

WHAT IS A MONTAGE?

Montage is a technique that involves creating a new whole from separate fragments (pictures, words, music, etc.). In filmmaking, the montage effect is used to condense space and time so that information can be delivered in a more efficient way.

Take the classic “falling in love” montage, commonly used in romantic comedies. We don’t see every single interaction; instead, we see: he surprises her at work with flowers, they walk through the park, they dance in the rain, they pass an engagement ring store, and she eyes a particular ring. You get the idea.

A few images tell the whole story. And you can use this technique for your essay.

But which essences should you choose? That’s up to you. (It’s art, remember, not science.)

FIND A FOCUSING LENS

You can’t discuss every single aspect of your life, but you can show us a few important points through a single lens or metaphor.

What type of focusing lens might you use to write your personal insight response? A sport? A skill? An art form? A hobby? Ask yourself: what’s something I know really well and (if possible) something that will help distinguish me from all the other candidates?

TIPS FOR FINDING A GOOD FOCUSING LENS

1. Make it visual. Storytelling is a visual medium. Use a lens that will help conjure images in the reader’s mind.
2. Write what you know. Know how to cook? Use food. Play chess? Use that! And, as I’ve said before, if you’ve got something impressive, don’t leave money on the table! Use that.

EXAMPLE ESSAY: "SANTUR"

Do re fa mi, re do fa mi, re do sol fa mi re mi re. Have I completely lost it? Should I be locked up in a mental hospital chained to a chair? No. Then what are these utterances coming from my mouth? Music.

I have devoted thousands of hours of my life to playing the santur, a classical Persian instrument that originated in the Middle East. Some people think I'm strange: a Persian redheaded Jewish teenager obsessed with an ancient musical instrument. But they don't see what I see. My santur is King David's lyre: it can soothe, enrapture, mesmerize.

The santur also allows me to connect to my culture and Persian heritage, and to visit Iran of the past, a culture rich in artistic tradition. Sometimes I imagine performing for the king in the Hanging Gardens of Babylon, the santur sounds echoing through the Seven Hills of Jerusalem.

Today, some Americans view Iran as a land of terrorists, but when I play the innocent of Iran, the educated, the artists, the innovators, come to life. Iran is not a country of savages; it's Kubla Khan's fountain, an abundant source of knowledge and creativity.

Finally, the santur represents one of my remaining links to my grandfather. In the last few years of his life, Baba Joon did not know me as his grandson. Alzheimer's slowly took over his brain, and eventually he could not recognize me. Baba Joon grew up with the music of the santur and my father plays it in his car every day, so when I play, the music connects all three generations.

In December I'll be releasing my first album, a collection of classical Persian pieces. Proceeds from the album will go toward Alzheimer's research, as I hope to play some small part in finding a cure for the disease. My teacher is one of only a handful of santur teachers from Iran, and I sometimes wonder if the santur will soon become extinct, like the seven thousand endangered languages which may soon be gone.

Not if I have anything to say about it.

(Length: 350 words)

Analysis: There is so much to love about this piece. Here's what the author does well (and what you can learn from it):

1. Choose a focusing lens (i.e. something that connects everything) and make sure it's clear. In this piece, obviously, it's the santur, but it could be anything: a talent or skill you have, an instrument you play, or a sport.

2. Brainstorm values that connect to this thing (whatever you've chosen). How? Use the answers from your Core Values exercise. But don't stop there:

3. Make several uncommon connections. Here's what I mean:

- A boring piece of writing chooses a common topic, makes common connections, and relates those connections in common language.
- A stand-out piece of writing chooses an UNcommon topic, makes UNcommon connections, and relates those connections through UNcommon language.

Boring example:

- Common topic: basketball
- Common connections: hard work, perseverance, teamwork
- Common language: "Basketball has really influenced me and my life."

Stand-out example:

- Uncommon topic: santur
- Uncommon connections: culture/heritage, social change, family
- Uncommon language: "...the santur sounds echoing through the Seven Hills of Jerusalem."

"But wait!" I hear you say. "Not everyone has an uncommon topic!" That's true. And not everyone is a writer. IT'S OKAY. If you have to focus on one of the three elements above, focus on uncommon connections. How? Like this:

First, brainstorm the cliché version of your topic.

How? Look at this Values Exercise and ask: What values would the typical response focus on?

Then agree not to focus on those values. Instead:

Brainstorm some uncommon connections. Ask: what are some unusual values that someone else's basketball/violin/mission trip essay might not focus on. Then:

4. Use those uncommon connections (i.e., values) as the basis for your outline, and focus on one paragraph per value (as in the Santur example above).

How to Write Essay Type B

For students who have not faced significant challenges but know what they want to study

The Secret to Writing This Type of Essay:



WRITE YOUR ESSAY BACKWARDS

One of my favorite ways to outline a Type B essay is to “write it backwards,” which essentially involves reverse engineering the essay using the [Montage Structure](#). Here’s how it works:

PART ONE: Essential Qualities

- * At the top of a blank sheet of paper in the center of the page write down the name of the career you’re likely to pursue.
- * Underneath that, on the right side, write “Qualities of an excellent [Write your career here: doctor/teacher/businessperson, etc.]”
- * Make a list of the qualities necessary to excel in whichever field you’ve chosen. If, for example, you want to study business, you might consider “ability to work well with others” and “leadership skills” on your list.
- * If you’re having trouble coming up with a list, refer to the “Values” sheet at the end of this document.
- * List at least five qualities along the right side of the paper. This is your “tell” column.

PART TWO: How I’ve Demonstrated these Qualities in My Life

- * On the left side of your page write at the top “How I’ve Demonstrated These Qualities in My Life.”
- * For each quality in your “tell” column, write down a specific moment/example from your life that **SHOWS** that you have developed this quality. (For example, if you wrote “ability to work well with others” in your right hand column, write in the left hand column a specific instance that shows you work well with others—the time you worked with a large group to organize the Dance Marathon at your school, for example. Or if you’ve written “good listener” in the right hand column you might describe how while volunteering at the hospital you found that the patients often felt comfortable sharing their life stories with you.)
- * Keep going until the left hand column is filled with examples that show the qualities that you tell in the right hand column. Remember: the left hand column will be “show” and the right hand column will be “tell.”

Example:

How I’ve Demonstrated These Qualities

- * After-school math tutoring
- * Designing my own shoes
- * Taking apart machines
- * Always asked questions as a kid

Qualities of a Great Endodontist

- * Desire to help others
- * Detail focused
- * Interested in how human body works
- * Curiosity

After you've finished the steps above, you'll have your basic outline. If you'd like to develop the outline a bit more, turn to page 50 and read the section on How to Create Outline 2.0.

If you're ready to start writing...

Some Tips for Writing a Type B Essay:

- * Before you begin writing the essay, list the values in chronological order--in other words, the order in which you developed the qualities--as this can help you see connections between the values and, sometimes, a larger progression. (Try it and see. Sometimes a story jumps out; it feels like magic.)
- * Think of the first $\frac{2}{3}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ of the essay as the "show," full of images and objects and details that illustrate your values without making the ending too obvious. (Example: if your essay opens with "I've always wanted to be a doctor," and your first paragraph is about playing "doctor" as a kid, your second paragraph is about helping people at your local hospital, etc., the essay might be kind of predictable unless there's an unexpected element--more on this in the next chapter.)
- * At some point--perhaps $\frac{2}{3}$ or $\frac{3}{4}$ through the essay--you'll probably want to mention your career.
- * Think of the last $\frac{1}{3}$ or $\frac{1}{4}$ of the essay as the "tell," in which you name the values and demonstrate the connections between the values and what you'd like to study.