

Introduction to the College Application Process

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Overview

- The Personal Statement
- Supplementals
- Additional Materials
- Novelties
- Workflow



Personal Narrative Essay

- What *is* a Personal Statement essay?
- Why must you even write one?
- What should you write about?
- Memorable and moving
- Styles: diary, manifesto, pivotal (conflict as hook)

General Do's

- Brainstorm and outline before you begin
- Jot down strengths, interests, talents, and aspects of your personality you want AOs to know about
- Make your essay your own
- Don't be common – put your own spin on things
- Be specific, clear, and to-the-point
- Disregard word count on first draft

General Do's

- Allow your personality to shine.
- A clear, tight main theme
- Have fun – overthinking and over-editing soften your personality do everyone a disservice.
- Ask someone whose opinion you trust (scholarly friend, parent, English teacher) how you could improve your writing and accept their feedback – maybe consider it.

General Don't's

- Procrastinate
- Compare
- AI
- Ask too many people for opinions
- Aim for a perfect first draft

Topics to Avoid

- Heroism
- Death, divorce, depression
- Travel itinerary
- Religious or political issues
- Dating/sex life
- Dodgy Experiences



Personal Narrative: Introduction

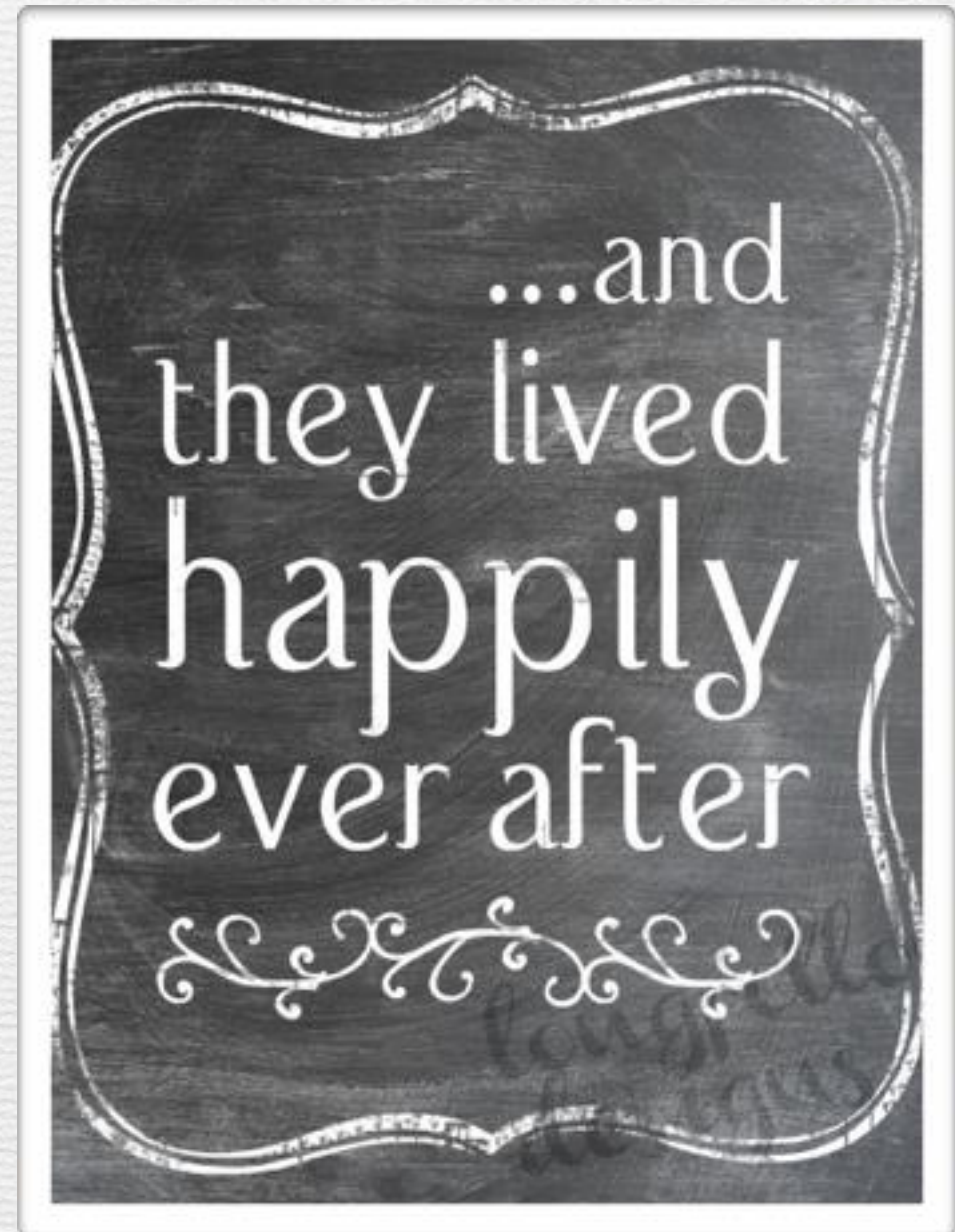
- Hook
- Setting the scene
- Thesis
 - Start with the story's events
 - Put forth a lesson learnt
 - Universal theme

Personal Narrative: Body Paragraphs

- Scenes
- Showing or telling?
- Experience as “supporting evidence”
- Passage of time; homogeneity; context
- Transition words
- Paragraphs: action to action, action to reflection

Personal Narrative: Conclusion

- Moral of the story
- What did you learn?
- How has this experience changed you?
- Omitting reflections



Writing Strategies to Consider

- Which verb tense?
- Creating vivid imagery
 - Figurative and rhetorical devices
 - Sensory descriptions
 - Adjectives, adverbs, verbs, nouns: do's and don't's
 - Specific versus vague
 - Adverbial deadweight
 - Strong and weak verbs
 - Passive versus active voice

Writing Strategies to Consider

- Anecdotes
- Dialogue
- Inner thoughts
- Pacing
- Varying sentence structure
- Rhetorical questions
- Lively words
- Cause and effect

Other Possible Structures

- General structure
- Alternative structures
- To reflect or not to reflect? Where does the story end?

Stylistic Tips to Avoid

- Wordiness and repetition
- Dramatic, boring, impenetrable
- Vague language
- Clichés – own spin is always welcome

Stylistic Tips to Avoid

- Overuse of the first person:

I love eating desserts, so I started baking classes on the weekends. In particular, I focused on chocolates, cupcakes, and tortes. I really enjoyed these courses, and they've added a lot to my life.

→ An obsession with desserts drove me to attend weekend baking classes, focusing on chocolates, cupcakes, and tortes. These courses were very enjoyable and added a lot to my life.

Stylistic Tips to Avoid

- Going off on tangents/over-describing minutiae
- Excess expletive constructions
- **Example:** There were two girls in class who had problems with math. Two girls in class had problems with math.
- **Example:** It is Monday that I get to see my teacher again. On Monday, I get to see my teacher again.

2026–2027 Prompts

1. Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.
2. The lessons we take from obstacles we encounter can be fundamental to later success. Recount a time when you faced a challenge, setback, or failure. How did it affect you, and what did you learn from the experience?
3. Reflect on a time when you questioned or challenged a belief or idea. What prompted your thinking? What was the outcome?

2026–2027 Prompts

4. Reflect on something that someone has done for you that has made you happy or thankful in a surprising way. How has this gratitude affected or motivated you?
5. Discuss an accomplishment, event, or realization that sparked a period of personal growth and a new understanding of yourself or others.
6. Describe a topic, idea, or concept you find so engaging that it makes you lose all track of time. Why does it captivate you? What or who do you turn to when you want to learn more?
7. Share an essay on any topic of your choice. It can be one you've already written, one that responds to a different prompt, or one of your own design.

Brainstorming for the PS

- What is my favorite academic subject and why? What was one of the key memories that sparked my interest in this subject area?
- What has been my greatest success to date? What were the steps I took to achieve success? How did I feel when I accomplished what I set out to do?
- What has been my greatest challenge to date? How did I overcome it, or what steps I am taking to overcome it?
- What is one of my most unique and special talents? How did I discover that I have this talent?
- The extracurricular activity that I pursue with passion is....I do this because....

Brainstorming for the PS

- What are my best three character traits and why?
- How would I describe my family life? How has my family life shaped who I am?
- How has my background/religion/culture/country of origin shaped who I am?
- The three things (can be: people/places/things/animals) in my life that are most impacting to me are....because....
- One of the biggest life lessons that I have learned thus far has been....I learned this lesson by....it has made me more....
- When you're done with this activity, check out our tips on topic selection.

Strategies for Topic Selection

- Step 1: Pull up the three essay topics that you came up with during the brainstorming activity. If you haven't done this yet, now is the time.
- What elements about myself do I want to share with admissions readers?
- Will I have enough content to tell an engaging story with a clear beginning, middle, and end?

Strategies for Topic Selection

- Is this essay mostly about *me*, and not about other people in my life?
- Will I be able to use creative writing techniques to liven up my story?
- If I'm choosing a common topic, can I put a unique spin on it?
- Does this essay reveal my best possible self?
- Step 2: After you've done this for all three topics, come up with a "working title" for each one—either nodding to the story's content itself or to its theme.
- Step 3: Next, summarize each story in 3-4 sentences.
- Step 4: Write down a few strengths and weaknesses for each topic. What can you envision really working well? What parts might be expanded upon? What do you see falling flat?

Narrowing it Down

- Chosen Topic/Working Title:
- Introduction:
- Three Main Ideas (and supporting details)
- Main Idea #1:
- Main Idea #2:
- Main Idea #3:
- Conclusion:

Common Misconceptions

- The PS should be an activity sheet or resume
- The PS should reveal everything about *me*
- The PS isn't a place to reveal failure
- The PS must take on a serious tone
- The PS should reveal study and career aspirations

Common Types of Supplements

- A Favorite or Important Activity
- Why School/Major
- Intellectual Curiosity/Joy
- An Important Experience/Adversity
- An Important Issue
- An Important Person
- Someone who has Influenced You
- Diversity

UC Schools

1. Describe an example of your leadership experience in which you have positively influenced others, helped resolve disputes, or contributed to group efforts over time.
2. Every person has a creative side, and it can be expressed in many ways: problem solving, original and innovative thinking, and artistically, to name a few. Describe how you express your creative side.
3. What would you say is your greatest talent or skill? How have you developed and demonstrated that talent over time?
4. Describe how you have taken advantage of a significant educational opportunity or worked to overcome an educational barrier you have faced.

UC Schools

5. Describe the most significant challenge you have faced and the steps you have taken to overcome this challenge. How has this challenge affected your academic achievement?
6. What have you done to make your school or your community a better place?
7. Think about an academic subject that inspires you. Describe how you have furthered this interest inside and/or outside of the classroom.
8. Beyond what has already been shared in your application, what do you believe makes you stand out as a strong candidate for admissions to the University of California?

Beyond Essays

- Activity Sheet; Additional Info; Explaining
- Portfolio
- Recommendation Letters/“Brag Sheets”
- Campus Visits; Admissions Reps/College Fairs
- Post-application: Interviews, Deferrals

Sample Activity Sheet

Pick up to 10 activities and keep their descriptions specific yet concise. Make your role in each activity clear; it helps to start with strong verbs and to remember that numbers are your friend. Character count includes "with space."

1) Position/Leadership Description (50 characters): Scientific Researcher

Organization Name (100 characters): Academic

Activity Description (150 characters): Using multivariable regression models, I completed research to determine the relation between carbon dioxide emissions and sex ratio at birth.

Participation grade levels* (11)

Timing of participation* (during school break)

Hours spent per week* 10

Weeks spent per year* 12

2) Position/Leadership Description (50 characters): Internship

Organization Name (100 characters): CodingMarch Academy, Shanghai

Activity Description (150 characters): Developed and taught several USACO bootcamps and Arduino workshops for students.

Participation grade levels* (11,12)

Timing of participation* (during school year)

Hours spent per week* 6

Honors/Awards (Pick up to 5; 100-character limit for title)

Honors 1 Title: AP Scholar with Distinction (averaging at least 3.5 on AP Exams and 3 or more on at least 5 exams)

Grade Level: 11

Level of Recognition: National

Honors 2 Title: College Board National Rural and Small-Town Recognition Award

Grade Level: 11

Level of Recognition: National

Honors 3 Title: 1st Place in Regionals in TSA T.E.A.M.S. (Tests of Engineering Aptitude, Mathematics, and Science)

Grade Level: 9

Level of Recognition: State/Regional

Honors 4 Title: Semifinalist (Top 20) in Step Up Loudoun Youth Competition

Grade Level: 11

Level of Recognition: State/Regional

Honors 5 Title: 4th Place in Washington-Arlington Catholic Forensic League Competition | Varsity Public Forum Debate

Grade Level: 10

Level of Recognition: State/Regional

Letter of Continued Interest

Dear Admissions Committee,

First, I would like to thank you for the time spent reviewing my Early Decision application to Cornell University's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences (CALS). I appreciate the opportunity to have my application considered again during the Regular Decision process.

Since submitting my application in November, I have continued to pursue my biology-related passions such as cavern diving in Mexico (I hold an Advanced Open Water Certification) where I was able to study the saltwater fish below the halocline in the cenote and the freshwater fish that live above it. I also recently had the amazing opportunity to participate in an educational program at the Baltimore National Aquarium where I dove with starry pufferfish, damselfish, and many more varieties, as my family looked on through the glass. I thrive in such immersive learning environments in which I can put my classroom studies into practice.

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In school, I have continued to perform at a high level in the most rigorous IB classes. I am also proud to have recently recruited ten freshmen to the Environmental Club, for which a friend and I are organizing a stream clean-up come spring. Another rewarding experience was my latest IB Biology research, a 30-page paper on epigenetics and polymorphism of local ant species: *Camponotus castaneus* (chestnut carpenter ants), *Camponotus pennsylvanicus* (black carpenter ants), and *Camponotus chromaiodes* (bicolored carpenter ants), the latter being one of the colonies I keep at home. Specifically, I explored how different castes within these species develop and how their environment affects caste differentiation.

Lastly, I would like to reiterate that CALS remains my first-choice college. As discussed more thoroughly in my application, I can think of no better way to grow as a student, scientist, and aspiring physician than as a Biological Sciences major at CALS with a concentration in Molecular & Cell Biology. The curriculum, with its heavy focus on real-world implications of knowledge, hands-on learning, and wealth of undergraduate research experiences, would provide a bedrock for a career devoted to understanding and treating pathologies and doing my part to better the world through such work.

If admitted, I vow to remain an "unconventional" and "passion-driven" learner during my four years in Ithaca and beyond. Thank you again for your consideration.

Best regards,

Recent Changes in College Admissions

- Tests no longer optional for many schools (1/2 the top-30 schools)
- Tests revamped
- AI usage
- UChicago ED0 – for kids who attended pre-college programs; binding decision in 3 weeks
- Additional Info Section 350 words

How I Work With Students

- 3-business day turnaround
- Comments/Edits on MS Word; From Scratch
- MS Word & Email = efficiency
- Activity Sheet, School Selection, Interview Prep

