

Writing Your College Admissions Essay

How to Include Supporting Evidence

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The best way to support your point is through the use of supporting evidence. This enables you to “show” your best attributes rather than “tell” (i.e. brag). Supporting evidence can include personal narratives (i.e. stories), examples, and anecdotes. We find that most people do not have a problem coming up with stories that provide supporting evidence; rather, they have a problem weaving their narrative or examples effectively into their essay. Your goal is to use supporting evidence successfully—that is to say, only use the most pertinent parts of the story, narrative, example, or anecdote that are in support of your argument.

There are two ways to use supporting evidence in your essay: (1) to thread one long narrative throughout your essay and (2) to use multiple short anecdotes and examples where necessary. Beware though; neither of these approaches requires you ONLY to tell a story. Your essay should only be a maximum of 40% supporting evidence and a minimum of 60% introspection. A college essay is not the right medium for pure story telling—any stories included are for practical purposes only, demonstrating your capabilities or supporting the points you have already presented in your essay.

One Long Narrative Approach

If you would like to use one long narrative, you must switch back and forth between relevant segments of the story and your own ideas and introspection. Do not spend four paragraphs telling your story and then wrap up with one paragraph explaining its importance.

The long narrative is a useful strategy if you can come up with a story that has many different elements that can support each point of your thesis throughout your essay. You should also introduce your narrative in the introduction, since the story is going to be such a significant part of your essay.

Take a look at how Nancy introduces her essay in which she plans to use one running narrative:

When I was little I did not know that there was something wrong with my mother. I thought that most mothers used canes and needed other peoples help to go up and down stairs. As I grew older, making sure that every location we visited was handicap accessible became a necessary part of making plans with my family. Not many children have a mother with MS, but no children have a mother who is as extraordinary as my mine. My mother has shown me how to develop the skills necessary to deal with any difficult situation: strength of will, optimism, and gratitude.

Here, Nancy has introduced her main idea: she believes she was heavily influenced by her mother and how she dealt with MS. From here, the body will use more specific examples from the author's time with her mother to illustrate the positive characteristics that Nancy has developed.

Once the narrative has been introduced and the tie into your main argument is clear, you may extract pieces of that longer story to use in your body. These references should be kept down to two or three sentences. It may seem extremely difficult to keep the story going in such limited space, but remember that the story is not the point of your essay. The story is only a supplement that will strengthen your own points and ideas. Take a look at how Charles, a first generation French American, uses portions from his narrative to support the points he makes in his body paragraphs.

I have been exposed to a variety of perspectives endowing me with a global sensitivity at young age. My parents, before settling in the United States, spent a significant amount of time living in Spain, Morocco, and the United Kingdom. They have raised me to believe that cultural exposure is one of the most important things in a young man's life. In my classes now, I often contribute information that challenges our cultural norms and helps start discussions. Questioning the limits and constraints of established principles is a necessary part of education—something I am eager to further explore in college. As a result of my upbringing, my goal is to travel and to decide upon a career that enables me to experience the world in all of its diversity.

As you can see, the underlined portion is the only part that cites a piece of the narrative. This portion supports the topic sentence that precedes it, and is followed by further elaboration and introspection.

When selecting which narrative to use, keep the following advice in mind:

1. The narrative must have enough depth so that it can support a number of different points. You do not want to use pieces that just support the same point over and over again.
2. The narrative should not convey any of your negative qualities. Even if it supports your argument well, do not use a story that portrays you in a bad light. This is an essay on why you are a strong candidate; do not let any of your faults or insecurities creep into this paper.
3. The narrative should not be overly complex. If the story is too complicated to explain and reference in only 2-3 sentences at a time, it is not worth including.
4. Be careful with drama. It is fine to include episodes of your life that are extraordinary, but please spare your reader a soap opera. The most enticing part of your paper should not be the story, but the introspection.

Multiple Short Anecdotes and Examples Approach

When using this story telling strategy, the author does not commit to a single running narrative, but rather uses short anecdotes and examples to illustrate his or her points throughout the essay. In this instance, the supporting evidence does not act as a thread for the paper as a long narrative does. Rather, it is the introspective thoughts that tie all of the stories together. The most difficult aspect of using multiple separate pieces of evidence is that you must present your anecdote or example in only two or three sentences, whereas if you were using the single narrative approach you would have

several opportunities (and therefore more time) to tell your story. The key to effectively describing many short examples is not to include any unnecessary information; only include the main point of the story (i.e. the part that made you think to include it) and the bare minimum of background information that is necessary for the story to make sense.

Take a look at how Anya chooses to include an anecdote to support the main idea in her body paragraph:

Having a father who is a politician has helped me develop communication skills that I now realize are vital to success. I have learned to communicate logically and effectively and have thus been able to learn and engage with people of various ages and standings. On one such occasion, I sat next to an ER doctor on a long train commute. I engaged him on a multitude of topics ranging from medical malpractice to surgical techniques and benefited not only from a pleasant conversation, but also from the wisdom and advice from a seasoned doctor. I now have a better and more realistic understanding of my ideal profession. I intend to apply these communication skills in the college classroom and in my future career.

As you can see, only about a sentence and a half is dedicated to the anecdote. The rest of the sentence is made up of ideas that Anya has formulated from this experience. However, all of the necessary, pertinent details to her story are there: the ER doctor, the circumstances under which they met, and the topics of conversation that they covered.

Because examples can be extremely short (less than a sentence long), they can even be integrated into the long narrative approach. You may choose to have a long narrative as a thread throughout your paper, and then season it with other very short examples. If you do this, be careful not to get carried away with only stories and examples. Remember that your reader wants to know more about how you reason, not about the cool stories you have to tell.

When selecting which anecdotes or examples to use, keep the following things in mind:

- You must be able to explain all of the crucial details in 2-3 sentences. If more explanation is necessary, do not use it.
- It must be relevant to your point (thesis if it is in the introduction, topic sentence if it is in the body). Make sure that it is very clear to the reader why you chose to cite this specific example.
- Do not use flowery language or imagery. This is a persuasive paper, so using metaphors and vivid images will not reveal your qualifications, it will distract from them.

In a Nutshell: Supporting Evidence

Do not let our emphasis on limiting your supporting evidence dissuade you from using it altogether. Whether you are using one long narrative or a series of anecdotes and examples, storytelling can prove extremely effective in supporting your claims. You are establishing your credibility by citing instances where the ideas you have just put forth have proven true.

Do

- Introduce the story early to indicate its importance to your essay if you are using a running narrative.
- Only spend a maximum of 2-3 sentences on storytelling at a time.
- Weave supporting evidence throughout, going back and forth throughout your essay between introspection and narrative.

Don't

- Use any supporting evidence that portrays any of your negative qualities.
- Spend too much time telling stories, and not enough on introspection.
- Use imagery or flowery language.
- Include too much drama. Do not let your supporting evidence detract from your main idea.

There you have it—use your stories as tools to support your argument; just be sure to include enough room for introspection.