

Lesson 4.1: Structuring Your Essay Pt.1

by Nestor Walters

When we talk about structure for these essays, we're talking more about a nervous system than a skeleton. Meaning: it's not about organization or formatting. Definitely not order of presentation. It's the flow of ideas (and hopefully feelings) and how they interact with and reinforce each other.

One way of doing this is the **What-So What-Now What** model (I don't know who started it, but I learned it in a GSB class with Matt Abrahams and Kristen Hansen).

For our purposes, we'll define the components like this (the color coding is for later):

- **What:** Tell your story, experience, parts of your personality that you want to convey. This is the inciting incident.
 - Luke Skywalker finds his aunt and uncle burning in the Tatooine desert.
- **So What:** Describe how your experiences impacted or affected you. How did you change because of them? What did you learn? How did you grow?
 - Luke understands that the war is closer to him than he'd thought, and that his destiny awaits etc.
- **Now What:** What do you plan to do with this new realization? How will this new version of yourself interact with the world?
 - Luke resolves to learn the ways of the force and become a Jedi.
- **Bonus:** Pure storytelling

Now read the short sample essay below and see if you can identify the key elements. In the second version, I've used the above color coding to highlight where I think they are.

Sample short essay: "I'll Sleep In A Hammock"

Response to Stanford's "What matters to you and why?"

I first set foot on Stanford's campus in May of 2016. My military service was winding down, and I'd started thinking about colleges. I remember getting off the Caltrain in Palo Alto and (probably in legal ambiguity) stringing my hammock between two trees near the Arizona Garden to save a night's Airbnb fare. Exploring campus the next day, I reflected on the legendary minds who'd walked the paths before me. I thought of my own personal intellectual hero, philosopher/neuroscientist Sam Harris, whose book *Waking Up* had first ignited my passion for philosophy and meditation. Sam left Stanford after one year, and following a decade traveling India and Tibet studying meditation, returned to study philosophy at precisely my age (albeit following a more... tranquil, yet equally transformative decade). Perhaps one day I too would inspire in others a journey into the mind's landscapes, or advance the frontiers of human wisdom. Lo and behold, two summers later I found myself seated in Wallenberg hall living out my fantasies in the flesh, immersed in a philosophy of mind course [editor's note: in another essay, this applicant mentions attending Stanford Summer Sessions]. Both my feeling of longing and *belonging* intensified, and as I left campus and returned to San Diego, my focus narrowed to a perfect final semester and preparing my application. And so, once and for all, here she goes. I don't want to sound cliché or to be paying lip service, but right now what genuinely matters to me the most is studying at Stanford this fall. I'll even sleep in my hammock.

Color coded:

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These elements happen to be in order here, but they don't need to be. Nor do they need to be evenly developed. But they should exist in some form.

Tell them what happened, how it changed you, and what you plan on doing with that change. It's as easy and difficult as that.