

Generic Structure for Admission Essays
Inspired by Dr. Jake Ptacek

Purpose: To help students applying to college develop clarity and structure in their essay planning. Jake, a lecturer at the University of Texas at Austin, uses a college application essay written by a young man named Jerry to illustrate these points. You can find Jerry's full essay on the [John Hopkins University website](#)

Six (6) Structural Areas:

Hook: This is your attention grabbing line. It should be early on in your essay; most likely the very first line. The "hook" often focuses on vividly describing a scene and your emotional response to it. Jerry's essay start with a great example: *"I looked up and flinched slightly. There were at least sixty of them, far more than expected. I had thirty weeks to teach them the basics of public speaking."*

Status Quo: This is what your world looked or felt like before the action of your story starts. What were you like before you had the experiences you describe in your essay? What is it that felt "normal" to you before the events of your essay, but you now recognize is different? For instance, in Jerry's essay, he focuses on how his speech impediment kept him from interacting with others and made him feel quiet and awkward growing up.

Challenge or goal: This is the goal that you want to reach or the obstacle that you are trying to overcome. Example: "When he gets to high school, Jerry decides he is tired of feeling shy and wants to make his voice heard."

Struggle to achieve goal or overcome challenge: A good essay allows the reader to see the process to victory. It is important that they see the work or struggle behind your story, so make sure to take some space to describe what you did to achieve success. For instance, in Jerry's essay he spends a full paragraph describing how he practiced consistently, looked to experienced debaters as models, got feedback from experts, etc.

Reflection: A strong essay shows growth. It is important for you to take a moment in your essay to look back and see what you learned, observed, or developed along your journey. How are you or your life different now? What changed because of this experience? As an example, look at how Jerry talks about both internal and external changes in the last paragraphs. *"In finding my voice, I found a strength I could only dream of when I stood in silence so many years ago"*

Final sentence(s) links back to the hook: It is important that your essay is concise. Linking the conclusion of your essay back to the experience or feelings of the hook helps create one clear message all the way to the end. Jerry's essay, for instance, returns to

the moment of standing before a group of others, but this time describes growth and confidence: *“On the last day of class for that year; I looked up and saw each of the students standing confidently, equipped and ready to speak their minds in whatever they wanted to do. They had come a long way from being the shy and stuttering novices that they were just thirty weeks before- I can’t wait to see how far they can go from here.”*

For detailed full essay samples you can visit: <https://apply.jhu.edu/application-process/essays-that-worked/>

Your essay structure:

Hook:

Status Quo:

Challenge or goal:

Struggle to achieve goal or overcome challenge:

Reflection:

Final sentence(s) links back to the hook: