two or three possible subjects. For each, jot down the strongest answers you can find. You can return and change your mind.

QUESTION	TOPIC A	TOPIC B
What specific moment could open it?	_____	_____
What choice, question, or pattern keeps the story moving?	_____	_____
What might a reader learn about how I think?	_____	_____
What detail belongs only to my version?	_____	_____
What would I rather keep private?	_____	_____

Give each topic a ten-minute audition

Write one scene for Topic A. Begin where something is happening, and include the details you remember. Do the same for Topic B. Mark the scene with the details you can still see and the thoughts you can still remember.

You may discover that the ordinary topic produces better material. You may also discover that the topics connect. Use the exercise to see which idea gives you scenes and questions you want to pursue.

The topic I'll freewrite next: _____

One question I want to investigate while drafting: _____



STUDENT WORKBOOK / TRY IT ON YOUR ESSAY

Worksheet · Find the story before you outline it

Write in phrases if you want. Use the space to catch memories and thoughts as they come.

1. A moment I still remember clearly:

2. What actually happened? Describe the scene before explaining what it means.

3. A detail I can still see, hear, or feel:

4. What did I want at the time? What complicated that?

5. A choice I made—or avoided:

6. What did I think then? What do I think now?

7. The question about this experience I still haven't answered:

Now write freely for ten minutes. Start in the most vivid moment, or wherever you can get words moving. Don't label the nine parts. Surprise yourself if possible.



STUDENT WORKBOOK / TRY IT ON YOUR ESSAY

Worksheet · Find the connection

Sometimes the essay is hiding between two things you thought were unrelated. Your interest in maps may have something to do with how your family remembers a place. Your approach to cooking may have shaped the way you conduct an experiment. You may discover the connection only while drafting.

Experience, interest, or place A:

Experience, interest, or place B:

What feels different about them?

What habit, question, conflict, image, or way of thinking appears in both?

A moment in A when I noticed that pattern:

A moment in B when the same pattern felt different:

What might a reader understand about me if I put these moments beside each other?

If the connection feels strained, work with one experience for now. A useful pattern often becomes clear during drafting, when you notice the same question or habit appearing twice.



Worksheet · A completed nine-part revision map

A worked example using The Sound List

This is what a useful worksheet might look like after a student has written a rough draft. Notice how the answers describe *jobs* the essay performs. A single paragraph may do several of these jobs.

PART	WHAT THE WRITER NOTICES IN THE DRAFT
1 · Compelling Hook	Refrigerator hum at 5:43 a.m. An unusual habit of listening.
2 · Response	The list in the notes app gives the opening context.
3 · Background	Home sounds, a bus stop, and the school auditorium gradually show where the interest developed.
4 · First reflection	Curiosity about what repeats and what changes. Already present in the early scene.
5 · Momentum	The list expands from household sounds to public spaces, then to imperfect recordings with people's voices.
6 · Turn	No single revelation. The shift appears as the narrator keeps unplanned sounds and other people begin contributing.
7 · Aftermath	A friend sends rain; a brother records a spoon. The curiosity becomes shared.
8 · Continued reflection	Keeping a recording with interruptions shows that the narrator has become interested in the people and moments surrounding a sound. This thought begins to take shape well before the closing scenes.
9 · Return and future	The fridge hum returns alongside the brother's spoon. The practice can keep growing.

What might I revise after completing that map?

Question: Do all the sound samples accomplish something different, or are there three that merely prove the narrator notices noise?

Possible decision: Keep the bus stop because it shows public curiosity, the auditorium because it shows sustained attention, and the imperfect kitchen recording because it adds a new dimension. Shorten one other list of sounds.

Another question worth asking: Does the friend's recording prepare the final line about the brother's spoon? The map helps the writer notice which moments are doing necessary work.

STUDENT WORKBOOK / TRY IT ON YOUR ESSAY

Worksheet · Your nine-part revision map

Use this with a draft or a page of freewriting. Fill in only what you have. Leave blanks where the story still needs work. Use extra paper if the answer needs a paragraph.

The three anchors

1 · Compelling Hook — What moment, image, action, or line raises useful curiosity?

2 · Response to the Hook — What does the reader need immediately afterward?

9 · Return to the Hook and Looking Forward — What can return with a new meaning?

A question about those anchors

What does the reader understand at the end that they could not have understood at the start?



STUDENT WORKBOOK / TRY IT ON YOUR ESSAY

Worksheet · Map the flexible middle

These functions may overlap or appear in any order. Put a star beside anything that is already working in your draft. Draw arrows between pieces you might move.

3 · Background Information — Which circumstances or history help the reader follow the story?

4 · Reflection on Personal Experiences — What did you think, feel, assume, notice, or value?

5 · Building Tension and Momentum — What decisions, questions, and obstacles give the piece motion?

6 · Climax — Where does an understanding shift, a pattern become visible, or a choice acquire meaning?

7 · Aftermath — What follows? What changes or remains unresolved?

8 · Continued Reflection — What do you understand now, and where does the story show it?

One part I might move, develop, combine, or cut:



Worksheet · Read your draft like a stranger

Pause after your opening, again in the middle, and once before the ending. Pretend you know nothing about the writer except what's actually on the page.

After paragraph number _____

What does the reader know about me right now?

What does the reader need to know?

What question is the reader probably asking?

When and how will I answer it?

One thing I should move, add, or remove:

The stranger test

Give your draft to someone who doesn't know the story. Ask what they remember, where they became curious, and where they got lost. Listen before explaining what you intended. If you have to describe an entire missing scene aloud, you may have found the scene you need to write.



The revision checklist

Use this when you have a draft worth improving. Use these questions to find your next revision, at your own pace.

1 Story and structure

- ☐ The first lines create useful curiosity, and the reader can understand the scene.
- ☐ The response arrives soon enough to keep a stranger oriented.
- ☐ The background helps someone understand this particular story.
- ☐ We see actual choices, discoveries, conflicts, or changing thoughts.
- ☐ Any turning point, gradual change, or developing pattern is believable.
- ☐ The aftermath shows a consequence or an honest remaining question.
- ☐ The ending changes how the reader understands an opening detail.

2 Reflection and voice

- ☐ My reactions are specific to what happened to me.
- ☐ My words sound like something I would actually say and defend.
- ☐ I describe other people fairly, with their own choices and perspectives.
- ☐ I'm honest about my contribution and what I don't know.
- ☐ The essay reveals something my transcript and activities list cannot.
- ☐ I am comfortable with the personal information I am sharing.

3 Sentence-level work

- ☐ Every paragraph changes what the reader knows or wants to know.
- ☐ I've removed stock lessons and claims the story already demonstrates.
- ☐ My verbs name specific actions. I've checked vague uses of "helped" or "worked."
- ☐ I can read the draft aloud without tripping over unnatural phrases.
- ☐ I've followed the correct prompt, word limit, and application instructions.



A revision process that doesn't drive you crazy

Trying to repair every sentence while you're still discovering the essay is exhausting. It also makes it easy to polish paragraphs you might eventually remove. I recommend separate passes through the draft.

Four common repairs

If the setup runs long, begin closer to the interesting moment and bring in context when it becomes necessary. If a paragraph reads like an activities list, focus on a decision inside one activity. For a vague reflection, find the object, conversation, or changed habit behind the claim. For an oversized conclusion, try returning to a detail from the opening.

First pass · Find the real story. Read the whole thing without making sentence-level changes. Underline the lines you would hate to lose. They may point toward a different story than the one you thought you were writing.

Second pass · Follow the reader. Use the four questions. Highlight where the reader needs context, where they might be confused, and where you answer a question too early.

Third pass · Track the movement. Circle choices, consequences, and changes in thought. If there are none, look for the moments you skimmed past in a hurry.

Fourth pass · Return to the opening. Now that you know what the essay is about, experiment with several hooks and endings. The best opening is often one you couldn't have written before the first draft.

Fifth pass · Cut carefully. Keep the word limit in mind. Remove explanations the scenes already supply. Favor precise details over impressive-sounding generalities.

Sixth pass · Let it cool. Put the draft away briefly. When you return, read it aloud. Listen for anything you wouldn't say or don't quite believe. Check names, facts, quotations, and any details that could affect the people mentioned in the essay.

What about feedback and AI?

A trusted reader, writing coach, or appropriate writing tool can help you notice confusing passages and ask better questions. Policies about AI and outside help vary among colleges, and they can change. Check the rules that apply to each application, and make sure the final essay reflects your own experiences, thinking, and writing.

One useful test: Could you explain every sentence and choice in a conversation? Look closely at anything you would struggle to explain or would never say aloud.



A small glossary

Keep this glossary nearby when you want to name a technique or understand feedback on your draft. These terms are useful when you're trying to talk about why a passage works.

Personal statement: The main application essay in which you communicate something meaningful about yourself.
Hook: An opening that makes the reader curious.
Response to the hook: The immediate information that helps a reader understand the opening.
Exposition: Background information needed to understand a story.
Stakes: What someone stands to gain or lose as events unfold.
Narrative tension: The uncertainty or curiosity that encourages someone to continue reading.
Momentum: The sense that one choice or event leads to another.
Reflection: What you think or understand about your experiences.
Climax / turning point: The moment or pattern through which something important changes.
Aftermath: What happens as a consequence of the turning point.
Narrative arc: The movement from the beginning of a story through its change to its ending.
Montage: Several short scenes connected by an object, idea, activity, or question.
Inference: A conclusion the reader draws from details you provide.
Revision: Reconsidering and improving a draft's choices—ideas, structure, sentences, and meaning. Proofreading for errors is only one small part of revision.



Where to go from here

By now you have some practical questions to bring to a draft. You can identify where the story becomes interesting, what the reader knows, where the thinking changes, and what an ending needs to return to.

You may have discovered that your first essay idea isn't your best one. That's part of writing. A rough draft lets you discover the material you want to develop and the pages you can set aside.

Write the experience as honestly and vividly as you can. Then use the nine parts to examine how the story reaches another person. Let the details teach you something as you revise.

Your story is already yours. The work is helping a reader see it.

About Admissions Control

Admissions Control offers college admissions advising, essay coaching, and resources for students and families. You can use the exercises on your own or bring them to a coaching session. Make the framework serve the story you want to tell.

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The Nine-Part Structure for College Essays · Teaching edition, October 2026. Based on Jake D. Sauls's existing Nine-Part Structure for College Essay Writing and Nine-Part College Essay Planner. The complete sample essays and invented exercises are fictional. Three anonymized, paraphrased teaching accounts are grounded in actual advising meetings. *© 2026 Admissions Control. All rights reserved.*

