

Ten Steps to Writing a Powerful Anecdote

For College Application Essays, Personal Statements or Other Essays

To write a strong anecdote, you need to:

1. Know what you are trying to show or illustrate (by example) with your anecdote.
2. Include some type of adversity, problem, conflict, obstacle (if you want a powerful little story).
3. Start at the peak of the action in the moment.
4. Make sure something happens. It might take no longer than a few minutes.
5. Include details to create a visual image. Set the scene with the 5Ws (who, what, when, where and why.)
6. Keep it short. Start long, then cut it down to the fewest words necessary.
7. Save the background for the next paragraph or later
8. Don't explain too much; save that for later.
9. Use more verbs and nouns than adjectives and adverbs.
10. Stick with shorter sentences. Include a snippet of dialog.

These take practice. But once you use them, you have crossed over from producing dry, formal English papers to real, descriptive writing! Anecdotes are one of the most powerful writing tools. They are perfect for college admissions essays—especially introductions—but you can use them in almost all writing to make it more interesting.

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How to Write an Anecdote

By j9robinson On June 9, 2010



College Application Essays

How to Tell a Story

In journalism, writers often use “anecdotal leads,” that is, starting a news or feature story with a mini-story about a real-life event, one that puts the reader in the middle of the action. Usually, the anecdote only describes a single moment or incident. But it’s usually a highlight. Something happened.

Anecdotes make great introductions for college essays. (I believe there’s no better way to “grab” your reader than to start a story—or your essay—at the most exciting part!) So how do you write an anecdote? Here are some tips.

- Start at the **peak** of the drama or excitement or conflict. Jump right in! (You will just back up and explain it later.)
- Set the scene: Describe what you **see**, what you **hear**, what you **feel** (both literally and figuratively), what you **smell** and **taste**, if relevant. These are called sensory details.
- Use the 5 Ws—**Who** was involved? **What** happened. **Where** did it happen? **When** did it happen? **Why** did it happen? (“H”: **How** did it happen?)
- Paint a picture with your words, or even better, describe a snippet of video. Zoom in on the action.
- Usually the “action” in your anecdote takes place in a matter of a few minutes.
- Throw in a line or two of **dialogue** to add drama or move the action forward.
- Use “concrete details.” Be **specific**! Instead of saying, “The dog ran up to me.” Say, “the neighbor’s bull terrier, Brutus, charged me...”
- In general, use short sentences or mix up the short and long.
- Don’t worry about the background or explaining the larger context of the moment. You can back up and explain that in the next paragraph.
- Borrow techniques you find in **fiction** writing: concrete details, dialogue, proper nouns, descriptive language, emotion, strong characters, etc.
- Use simple language (avoid SAT vocab. words). Write with **nouns** and action **verbs**. Go easy on the adjectives.

- If your mini-story (anecdote) takes three paragraphs to relate, try to go back and see if you can cut it down to two or even one paragraph by keeping only what you *need* to recreate the moment. You will be surprised how you can shorten them, and actually make them better!

“Writing is easy. All you have to do is cut out all the wrong words.” Mark Twain