

## COMING ALIVE

Pump life into your essays with a few techniques borrowed from professionals.

## TELL A STORY

All the world is not a stage; it's an audience, and it dearly loves a story. Professional writers know this, and use stories and pieces of stories, or *anecdotes*, to bring their work to life. An incident, a bit of conversation, a few vivid characters (real though they be) can make the difference between a lifeless piece and one that sings. Certainly a fragment of dialogue in a college essay—how rare it is!—is like catnip to an admissions officer.

So tell a story in your essay—tell three.

I had never even seen a whole sole before, and there were bones where bones just did not seem to belong. The Charbonneaus (that's what I'll call them) were obviously treating my first night with them as a special occasion—the tablecloth showed fresh creases, there was too much silverware, and the candles that had just been lit were tall and smooth. The only problem was that I really didn't like fish, and

the knowledge of how to filet them was not a standard part of the education of a New Jersey girl. But Monsieur and Madame smiled indulgently at me, he with yellow teeth and she with a gold one; I couldn't tell if they meant it or were only making up for Catherine, their daughter, who looked my way as if she might spit.

The candlelight was nice but I wished they had turned the lights on, because romantic semi-darkness and first-time fish fileting were not a good mix. All three of them effortlessly lifted the flesh in one piece off the bone, but I couldn't figure out where to put my fork. And then I realized that I was supposed to use my knife. After I'd broken its back and embedded tiny pieces of bone into the flesh—mine and the fish's—I saw I was losing the battle. So did Catherine, who finally had something to smile about—entertainment tonight, guest starring the American and a badly mauled fish.

Unfortunately I wasn't feeling very funny. I was trying too hard not to seem like another provincial American. Disregarding my first impulse—to deposit my mouthful into the napkin—and my second—to cry—I followed my third instinct and went to the bathroom, trying to make as little fuss as possible.

The night before I left for the Experiment in International Living, my parents had taken me to see *E.T.* As I cried in the backseat on the way home they were quick to say "Don't worry, Niki. If it's really bad you can come home." It was nice of them to say it, but none of us believed it for a minute. When I was in third grade the same two people had made me stick it out at Camp Waziyatah (which, I still remind my parents with satisfaction, folded the next year). I guess some of my tears were for Elliot, the boy in the movie, who had to manage alone in the end. But at least he got to stay home.

Growing up in Tenafly, New Jersey, means that Harold the mailman calls my mother by her first name and all of Bob's Taxi drivers know who lives at 124 Churchill Road; and yes, the sole all comes

boneless from the market. Which is to say Tenafly is sheltered, and there isn't much room for developing either independence or filetmanship.

A feeling of security is what you do develop in Tenafly and that feeling comes from living in the comfort of a stable cocoon of familiarity. I didn't feel secure in front of Catherine, or even in front of something as harmless as a fish. In fact I felt like an extra-terrestrial and I wanted to go home. But gradually, picking bones out of my teeth in the bathroom, I looked at the big picture. I realized I was not here to learn to debone a fish; Julia Child could have taught me that in my Tenafly living room. Of course, I wasn't sure what I *was* here to do, if anything, but I knew this was part of it.

When I emerged, I saw my dinner lying as I had left it, unromantically half-clawed in the candlelight, and for a moment my resolution shook like a weak muscle; I had a quick idea of running out the door and back to the train and the plane and New Jersey. M. Charbonneau seemed a little puzzled but not especially interested in whatever dilemma I was having. But his wife looked up sympathetically as I neared the table. "Ça va?" she said.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Catherine smirk again.

I sat down. I put a piece of sole on my fork. "Ça va," I said. "Passez du vin, s'il vous plait."

The I's are frequent, and it's a Trip essay, but this writer gets away with it because she tells a vivid story. She makes us feel the strange new atmosphere by her choice of small details—the parents' teeth, the fish, Catherine's expression. But more than that, the story is clearly going somewhere—not to a moral, but to a point. She doesn't have to tell us "I conquered a difficult experience," because she shows it. She gives us an eye on the experience and spares us the Trumpets of Triumph, or the Marvelous Me Moral. She just tells what happened.

Writing this kind of story is largely a matter of choosing the right incidents, and then letting them speak for themselves. The temptation is always to finish with the sell job, the Trip trap:

“That summer taught me more than ever the importance of learning to get along with many different kinds of people and the necessity of self-reliance. I believe these qualities will be essential in college.”

Resist such conclusions at all costs. Events are complicated, and any attempt to squeeze Trumpets of Triumph out of them violates the reader's trust that you must work so hard to build.

The uses of anecdote are many:

- a. the introduction and takeoff point for the whole essay.
- b. a final note, a story that sums up or crystallizes what you have been saying and leaves a reader with the tone of the whole.
- c. a detail in the body of the essay. Anecdotes used this way should not require a big windup. Be economical—save words, save readers.
- d. a big story that runs throughout the the essay and shapes the whole. The filemanship writer sandwiches her thoughts between the pieces of one story—the way movies use flashback technique: she's here in France, then she's back in America at a movie, then she's back again in France.

In a short piece like a college essay, anecdotes are a quick and vivid way to entertain and inform. End with dialogue, like the essay above, or with an action reported. Think like a camera—with what shot do you end the movie that is your essay?

## ENTERTAINMENT QUOTIENT

After you have written short sketches like the ones in chapter five and are thinking of rewriting them or expanding them into full-scale college essays, look at them with a critical eye for their Entertainment Quotient:

**1. Sense detail.** Write to help admissions officers see what you saw, hear what you heard, taste what you tasted. Rather than tell what you learned from photography, show what it looks and feels and even sounds like in a darkroom as your picture emerges—the smell of the chemicals, the red bulb glowing in the darkness. Rather than describe how disciplined you have become as a result of your music lessons, talk about your violin itself, the texture and feel of it, the smell of the rosin and the wood—no one ever thinks of the sense of smell in connection with a violin—details that put a reader through your practice routine with you. Sight, sound, smell, touch, taste. In other words, show what you know.

**2. Metaphor.** Writers continually see one thing in terms of something else; the result is metaphor, the language of comparison. Sometimes the sheer wit and power of metaphors can carry a piece of writing and make it entertaining and fresh, and learning to think metaphorically is perhaps the most “fun” part of writing. You need to have command of the two common ways of making comparisons. One simply uses “like” or “as”: *The leaves are like hands*. The other speaks directly: *The leaves are hands*; or, more subtly, *The leaves beckoned in the wind*. (The metaphor is contained in the verb; leaves don't usually beckon—but they might if they're like hands.) Metaphors are all around you, but through time and use some of them have lost their ability to startle: leg of a chair, face of a clock, eye of a needle. Still others are on their way to the metaphor graveyard but are not quite buried yet. Using them is not the sign of dead metaphor but of a dead mind: white as snow, big as a mountain, high as a kite, smooth as glass. There are thousands of others. To be an entertaining writer you

must hammer your own metaphor out of materials you know and understand. A good rule of thumb, suggested by George Orwell, author of *1984*, is never to use a comparison you have heard before.

3. *Verbs and Nouns*. Nouns are the bones of writing; verbs are the muscles. Entertaining writing gets its structure and strength from them. Don't load up on adjectives—a “wondrous evening,” a “multifaceted personality”—hoping to sound more creative or intelligent. An essay flabby with adjectives only weighs a reader down. Before you can write beautifully you must write well. Try the following:

Without adjectives (“the,” “an,” and “a” are OK), write a short paragraph or two describing something—a restaurant, a teacher, a pen, a bird, your favorite room in the house—so that it sounds appealing. Then—again without adjectives—make the same subject unappealing. It will seem awkward at first; remember, nothing comes out whole, and it will take a few drafts to trim and tighten the paragraph. But you'll increase your control over words and style. Here's an example:

[1]

There's nothing on the planet like chocolate. Vanilla may be the province of the purist and the test of the connoisseur, but in the kingdom of sweets, darkness rules. Among the garden of edibles, chocolate earns the status of sin—a compliment, like knowledge itself in the Garden of Eden. A silk among desserts, its flavor is like a mixture of malt and nectar and cream.

[2]

People who like chocolate must be in league with dentists, the pokers and pullers who have inherited the reins of torture from the Inquisition. Is chocolate worth the pain? I don't think so. It appeals to chil-

dren who, when the temperature inches up and softens fudge, like to fingerprint Uncle Nathan's belly with it. It doesn't look like dessert then; it looks more like something the dog deposits. To adults I've seen scrambling for the Toblerone, it's like a drug. Not for nothing is the cacao, from which it is pounded, related to cocaine.

These examples are admittedly freaks. In your final essays you needn't carry adjective-bashing to this extreme, but it's fun to noodle with; this is a true literary pushup that will make your writing stronger.

When you learn to rely on verbs and nouns, they keep you thinking metaphorically, as you can see from the examples. Increasing your store of verbs and nouns opens up that world of comparison. For example, the verb “fasten” might be *pin, stitch, chain, paste, moor, clasp, clamp, suture*, or *belay* (from mountain climbing), depending on the comparison you wanted to suggest. One of my classes found 148 synonyms for the word “walk”—a good many more than are found in any thesaurus. Make a list of your own with a friend or two. Think metaphorically: How does a horse on parade walk? How does a thief walk? A snake? Try the same thing with the word “say.”

## METAPHOR MADNESS

Children are natural metaphorists. On a walk in the woods in late fall, the four-year-old son of a friend looked up (from his vantage atop his father's shoulders) at all the branches around him losing their leaves and said, “The trees have their pants down.”

Kids are always reporting what they see in fresh language; they haven't learned how to be dull. We grow up into dullness, just the way we lose the imaginary friends that we sometimes had as kids. But kids don't know what they're saying and can't build on it; with them, metaphor is

simple habit, part of the way they think. In one sense, learning to write is learning to recover the freshness and imagination of kid talk and harnessing it to grown-up consistency.

You can help redevelop the metaphorical habit by doing what kids (and writers) do—playing games. I call one Fruits and Vegetables, a good one for long car or train rides with friends or family. To start, the one who's "it" thinks of a person you all know, like a figure from history, a teacher, or a neighbor, and says only "a teacher" or "historical female." The others must try to guess who it is by asking metaphorical questions: "What kind of vegetable would he be?" You must respond with an answer that in your mind reflects the essence of the person, not just a superficial characteristic. For example, don't answer "red pepper" simply because the subject has red hair. Better to answer pepper if the subject has a spicy and colorful personality. Questioners should really stretch—which type of bird would he be, which highway in America, which breakfast food, which household appliance. Each guesser is allowed only one guess before he is out, but there is no limit to the number of questions.

Here's another good metaphor game for those long rides. I call it Raymond Chandler, in honor of the mystery writer known for his similes. You may need pencil and paper at first, but soon you'll be able to play it in your head. Begin with two columns of nouns, one concrete, the other abstract. For example:

hammer	honesty
piano	love
light bulb	trust
birdseed	disappointment
rowboat	tension

Your friend picks one word from column A, one from B, and both of you make a sentence that shows why they're alike: Love is like a light bulb:

you can turn it off and on. Or, Love is like a rowboat: it takes hard work to keep it moving forward. Or, Love is like a piano: you have to practice to be good. Writers are constantly indulging this playfulness with ideas and words, and the metaphors, forced as they are, sometimes uncover strange truths you never saw before.

Play the same game with things you care about:

soccer  
books  
college  
teachers  
sleep

Match them with nouns at random: shirt, glass, key, tiger, dinner.

Robert Frost, the poet, played this game. "Poets," he said, "are like baseball pitchers. Both have their moments. The intervals are the tough things." So did E. B. White: "A writer is like a bean plant—he has his little day, and then gets stringy."

Don't worry about stretching it to ridiculous limits—that's how you get better and better at seeing connections and playing with ideas.

## B. S. DIGRESSION

"C'mon, Mr. B, that's b.s.," my students sometimes snicker when we play these games. "Everything can't be like everything else." (Actually, when you look closely enough—at the level of particle physics, say—everything is almost *exactly* like everything else. Metaphor is not just a poetic fancy.) But I couldn't agree more; it is b.s. And inferior b.s. is a very shoddy product, adulterated with twigs, stones, and debris. But pure b.s. is a noble, fertile resource; stuff *grows* in it.

Students give b.s. a bad name. Here's how: For the upcoming essay-

test on the Civil War, you lock down and study like a dog all weekend, learning every strategy and body count, and the exact blood-alcohol level of Ulysses S. Grant at the battle of Vicksburg. Your classmate, Bartleby the Slacker, never cracks a book, and you happen to know he spent a good portion of the weekend imitating Grant's leisure rather than memorizing battle plans. You sit for the essay. Mr. Snoozleman reveals the topic: How did the South lose the war?

When you get the essay back (you already know where I'm taking this), you get the B, Bartleby gets the A. *But he just b.s.'ed his way through that*, you sputter, *and Snoozleman bought it*. Yes. I urge you to cultivate that skill as soon as you can and with as much care as you can muster. When b.s. reaches a certain (very high) level it is called *thinking*, and when it finds a voice, it is called literature. (Ever wonder why in the one high school class you have to take every year, and therefore apparently the main vehicle of education, the material consists mainly of a bunch of b.s.—at school it's called fiction and drama, but in my neighborhood it's called *lies*.)

The college essay, reduced to its essentials: b.s. and memory.

### DIGRESSION ON MEMORY

You are not what you eat but what you remember. Our fascination with amnesia stories in movies and literature is that we know identity begins and ends in memory. It's the unique source no one else has, the foundation of what only you can write.

Luckily, your memory is b.s.-ing you constantly. You know this if you've discussed with your parents a cherished early memory—that time you fell off your new red tricycle at your grandmother's and had to go to the hospital, for example. "Actually," your mom says, "it was your sister's silver scooter, and it was at the park, and you didn't go to the hospital for that but you did go a bit later, for the ear tubes. . . ."

This truth about point of view drives the police nuts. Four eyewitnesses to a crime cannot agree on the number of bank robbers, or what the crooks looked like, wore, or said.

If you spend any time with the elderly, you see how memory changes; your grandmother can't remember what she had for lunch or what grade you're in, but she can vividly recall capsizing in a canoe at camp when she was ten.

Your memory is not the truth of *then*; it's your story—your b.s., your fiction, your drama—of who you are now. The writer's confidence is this: My memory selects for a reason, and I write to discover, or b.s. my way toward, that reason.

So you can b.s. your memory right back.

If you wanted to start an essay right now you could think of your very first memory. (Sometimes when I do this in workshops, some touching innocent will say—and mean it—"I can't remember." And I'll have to say, "Start with breakfast today and work backward.") Maybe it will be a fragment from when you were three or four, just an image. See it in your mind's eye, the colors, the sounds, the moment. Now realize how little else you remember of that year when you were four—365 days' worth, like every other year. Ask yourself: why do I remember that, of all things? (The writer's answer: because it's important to your story of yourself *now*.) And then: *how* is that about me now? Your essay is the great-b.s. answer to that question. Everyone could begin an essay with exactly the same phrase and the resulting pieces would be as individual and identifiable as fingerprints. And that phrase is *When I was six . . .*