Starting and Styling

**Ok…I know what I want to write about…how do I start?**  A student wanted to write about his summer experience volunteering at a hospital. This is how he opened his first draft:

*It was my third year summer as a volunteer at Christiana Care. I decided to devote my time at the hospital, hoping that I could learn and experience the duties of nurses and doctors. Each year, the doctors or nurses provided specific tasks to be done. This year, I was assisting nurses by monitoring patients, delivering food, and making beds.*

This is a pretty boring and predictable opening because it’s just exposition. We know where the essay is going – he’s going to talk about one or two of his experiences volunteering at the hospital and what that taught him. The second draft begins with more appeal:

*"Come on Mr. Blaire, just do a couple more!"*

*"Ok..." he replied with a soft groan. Mr. Blaire, an elderly man with a heart condition, was sitting in his wheelchair looking quite tired. Today, he had to lift a small bar twenty times, but as usual he had stopped at around five. No matter how much I pushed him to finish, all he would do was lift the bar with his wrists, exerting almost no energy at all.*

*"Can I go back to my room now?" Mr. Blaire insisted. Eventually, with the permission of the nurse, I pushed him back to his room so he could relax. Volunteering at the hospital had seemed like a great idea, but who knew I’d have patients like Mr. Blaire?*

The second version is so much better because it starts **in medias res** (in the middle of the action), it uses dialogue and it hooks the reader because we don’t initially know what’s going on. By the time the exposition arrives in line 7 (“Volunteering at the hospital seemed like a good idea…”), we had figured that this was probably about something like that. **Beginning in the middle of a story, using dialogue, and trying to limit the obvious exposition** are three great ways to start your essay.

**Ending the Essay**

Since you’ve started with a story, you then transition from the story to your “point”…and your “point” is different depending on what type of essay you’re writing (if it’s a “success/failure” essay, then you end by discussing how this success/failure shaped you…if it’s an “influential person” essay, you end by discussing how this person still influences you today…if it’s a “significant belief” essay, end by discussing how this belief affects decisions you make today.).

**I’ve finished a draft…now what?** Show it to someone. If they’re the kind of person who doesn’t want to hurt your feelings they’ll say something like, “It’s good!” or “I like it!” That’s not helpful criticism. Ask them, “If you think I should change one part, what part would it be?” Force them to pick at least one part they didn’t like. If the person is very critical, toughen up and listen to what they have to say. It doesn’t necessarily mean they’re right…it just means that you caused a reaction. Show it to someone else and see if they say the same thing. Listen to your heart—if you see the value in a piece of criticism given by someone you trust, you should probably make a change.

**However,** at a certain point, you should stop showing it to people and write a new draft, because eventually the advice and criticism will all start to run together. And a second draft often brings awareness to new ideas and methods of expression.

**Remember:** **No one…not Shakespeare, not Emily Bronte, not William Faulkner…wrote something perfect the first time. They all rewrote and did multiple drafts. Expect that to happen for your college essay, too.**