

## Step 4: What Story Do I Want To Tell?

Now that you have done some freewriting, sit back for a moment and think about the various stories from your life you have been revisiting and how it felt to begin to put words together to express memories of moments -- to take these experiences and render them into images that would express their significance to a reader who doesn't know you.

Which story feels like the *right* one to tell?

The answer to this question is not about which story you think a college admissions officer really wants to read. It is not about which story anyone else in your life thinks is the most interesting or appropriate.

It's also not about the one you think is most impressive, most clever, most original, or most deep.

The *right* story is the one that you feel good about writing and good about putting out into the world. It is the one that feels really true to who you are -- that will show the parts of yourself you most want other people to see.

There are many "right" stories -- you have a wealth of experiences, an infinity of moments that have shaped who you are. The story you tell in your essay is just a vehicle or a container; it delivers the message, but it is not, in and of itself, the message. The story is the *medium*.

**The message is your selfhood: those qualities, values, and passions you really want to come through.** Think of a work like [Van Gogh's \*Starry Night\*](#): the *medium* is an oil painting of larger-than-life swirling lights in the night sky above a village. The *message*, though, is about taking joy in the beauty of the universe -- and maybe about finding hope in that beauty, too, since Van Gogh painted it from inside an asylum where he was undergoing in-patient treatment for life-threatening depression. There are many mediums through which he could have expressed joy in the beauty of the universe. He chose the story of a night sky -- in that particular moment, for that particular painting.

Whatever story you choose for now, it is not THE story of your life. It is not the last story you will ever tell, or the defining story of who you are, now and forever. It's just one story of many that you could choose as the vehicle to deliver the message of who you are.

Below is a space to sketch out the foundational elements of your essay. This is, basically, the preliminary outline of your essay.

Here's one example of an outline, based on Sherman Alexie's narrative essay "Rebel Without a Clause," one of the Stories of Self from Stage 1. Note that Alexie didn't actually write this outline himself -- I pulled these elements from his essay to be able to give an example.

## Outline

### My Message:

#### What I Want The Reader To Know About Me

1-3 of my fundamental qualities, passions, or values:

- *headstrong*
- *aware of my history and connected to my culture as a Native American*
- *(BUT ALSO) determined to chart my own path in life*

### My Medium:

#### Aspect of selfhood i'm focusing on

This is the experience(s), identity(ies), or relationship(s) that are the main topic of your narrative.

- *My name, specifically: the struggles I've always had with being a "junior" and my attempt to rename myself "Juniour"*

#### Major moments in my narrative

These will be the "plot points" of your story. Think of your story as one hiking path through the woods of your life. You, the writer, are the guide who is leading the reader on the hike, showing them the way and getting them from point A to point B. What are the major signposts along that path?

- *Explain what my name is and why I struggle with it: it's the same as my dad's and I wanted to be my own person; there are tons of other Juniors in the Indian world; it's not a cool or grandiose name like Crazy Horse*
- *Changed the spelling of my name to "Juniour" at age 3 in preschool*
- *My teacher, a White man, told me it was wrong*
- *I stood my ground and insisted on spelling it my way*
- *He let me write my name like that from then on.*
- *Explain that changing the spelling of my name symbolized rebellion -- refusing to obey anyone who tries to tell me who I am or limit me because of where I'm from.*

To see more examples of outlines by real students, visit [www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing\\_samples.html](http://www.storiesofselfworkshop.com/writing_samples.html). Notice how each of these writers get from Step 1 to Step 4, using their free-writes to help them decide which story felt right as well as give them a few ideas for major moments to include in the essay.

## Outline



### My Message

#### What I want the reader to know about me

1-3 of my fundamental qualities, passions, or values:

---

---

### My Medium:

#### Aspect of selfhood I'm focusing on

This is the experience(s), identity(ies), or relationship(s) that are the main topic of your narrative. (At least one, but no more than three recommended or else you probably won't be able to meaningfully integrate everything in one short essay.)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Major moments in my narrative



These will be the “plot points” of your story. Think of your story as one hiking path through the woods of your life. You, the writer, are the guide who is leading the reader on the hike, showing them the way and getting them from point A to point B. What are the major signposts along that path? (Add or delete bullet points here -- there’s no “right” number! Also, feel free to plan out details related to each main point that you want to remember to include.)

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Do You Like A More Detailed Outline?

If you’re someone who prefers to really plan out the details of an essay before you write it, find another option for outlining on the website (URI below). This document includes a template with a suggested essay structure based on planning for a balance between “showing” and “telling” and including lots of detail.

- Showing and Telling Narrative Essay Outline Template:  
[storiesofselfworkshop.com/showingtelling\\_template.html](http://storiesofselfworkshop.com/showingtelling_template.html)