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Use the **Story To College** Method,
Write Great Application Essays,
and Get into Your Top Choice College

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Mexico City Milan New Delhi Singapore Sydney Toronto

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Choose a Moment

When, years later, she'd look back at this moment of change, look at it clinically . . . she would see that her transformation actually took place over many months. However, it was only as she was falling out of the sky over the Bab al-Mandab that she understood that change had come.

—ABRAHAM VERGHESE, *CUTTING FOR STONE*¹

In every experience that defines you, there is a moment of change, a moment after which the world looks different. You say and do things differently. You make different choices. Others may not notice at first, but your perspective has changed. You have changed. You know it, and feel it. There is a clear before and after. How do you bring these moments to life so other people can experience what has changed for you? In this chapter you will learn to find those moments and explore them. You will explore your own Defining Moments to find the details that make those moments accessible to others.

The Moments Method

Students often try to pack too much into each essay. They will write essays that start like this: “From being the stage manager I learned how to work with other people and how all the parts of a play are put together. The director said he could really count on me to take care of things.” Did you notice three scripts in those two sentences? And then the person provides a laundry list of all the things he or she did as stage manager. The experience of being the stage manager suggests that this person is probably a great bet for management of a campus organization! Sound like you? How can you make your leadership experience come to life for your reader?

REFRESH

Yesterday

What did you do yesterday? Write down everything you can remember, including as much sensory detail as possible. No scripts! What did you do? What did people say? What else did you hear? What did you smell and taste? What did your hands do and touch? Write everything you can think of and keep your pen moving or your fingers typing for three minutes or more.

Here's the secret: drawing me into one critical moment of that experience will show me much more than a laundry list of all the things you organized. Pick one detail for each essay, and relegate everything else to your résumé. Let's say as stage manager you were responsible for the program, the lighting, the props, the costumes, and makeup. What are the key stories in each of those areas, and what are the specific moments that make up those stories? A moment is a specific and contained instant in time when something changes. Most of the things we first call "moments" are actually stories comprised of many moments, so go in as close as you can to distinguish specific moments from a very generalized experience. Maybe the lighting was a week behind schedule, and you worked with the director and lighting team to rethink the lights, making them simpler but also more powerful. Maybe you delegated the program to someone who doesn't usually do graphic design, and you taught her how to use InDesign. Or maybe the person in charge of makeup got sick, and you had to convince the big, burly male lead, who is also the captain of the football team, to wear lipstick on stage. This chapter teaches you how to choose a specific moment and work with it, so that it reveals your character and personality to the reader.

Choose a Moment is the fourth and final tool to find your stories and the heart of the Moments Method: by drawing other people into your moments of growth and change you show them the world from your perspective, and you connect with them. Sharing the process that has shaped you into who you are today shows admissions readers what you are likely to do when you are tested in the future—on their college campuses and in the rest of your life. In this chapter you will organize the work you did in Chapter 2: The Bridge and Chapter 3: Transform Scripts to Stories. Choose one moment that reveals something important about your character—I call this a Defining Moment—and go back and explore that moment from various perspectives. In Part 2 and Part 3 you will work with a variety of different moments from your Story Portfolio and shape them into college application essay drafts.

While you are going back into your Defining Moments, you want to remember and write down everything you find there, as vividly and in as much detail as possible. The more you can remember, the more you will have to work with in your actual essays. Allow yourself to be curious about what is there. When you are digging around in one Defining Moment, you may remember others—just write down what you find in your Story Portfolio and you can explore those moments later.

The Moments Method is a process you can use again and again to identify the key moments from your own past and focus in closely to bring them to life for others. For instance, every one of my generation remembers the day that President Kennedy was shot. I was in kindergarten, and we were sent home from school early. When I got home everyone—10 people who worked for my parents in the advertising agency in the basement of our house—were all sitting on the couch in the living room, watching the news on our 20-inch black-and-white Zenith TV. Similarly, my children—who were 13, 11, and 7 on September 11, 2001, remember the angry crowds they saw cheering on television and the smell of burning oil. But that is all ancient history for you. Let's Refresh and go back to exploring your Defining Moments.

The next exercise gathers the work you did in the last two chapters and brings it together into what we will call your Life in Moments.

EXERCISE 1

My Life in Moments

You will need The Bridge (Chapter 2) and your Story Portfolio (Chapter 3) to complete your Life in Moments. To complete the left side—What do I want colleges to know about me?—pull the most important elements from The Bridge. Include six to eight things, and at least one from each box in The Bridge.

Then, to complete the right side—My Life Story—review your Story Portfolio and list the major events of your life in chronological order. Include a few events from elementary school and middle school, but make at least half the list from high school or after leaving high school, and remember to include things you have done outside of school.

WHAT DO I WANT COLLEGES TO KNOW ABOUT ME?	MY LIFE STORY
<p><i>I started a dance group at my school.</i></p> <p><i>My mother was a single mom and a huge influence.</i></p> <p><i>I want to study public health policy in college.</i></p>	<p><i>I was born. My brother was born a year later.</i></p> <p><i>When I was in third grade my grandmother died (she lived with us and was a dancer with Alvin Ailey until my mom was born).</i></p> <p><i>I started dancing after she died.</i></p> <p><i>In middle school my mother got sick, and I had to take care of her and my brother a lot.</i></p> <p><i>I was selected for a middle school pre-college program and applied to SEED for high school. I moved to the SEED school (this was really hard for me).</i></p> <p><i>Once a month my ninth-grade English teacher had us write poetry.</i></p> <p><i>I won a national poetry contest in tenth grade. Used the prize money to enroll in a summer dance program and started the Modern Dance Club at my school.</i></p> <p><i>The next summer I had an internship on Capitol Hill about public health policy.</i></p>

WHAT DO I WANT COLLEGES TO KNOW ABOUT ME?	MY LIFE STORY

How to Choose a Moment

Choosing a moment is taking a specific moment out of a larger experience and exploring it from different angles, to identify how that moment was definitional for you. This is a bit like going to the gym and working one muscle group at a time. Some of your storytelling muscles may feel a bit awkward at first. But with time it will become more natural to use them, individually and together, and you will be able to use the power of your experience to connect with people in college applications and many other situations.

EOP, HEOP, and QuestBridge

There are a number of programs designed to make college accessible to students who would otherwise not be able to attend college.

- **The Education Opportunity Program (EOP)** provides full tuition for educationally disadvantaged students at state universities and community colleges around the United States.
- **The Higher Education Opportunity Program**, or HEOP, (<http://heop.org/>) is a New York State program that makes college available and affordable for economically disadvantaged students. HEOP offers tutoring and counseling to help with college adjustment. Students must have a household income of less than \$40,000 for a family of four to qualify for HEOP. The program offers full tuition. Other states have similar programs; ask your guidance counselor for more information.
- **QuestBridge** (www.questbridge.org/) matches highly qualified, underserved students with selective colleges. In order to qualify, students must have a stellar academic profile (most QuestBridge scholars are in the top 5 percent of their high school class) and a household income less than \$60,000 for a family of four. The program provides full tuition for all four years of college. Students applying to QuestBridge rank their top 8 schools from a list of 33 participating institutions (including Columbia, Dartmouth, Haverford, Northwestern, Stanford, Wesleyan, and Yale), and QuestBridge sends the strongest applications they receive to their partner schools. The schools then offer admission to the students they want; those offers are binding. About 1,500 students are matched through QuestBridge each year.

Whenever you move from a broad and general experience to something that is uniquely your own and show how a specific moment changed you, or allowed you to do something in the world, you stimulate the centers for compassion and empathy in the reader's brain.² You are reaching out as one human being to another; the other person's memories wake up and that person feels a sense of community with you. The first step is to sift through

your experiences to find your Defining Moments and fill them in with details from your own remembered experience. The next exercise—Choose a Moment—gives you practice doing that.

EXERCISE 2

Choose a Moment

Go back to Exercise 1: My Life in Moments, earlier in this chapter, and ask yourself, “What is the most important thing I want colleges to know about me?” (from the left side of the chart) and write it here:

Then ask yourself, “Which of my stories reveals some aspect of how that came to be my most important thing?” (from the right side of the chart) and write that here:

Following the trajectory of the example in Exercise 1, the most important thing she wants people to know is that she is resilient and resourceful. She chooses the story about starting a dance program at her school to reveal how she keeps going when she runs into challenges. Don’t worry about which moment you pick. Just pick one of your characteristics and one of your important moments.

Moving from an Experience to a Defining Moment

The next exercise opens up one of your important life events from an Experience to a Moment to a Defining Moment. You create a Defining Moment by taking it out of the ebb and flow of everyday experience and focusing on specific actions, words, and details to show the reader what you have learned and how you have changed.

Here’s the path you will follow:

- An **Experience** is the first way we remember things, rather broad and almost factual. Example: “My younger sister was born when I was 13.”
- A **Moment** is a part of that experience that you remember specifically. Example: “When my father brought my baby sister home from the hospital, my mother stayed in the hospital. She was still too weak to come home.”
- Out of your many experiences and memories, a **Defining Moment** is one that has changed you or someone else in some way. Example: “My father said, ‘It may be a few weeks before Mama is strong enough to come home. I’m going to need you to step up and take care of your baby sister.’”

You can use the power of memory to open up your general experiences into specific Defining Moments of learning, growth, or change, and to connect your story with your reader’s memories, emotions, and compassion, forging a powerful human connection with them.

EXERCISE 3

Experience → Moments → Defining Moment

Starting with the story you chose in Exercise 2: Choose a Moment, you are going to expand the story from an experience to a series of moments and then a Defining Moment, like the following example:

Experience

I started my school’s Modern Dance Club.

Moments

The principal signed the letter of approval for the club.

Jack, Charles, and Diana danced on stage with the rest of the group.

I choreographed a new dance.

We all danced my piece in the school’s Winter Festival.

Defining Moment

I dedicated the dance to my grandmother, who had danced with Alvin Ailey but left dancing to raise my mom. When the dance was over, I asked all the moms and grandmas in the audience to come on stage and stand with us.

Experience

Moments

Defining Moment

The two biggest mistakes most students make in their college application essays are

1. Staying too broad and general
2. Telling stories that happen in their heads

Remember moments are only definitional if something happens in the world. Your big insights—something you learn, but you do nothing differently—are not the best topics for personal essays. What you learn is important; your ideas inform who you are and what you choose to do. But to make your unique insights accessible to other people, you need to reveal something you did or made happen in the world.

Here are some questions to ask yourself or your friends to turn an idea or realization into a Defining Moment:

- > How did I get to the moment?
- > What happened before the moment?
- > What was different after the moment?

The more you explore the details of your story and share those details with your reader, the more powerful your essay will be.

Four Types of Defining Moments

Another way to think about your Defining Moment is to ask yourself, “What type of moment is this?” Most Defining Moments fall into one of four buckets:

- > **Change:** Significant moments make a change in you or in the world.
- > **Achievement:** You overcome an obstacle to make something happen in your own or someone else’s life.
- > **Risk:** You do something that is challenging or uncomfortable.
- > **Dilemma:** You are forced to make a hard choice.

To find additional material, a Defining Moment can be explored from each of these perspectives. Next is an exercise to explore your Defining Moment using each of the four frameworks to reveal more information about what you learned and how you changed.

EXERCISE 4

Defining the Moment

Consider the Defining Moment that you have been working with in the past two exercises. First write down the Defining Moment here:

EXAMPLE: *I dedicated the dance to my grandmother, who had danced with Alvin Ailey but left dancing to raise my mom. When the dance was over, I asked all the moms and grandmas in the audience to come on stage and stand with us.*

Now consider your moment from each of the following perspectives. Include a few in each category.

Change

EXAMPLE: *This was the first time that anything other than music was included in the Winter Festival.*

Achievement

EXAMPLE: *There was an article about our performance in the local paper, with a picture of the dancers and their mothers and grandmothers on stage.*

Risk

EXAMPLE: *I was worried that some of the older women wouldn't be able to walk up the stairs onto the stage.*

Dilemma

EXAMPLE: *My mom didn't want me to tell her story, but I did anyway.*

You can use Exercise 4: Defining the Moment to explore your Defining Moment story for the tensions and complexities that make it more engaging for the reader. And you can use the next exercise—Expand the Moment—to break the moment down into its component parts.

EXERCISE 5

Expand the Moment

To find and write down the details that will leave an indelible impression with your reader, ask yourself questions as if you are an observer or reporter on your own experience. Be as specific as you can about colors, sounds, textures, and the words that people actually say. Feel free to add as many of your own questions as you need to find the important details.

Who?

Who was there? Were any of the people more important than the others? What were their names?

What?

What did they look like? What did they wear? What did they say? Was there anything unusual that I would have noticed if I were there?

When?

What season was it? What time of day?

Where?

What is the name of the neighborhood or street? Is it inside or outside? Is it a public or a private place?

Why?

This question tends to bring up interpretations. Once you figure out the why, can you find story details that show the why without the word *because*?

Be an Outsider

Looking at your own experience with an outsider's questions can help you find aspects of your stories that you usually overlook. Any time that you explore this observer perspective—almost like watching your life from the outside—you are developing your capacity for reflection, which is not only at the heart of great essays, but an attribute of college readiness and college success.³

Cultivating the perspective of an outsider (the observer or reporter) helps you to re-experience the moments that have been fundamental in shaping you. This stance also helps you share your stories with others. For most of this chapter you looked at one story in considerable depth and from a number of different angles. The next exercise—Three by Three Life Stories—is designed to reveal important stories that you may have overlooked until now.

EXERCISE 6

Three by Three Life Stories

This exercise works in three rounds.

ROUND 1: Write your life story in three sentences.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

ROUND 2: Write your life story in three sentences, using none of the details you used in Round 1.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

ROUND 3: Write your life story in three sentences, using none of the details you used in Round 1 or Round 2.

1. _____

2. _____

3. _____

If this exercise helped you find other moments that have been definitional for you, feel free to add them to your Story Portfolio (Chapter 3) to shape in the following chapters. As you shape your stories into college application essays, you will remember other moments, other stories. Write down these memories when you remember them, so you can explore them further and weave them into your college applications and your life story in the present.

Further Reading

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