

Beginning to write your 650-word personal statement can be an intimidating and daunting task. We will work with you to brainstorm ideas and build a story that **shows (not tell)** college admissions something important about you.

You will hear us say dozens of times that the best college essays are a good story well told. How do you tell a good story? The 6 Rules of Great Storytelling (As Told by Pixar) explain the elements of great storytelling, particularly the “so what” in a very relatable way.

6 Rules of Great Storytelling (As Told by Pixar)

Effective storytelling involves a deep understanding of human emotions, motivations, and psychology to truly move an audience.

1. Great stories are universal

Great storytelling is about taking a piece of the human condition (so things like birth, growth, emotionality, aspiration, conflict) and conveying it in a unique situation.

Acclaimed Pixar director Pete Docter puts it perfectly: *“What you’re trying to do, when you tell a story, is to write about an event in your life that made you feel some particular way. And what you’re trying to do, when you tell a story, is to get the audience to have that same feeling.”*

One way you can do this is to pull apart the stories you like. Break down every little element about what you love about them. Those are *real* feelings you are having, and you must recognize them in detail in order to tell a great story yourself. In other words, self-knowledge and awareness are at the root of all great storytelling.

You are part of the human condition and people will relate to that.

2. Great stories have a clear structure and purpose

Part A (Structure)

One of my favorite ways to develop a compelling story is to use “[The Story Spine](#)” formula created by professional playwright and improviser Kenn Adams. Pixar has used this story structure to create so many films we know and love today.

It goes:

Once upon a time there was [blank]. Every day, [blank]. One day [blank]. Because of that, [blank]. Until finally [bank].

Part B (Purpose)

As Pixar writes:

Why must you tell THIS story?

What’s the belief burning within you that your story feeds off of?

What greater purpose does this serve? What does it teach?

That is the heart of really great storytelling.

By crafting a story that you are passionate to tell because it serves a real purpose, your stories will have bigger impact on the world.

3. Great stories have a character to root for (an underdog)

Believe it or not, people want to root for you (the main character).

AND they love a good underdog.

This might seem straightforward but it’s worth keeping in mind anytime you are creating a story.

Pixar explains that we as the audience admire a character for trying more than for their success. In other words, it’s more about the character’s journey than it is their actual destination.

When your character is battling against all odds, facing adversity, or their back is against the wall, well then, you have yourself the makings of great story.

4. Great stories appeal to our deepest emotions

Psychologists generally agree that there are six basic emotions: anger, disgust, fear, happiness, sadness, and surprise. If you ever watched the Pixar movie [Inside Out](#), you will recognize these emotions as characters in the movie.

The more you understand how/when your own emotional levers are pulled, the more you will appreciate how that works in other people (and the more you'll be able to hone those emotions in your stories). Consciously begin to recognize these various emotions in yourself —and think about the “why”.

Why are you feeling a certain way? How might you be able to take the “why” behind your emotions and tell a story?

Continuously question yourself in order to understand your own emotional reactions to stories so that you can learn to tell more authentic stories that reach and move people where it counts.

5. Great stories are surprising and unexpected

We have all seen the classic “fairytale” storyline: a helpless princess in need and a charming prince swooping in to save the day.

Boring (and totally outdated).

What makes modern stories compelling are when our perceptions of reality are challenged or changed in some way.

6. Great stories are simple and focused

Have you ever watched a movie or read a book where you had to keep asking yourself (or someone else) what was happening in the plot?

As creators, we naturally want to include as much information as possible in our stories. We want to pack the story full of characters and plot twists and dialogue.

And often times we might not even realize that we're adding layers that don't need to be there.

Pixar's advice here is to “combine characters and hop over detours.”

While you as the creator may feel like you're losing lots of valuable stuff, it'll set you free in the end and will allow your audience to get lost in the narrative.