Writing a College Essay

There are many different ways to structure a college essay; this handout outlines one way.

1. Choose a TOPIC with the help of your college counselor and the College Counseling Office’s handout called “College Essays.” Write your topic as a STATEMENT that will guide you as you write your essay (although the statement itself may not actually appear in the essay).

   Meeting my German host mother, a fellow stutterer, helped me acquire self-confidence.

2. Make a list of three POINTS that support your topic. The points for the topic above would be:
   ● What I was like before I knew Monica: ashamed, inhibited.
   ● How Monica influenced me: I admired her self-acceptance and confidence.
   ● What I am like now, since I’ve known Monica: self-accepting and bolder.

3. In the first paragraph, illustrate your first point with a SCENE. Include one or more characters, a setting, action, emotion, and either dialogue (conversation) or what you are thinking. (The word limit for your essay will govern how long your scenes can be.)

   Making my way up to the Starbucks counter, the smell of brewing coffee beckons me. I politely ease my way through the herd of people gathered in front of the register and meet the eyes of the cashier. I open my mouth to begin speaking, but nothing comes out. Silence. I continue to stand there, lips spread wide. Embarrassment overtakes me as the herd glares in my direction. The cashier remains motionless, unsure of how to cope with the silence. As time stretches on, my cheeks burn with shame. The herd begins to giggle uneasily. Twenty seconds pass before I’m able to break the silence with a mumbled, "M-M-M-M-May I h-h-have a g-g-grande l-l-l-latte?" With an awkward smile, the cashier reaches for my gift card, and I retreat with my head tucked deep into your chest.

   This scene shows what the author, Andrew, was like before he met Monica. It draws the reader in with its specificity of detail (the smell of coffee, the blush on Andrew’s cheeks, etc.) and its emotion (embarrassment and shame), thus demonstrating the method of showing rather than telling, which is critical for college essay writing.

4. In the second paragraph, EXPLAIN what point the scene illustrates, and make a TRANSITION into the next point.

[EXPLANATION:] It was moments like these that made me truly ashamed of who I was. Ever since the age of six, I’ve stuttered. And before I traveled to Munich this past summer, I wished every morning that I’d wake up without my stutter. I’d often avoid answering the phone, even conversing with my family, anything to abstain from speaking. Terrified of humiliation, I would simply keep quiet.  [TRANSITION:] Yet, I could no longer live my life running from the opportunities I so fervently desired to experience. I craved to be myself, to do the things that I wanted to do, regardless of my stutter. And so I gathered the courage to spend three weeks alone in Germany.

Andrew explains how his stutter used to inhibit him and provides a transition into the next point by introducing his trip to Germany.

5. In the third paragraph, illustrate your second point with a SCENE.

When my plane landed in Munich, my host mother came barreling into my arms. The amount of joy in her hug overwhelmed me. I’d been with her for less than a minute and already I was a part of her life. What truly grabbed me, however, was the way she introduced herself. While still embracing me, she squeaked, "Hello! My name is Monica, and I stutter." My heart stopped. The first words out of her mouth were the ones I feared the most. When she stepped back to look at me, I couldn’t take my eyes off her smile. She didn’t have a hint of shame in her voice. She was proud to be a stutterer.

This scene demonstrates Andrew’s shock and admiration upon meeting Monica. It draws the reader in with its sensory details (the squeak of Monica’s voice, the stopping of Andrew’s heart) and its emotion (joy, fear, shock, pride).

6. In the fourth paragraph, EXPLAIN what point the prior scene illustrates, make a TRANSITION into the third point, and state the third POINT.

[EXPLANATION:] The courage glistening in her eyes inspired me more than the words of any speech therapist or supportive friend. I always suspected I had the will inside of me to accept my stuttering, but it took the simple encouragement of another stutterer for me to finally make peace with it. Witnessing her dignity increased my own self-respect. [TRANSITION:] From those simple words, I learned that I am who I am, and that I need to embrace and welcome it. [THIRD POINT:] I realized that without my stutter, I wouldn’t have nearly the amount of perseverance, optimism, or integrity that I have today, as these qualities allow me to remain positive during the long beats of silence. They’re what make me unique, and if I must stutter in order to possess them, then I’d stand silent in Starbucks forever.

Andrew explains exactly how Monica influenced him the moment they met and makes the point that he’s now different.

7. In the fifth paragraph, illustrate your last point with a SCENE.

Before I went to Germany, I’d always wanted to give tours to prospective students. I was afraid, however, that my stutter would prevent me from giving the enthusiastic tour that the school deserves. But after realizing how proud I am to be myself, I confidently marched up to the Admissions building. I wanted to share my courage with those around me. I wouldn’t be ashamed. I’d finally be the person I desired to be. I would do the things that I love to do, the things that make me happy. And as I approached the prospective student that I was about to tour, I extended my hand and smiled, "Hi! My name is Andrew, and I stutter."

Andrew demonstrates how confident and courageous he’s become since he’s known Monica. He provides both physical details (extending his hand) and emotion (confidence, courage, passion, happiness).