

# COLLEGE ESSAY BLUEPRINT



KRISTEN MOON, MBA



Step-by-step guide for writing  
a memorable personal statement

Including real essays that worked

Application Pieces .....	2
Essay Purpose .....	4
Essay Topic .....	5
Essay Layout .....	6
Opening Paragraph .....	7
Body of the Essay .....	12
Closing Paragraph .....	14
Metaphors & Similes .....	16
Verbs .....	19
Adjectives .....	20
Emotion Adjectives .....	21
Sensory Adjectives .....	22
Exclamation Points .....	23
Cut the Fat .....	24
Strengthen Your Verbs .....	25
Strengthen Your Adjectives .....	25
Grammar Review .....	26
Free Grammar Checker .....	31
Appendix—Real Essays .....	32
The Costco Essay—Brittany .....	32
The Mom Essay—Lyle .....	35
John Hopkins—Admission Staff	
Favorites .....	38
Math, Music & Football—Brenden .....	52
Family Values—Isabella .....	54
The Confession—Erica .....	56



## CONTENTS





## APPLICATION PIECES

---

### The Essay is a **PIECE** of the Application Puzzle

Is the essay the most important part of your application?

Nope.

Your transcript is the most critical factor.

No matter how stellar your essay, it certainly will not make up for four years of slacking off. The academic profile of a student is critical; it is the first hurdle an applicant must overcome in the admissions process.

### The academic profile is composed of:

- transcript
- class rank
- standardized testing scores

All A's are great, but college admission officers look at the rigor of your courses too. They are impressed by students who challenge themselves with a strenuous course load filled with AP and college level courses.

An 'A' in Symphonic Choir does not equal an 'A' in AP Physics. Difficulty matters. College admission officers have a keen "fluff class" radar.



## What if my high school does not offer many AP courses?

Admission officers look at course offerings at each high school, then they examine if the applicant has taken full advantage of all opportunities offered. Each student is compared to other students at the same high school. An applicant is not penalized if their high school offers limited advanced level courses. It is the admission officer's job to know which high schools are more challenging than others. An "A" at high school X may not equal an "A" at high school Y.

Second in line, right after the transcript, is standardized test scores.

I know what you're thinking: how come one test is so important? Yes, I agree. You can thank U.S News & World Report, and all the other publications that rank colleges, for that. Rankings are particularly significant to universities; they know students and parents read them and pay attention to them. It is a money maker for the university.

Guess one of the criteria they look at in determining rank? You got it: the average SAT/ACT score for the incoming freshman class.

Colleges are hesitant to accept students that bring down their rank. They will not openly and honestly admit this, but it's true. Your SAT/ACT test scores matter.



# ESSAY PURPOSE

---

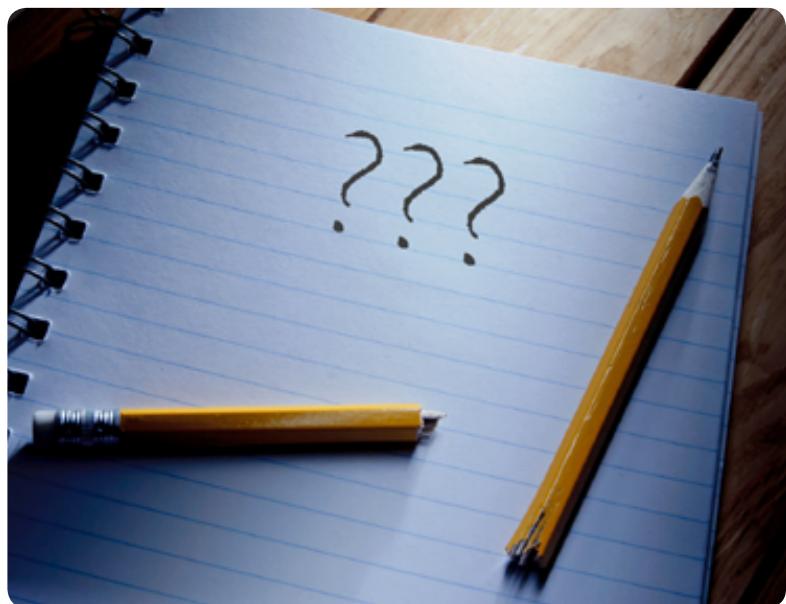
Ok, so now that we have covered how important your academic credentials are, next in line is the essay.

## What can you offer the colleges—besides the numbers?

This is where your essay comes in. The essay makes you three-dimensional: it is more than a few sheets of paper—it showcases your personality. It is your chance to show the university how awesome you are, how you are one-of-a-kind, and how lucky they would be to have you at their college.

## The essay must add something to your application

- Avoid reiterating things that can be easily found on your application.
- The essay must add something new.
- Don't try to summarize all your extracurricular activities and accomplishments. Remember, this can easily be seen on your application.





# ESSAY TOPIC

---

Sometimes a “regular” event in your life can serve as a great essay topic. Often times, students try hard to think of monumental things that have happened to them and often get stuck on finding a worthwhile topic. The essay topic does not need to be monumental; it needs to be personal.

Read over some of the questions below to help get some ideas flowing.

## Brainstorming Questions

- What makes your family different from other families?
- Does your family celebrate cultural holidays? Do any of these hold a great significance to you?
- Do you have a special family tradition?
- What single achievement are you most proud of?
- What is the nicest thing you’ve done for someone?
- Has helping someone changed your perspective?
- What do you aspire to be?

- What do you hope to be doing 10 years from now?
- What is the greatest challenge you overcame?
- Describe a time you felt empathy for someone else.
- Describe a time you were out of your comfort zone.
- Describe a time you received kindness even though you didn’t deserve it.
- Describe a time you showed kindness even though they didn’t deserve it.

The topic you select for your personal statement should feel easy to write about and expresses something truly special about who you are as a person.

The essay is not the time to be modest. Now, I am not saying be boastful or arrogant. Use your story to highlight your good qualities.



# ESSAY LAYOUT

---

Think of the essay, or personal statement, as a narrative. The narrative is a gripping story about you.

## A narrative essay can discuss:

- a personal journey
- an encounter that changed you in some way
- your quest for the truth
- a story of how you defeated a problem
- a personal story of something that has helped shaped you
- an experience that led you to your chosen major

---

**A narrative essay can be broken down into three parts: Opening, Body, and Closing.**

---



Your essay must be memorable

## OPENING PARAGRAPH

---

The opening paragraph must grab the reader's attention. It must be riveting and leave them wanting to read more.

Keep in mind, each admission officer reads essays for eight to ten hours a day during application season. That's a lot of essays!

In order for your essay to jump off the page and into the admit pile, it must be memorable. It must make them feel something. It must be personal.

My favorite opening paragraphs involve a snippet of a larger story: an anecdote.

The anecdote should be a short story about a real experience in your life. Anecdotes are a personal way to open the essay. The anecdote can detail a conversation, encounter, or any moment in time that had an impact on you.

A good opening paragraph plunges the reader right in the middle of your story.

Below is **Isabella's opening**. This is an example of an anecdote. The reader is thrown in the middle of her story.





My small body and head of curly hair trotted over to the refrigerator in search of some butter for my bread. I shifted some cans of half-opened Goya beans and the remnant of a brick of dulce de leche that had seen better days. After much shuffling, I spotted the big brown container of margarine. Carefully placing the tub on the kitchen table and readying for my “feast,” I opened the container. To my dismay, it was filled with arroz con pollo. My eyes tightened and my stomach made Chewbacca noises. Maybe I could mash the dulce de leche on top of the bread.

*\*The full essay can be viewed in the Appendix.*



Hook your reader with a personal story. Make them want to keep reading to find out where this story is leading.

I know what you are thinking. My life is boring, I don't have an interesting story to tell.

Everyone has a personal struggle. Sharing the story of this struggle makes a dull topic more fascinating.

Describe a problem, situation, or encounter in your life. Make the reader feel like they are there with you.

Detail the five senses.

1. What do you see?
2. What do you smell?
3. Any sounds?
4. How does it feel? What is the texture?
5. What does it taste like?



The opening must be gripping and leaving them wanting to find out more.

End the opening paragraph with a hook. The last sentence must be thought-provoking and a bit

mysterious. The reader will have no choice but to keep going.

Below is **Lyle's opening**. It's personal and descriptive; I can visualize it.

While resting comfortably in my air-conditioned bedroom one hot summer night, I received a phone call from my mom. She asked me softly, "Lyle, can you come down and clean up the restaurant?"

Slightly annoyed, I put on my sandals and proceeded downstairs. Mixing the hot water with cleaning detergents, I was ready to clean up the restaurant floor. Usually the process was painstakingly slow: I had to first empty

a bucket full of dirty water, only to fill it up again with boiling water. But that night I made quick work and finished in five minutes. My mom, unsatisfied, snatched the mop from me and began to demonstrate the "proper way" to clean the floor. She demanded a redo. I complied, but she showed no signs of approval. As much as I wanted to erupt that night, I had good reasons to stay calm.

*\*The full essay can be viewed in the Appendix.*

Can you spot the hook?

Here it is:

---

**As much as I  
wanted to erupt that  
night, I had good  
reasons to stay  
calm.**

---

This hook makes me wonder: what is his reason to stay calm?

I need to keep reading to find out.

Sharing your personal story isn't always easy. You have to be brave enough to admit your own doubts. Opening yourself up and being vulnerable is a powerful way to bond with your reader.

## Elements of a strong opening

- **THE WHY**

End the opening paragraph with the reader wanting more. They want to keep reading. They are asking why? Where is this story going?

- **THE SURPRISE**

It is good to startle the reader; make them sit up straight and pay attention.

Let's take a look at some examples of how to use the surprise element.

- My happiest moments are when I am high.
  - You are a pilot—flying planes is your passion.
- I grew up a killer.
  - Describe the story of becoming a vegetarian.
- I was a police officer for three months.
  - Describe your summer job as a camp counselor for young children. You were tasked with the job of keeping the children safe and things under control.
- I enjoy being a parent.
  - Describe your experience caring for newborn kittens at the volunteer animal hospital.





- **THE CONFESSION**

By revealing something personal about yourself, you establish trust with the reader. They become your confidant.

Let's take a look at some examples

- Daisy is a speech and debate national tournament winner
  - Confession: She has a fear of public speaking. Her essay will detail how she overcame/managed
- Kevin is captain of the football team
  - Confession: He was a chubby kid and has had to work hard to manage his weight.
- Lesley is ranked #1 in her high school and is valedictorian
  - Confession: She is dyslexic and has had to work diligently to overcome this learning obstacle.



# BODY OF THE ESSAY

---

The body is where we get into the details. Elaborate on the opening paragraph. At the same time, highlight your personal qualities. Show the admission staff what type of person you are. Show them through your story.



## Show & Tell

The essay is a time to SHOW, not TELL. Many students spell things out in a blunt way in their essays. Instead, use your story to communicate the message you want the admissions staff to hear. Paint a picture with your words.

## Examples of TELLING:

- I overcame a large obstacle
- I conquered a difficult experience
- I dedicate my time to helping others
- I embrace different cultures
- I am open to new experiences
- I enjoy diverse environments



## Instead, **SHOW:**

- TELL: I overcame a large obstacle
- SHOW: Describe how you worked at a summer job that put you outside of your comfort zone
- TELL: I dedicate my time to helping others
- SHOW: Discuss your volunteer experiences
- TELL: I embrace different cultures
- SHOW: Describe the diverse organizations or events you participate in

Let your story speak for itself. The reader will certainly get the message. The goal is for the reader to feel like they are in the room with you. They see what you saw, smell what you smelled, and hear what you heard. Paint a vivid picture with your words.







# CLOSING PARAGRAPH

---

The closing paragraph is the second most important piece of your essay, right behind the opening paragraph. It must tie everything together.

Avoid these words. They are boring and state the obvious.

- In conclusion
- In summary
- Finally

Make reference to opening paragraph and main idea of the essay. Wrap it all together. Below are a few ways to end your essay.

- A similar anecdote.
- A quotation.
- Lessons learned and a positive plan for the future.

Your story reaches its climax.

But, what's the climax?

It's the solution to your personal struggle. How did you cope? How did you move forward? How did you come out a stronger person as a result?

Make reference to the opening paragraph. Tie it all together.



Below is **Isabella's closing** paragraph. She references the arroz con pollo in the butter container, from the opening paragraph. She tied the essay together.

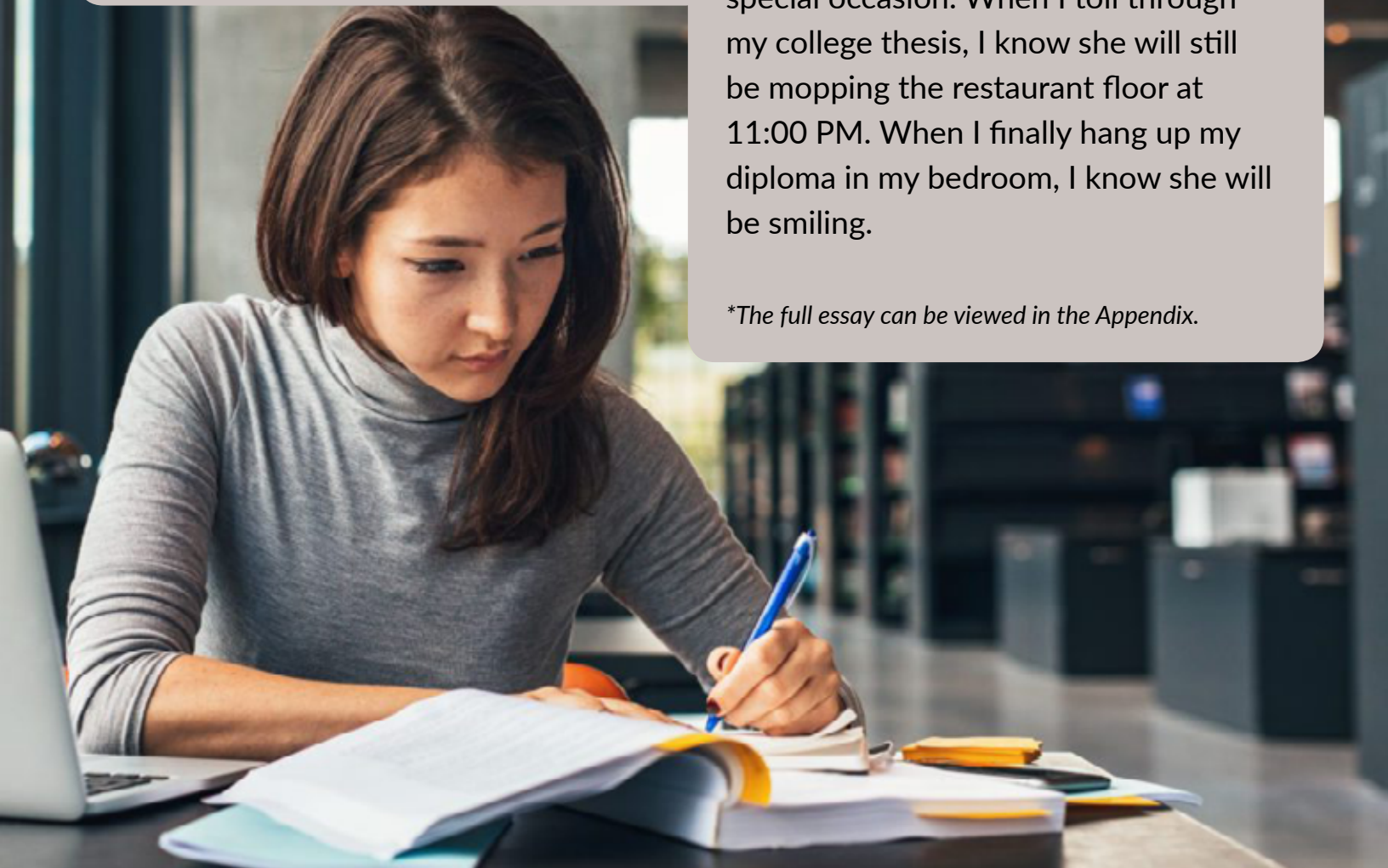
The laughs we exchange keep me warm, my grandmother's advice, *sigue adelante*, or keeping moving forward, resonates with me, the arroz con pollo in the butter container satisfies me and our love for each other fuels me with drive to excel. We make do everyday and through our doing and making I know in my heart, the best is yet to come.

*\*The full essay can be viewed in the Appendix.*

Below is **Lyle's closing** paragraph. He concluded his essay with a strong closing. Like Isabella, he makes reference to his opening paragraph. He references mopping, which was first mentioned in the opening paragraph. He also references his mom; the main character of his narrative.

In hindsight, I'm astounded at the ease with which I can compose all my views of this amazing woman on a piece of paper, but lack the nerve to express my gratitude in conversations. Perhaps, actions will indeed speak louder than words. When I graduate on June 1st, I know she will buy a dress to honor the special occasion. When I toil through my college thesis, I know she will still be mopping the restaurant floor at 11:00 PM. When I finally hang up my diploma in my bedroom, I know she will be smiling.

*\*The full essay can be viewed in the Appendix.*





**Make your writing vibrant**

## **METAPHORS & SIMILES**

---

### **Metaphors**

A metaphor is often referred to as the language of comparison. It is a figure of speech in which a word or phrase is applied to an object or action to which it is not literally applicable.

Rule of thumb: Do not use a metaphor you have heard before. Overused metaphors will make your writing stale. Create your own unique metaphor.

“

**Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.**

”

*—George Orwell*





### Cliché Metaphors (to avoid):

- broken heart
- cold feet
- couch potato
- early bird
- moral compass
- break the ice

### Unique Metaphors:

- zebra hair
- lion temperament
- zigzag emotions
- cotton candy words
- The lawn was a plush green carpet
- The sun was an orange tangerine

## Simile

- A simile uses the words 'like' or 'as' to describe something by comparing it to something else. The words 'like' or 'as' signal that a comparison is being made.



**A metaphor is like a simile.**



*—Steven Wright*

### Cliché Simile (to avoid):

- white as snow
- as big as a mountain
- bright as the sun
- straight as an arrow







Metaphors and similes work best when they're simple, unexpected, and concrete.

### Tips:

- Create a quick picture rather than a lengthy story. If it requires a lot of explaining you risk losing the reader's attention.
- Try making your metaphors sensory; let the reader experience your words. When readers can see, feel, smell, taste, or hear something, they're more likely to engage and remember. Bring the reader into the moment with you.

### Some examples:

- The play was like a cold coffee. After one sip, I've had enough.
- She stands out like a single soprano amid a choir of baritones.





# VERBS

---

Strong verbs engage your senses and allow the reader to visualize actions.

Strong verbs are precise and concrete.

Weak verbs are abstract and generic. They don't help you visualize a scene.

## Examples of weak verbs are:

- to be
- to provide
- to add
- to utilize

You can't picture these words. Can you picture "to utilize"?

For instance, "to walk" is stronger than "to go" because it gives you an indication of how someone moved. But stronger options would be: to stroll, to hike, to shuffle, to trudge, to stride, or to skip.

You can't picture "provide feedback," but you can visualize "shouting," "lecturing," and "scribbling notes."

When selecting verb choices, ask yourself if you can be more specific. Can your reader visualize the action?







# ADJECTIVES

---

Don't load up on too many adjectives. Adjectives make your sentences longer, which requires more effort from the reader. They can weigh the sentence down.

Overindulgence in adjectives causes your writing to be verbose and cumbersome.

Choose your adjectives wisely. Beware of over-the-top or wishy-washy adjectives.

## Examples:

- A wondrous evening (over-the-top)
- innovative person (overused)
- sophisticated taste (wishy-washy)

What do these adjective add? Not much.

Instead, make abstract concepts concrete by appealing to the senses.

Describe how the evening was wondrous, how you are an innovative person, and what makes your taste sophisticated. Try to use analogies and emotional words to describe your story to the reader.

## How to cut fluffy adjectives from your essay:

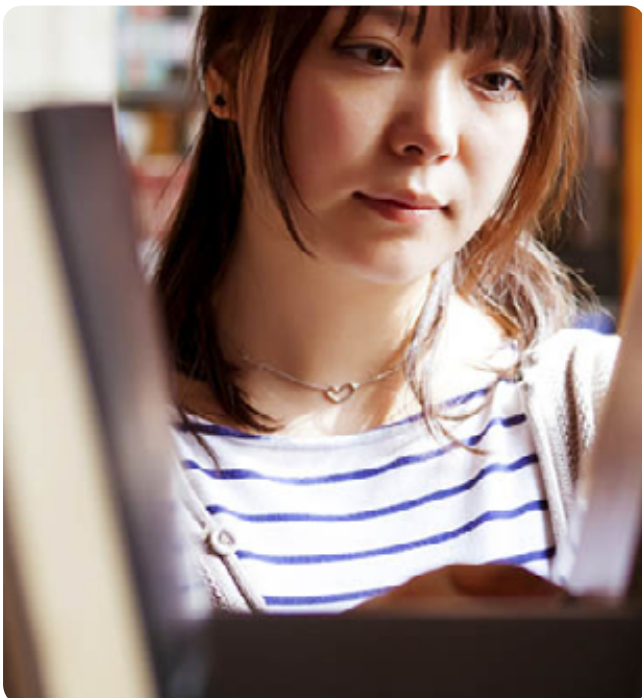
- If the meaning of your sentence doesn't change when leaving out an adjective, skip it.



- Use a stronger noun if it means you can leave out an adjective.
  - Ex: A crisis is better than a severe problem.
  - Ex: A gala is better than an extravagant party.
- Avoid using very and really.
  - Ex: Delighted is better than very happy.
  - Ex: An action-packed movie is better than a really good movie.

## Emotion & Sensory Adjectives

When selecting adjectives, try for ones that evoke emotion or appeal to the senses.

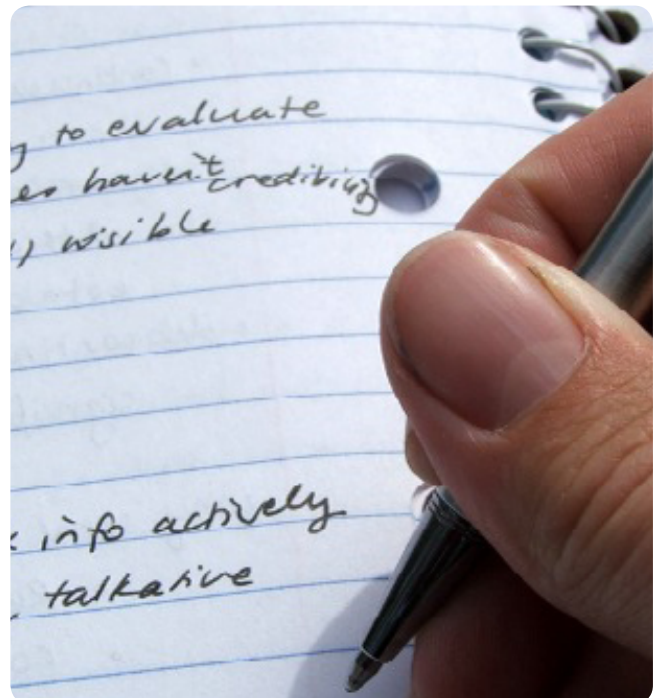


## Emotion-Rich Adjectives

- Emotion-rich adjectives make your readers feel something, and they will remember how you made them feel.
- Emotion-rich adjectives can appeal to fear, anger, enjoyment, nostalgia, or empathy.

## Examples:

- a jubilant child
- a spirited woman
- a serene afternoon





# Sensory Adjectives

Sensory adjectives make abstract ideas more impactful and memorable.

## Sensory adjectives can be:

- visual (bright or drab)
- tactile (sticky or polished)
- related to sound (fizzy or chirpy)
- taste (refreshing or boring)
- smell (stale or stuffy)

## Examples:

- Stories can be exciting or bland
- The room can be drab or stuffy
- Your day can be rough or smooth



# EXCLAMATION POINTS

---

Avoid excess use of exclamation marks!

Instead of the exclamation mark, try to find the right word.

## Examples:

Go from this: It's big!

To this: It's gigantic.

Go from this: That was brave!

To this: That was heroic.

Go from this: She is beautiful!

To this: She is breathtakingly gorgeous.

---

**Power words are  
more effective than  
exclamation marks.**

---



# CUT THE FAT

---

Put your essay on a diet.

Tighten your sentences. Cut out unnecessary words. When you have a limited word count, every word must count.

---

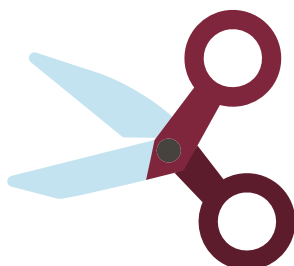
## Don't pad your essay with empty filler words

---

Grammar expletives make your writing bloated and can be eliminated.

They begin with the words *it*, *here*, or *there* followed by a form of the verb *to be*.

Common constructions include *it is*, *it was*, *it won't*, *it takes*, *here is*, *there is*, *there will be*.



## Let's look at some examples:

- Before: It's fun to write
- After: Writing is fun
- Before: It takes time to write
- After: Writing takes time
- Before: There are many people who write
- After: Many people write
- Before: There's nothing better than writing
- After: Nothing's better than writing

**TIP:** Use your word processor's find functionality and search for *there*, *here*, and *it* and determine if you've used an expletive.



# Strengthen your verbs

Get rid of wordy verbs and use strong verbs instead.

## Let's look at some examples:

- Before: He is writing
- After: He writes
- Before: Students are in love with him
- After: Students love him
- Before: Handout
- After: Distribute
- Before: Find out
- After: Discover
- Before: Make it clearer
- After: Clarify
- Before: I can't make it to the class
- After: I can't attend the class
- Before: He went to Europe
- After: He traveled to Europe

# Strengthen your adjectives

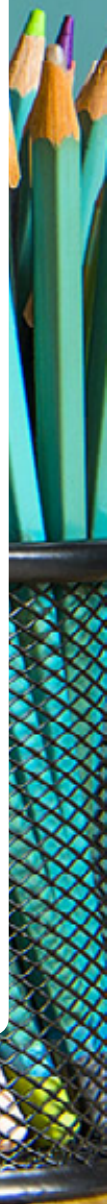
Certain words, like really and very, usually signal a weak adjective.

Don't replace an exclamation mark by the words very or really.

Very/really is bland and almost meaningless.

## Let's look at some examples:

- Before: Really bad
- After: Terrible
- Before: Really good
- After: Great
- Before: Very big
- After: Huge
- Before: Very beautiful
- After: Gorgeous





# GRAMMAR REVIEW

---

Common grammar mistakes to avoid:

## 1. They're vs. Their vs. There

**RULE:** "They're" is the same as saying "they are"; this is a contraction.

**EXAMPLE:** *They're on the way to the arena right now.*

**RULE:** "Their" is possessive; denoting an object belonging to a person or group.

**EXAMPLE:** *The other couples are bringing their children with them.*

**RULE:** "There" is referring to a place.

**EXAMPLE:** *We can find our seats when we get there.*

## 2. Your vs. You're



**RULE:** "Your" is possessive; denoting an object belonging to the person you are speaking to.

**EXAMPLE:** *Do you need to take your dog to the veterinarian?*

**RULE:** "You're" is a contraction, the same as saying "you are".

**EXAMPLE:** *You're a cat person.*



### 3. Its vs. It's

**RULE:** “Its” indicates a characteristic of something.

Example: This tire has lost its tread.

**RULE:** “It’s” is another contraction; the same as saying, “it is”.

**EXAMPLE:** *It’s time to replace all four tires.*



### 4. Passive Voice

**RULE:** Passive voice is when something is **happening to** the object of a sentence, rather than that object **doing** an action.

**EXAMPLE:** *The coffee steamed (active) as it was poured (passive) into the cup.*



### 5. Affect vs. Effect

**RULE:** “Affect” is a verb; to affect some person or thing.

**EXAMPLE:** *She affected his emotions.*

**RULE:** “Effect” is a noun; to have an effect on a person or thing.

**EXAMPLE:** *His smile had an overwhelming effect on her.*





#### 6. Me vs. I

**RULE:** When it is something you could do alone, you will use “I”, instead of “me”.

**EXAMPLE:** *I am going to the store; or (My friends and I) are going to the store. Would you like to come with me (us)?*

#### 7. To vs. Too

**RULE:** “To” is used when going or sending someone or something.

**EXAMPLE:** *Please take this package to the post office and mail it to my sister.*

**RULE:** “Too” is another way of saying “also”.

**EXAMPLE:** *While you are out running errands, go grocery shopping too.*

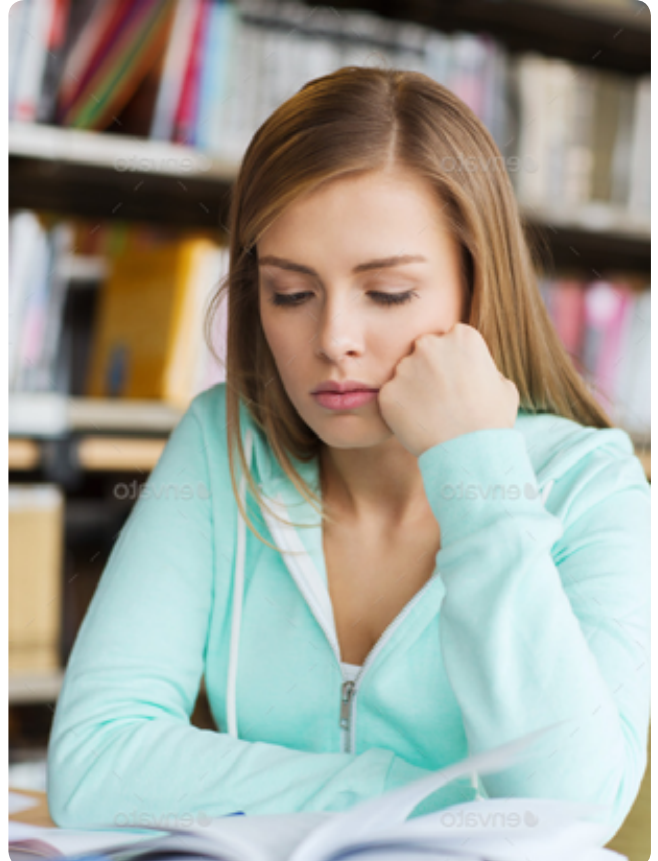
#### 8. Who vs. Whom vs. Whose vs. Who's

**RULE:** When referring to a he/she, use “who”. When referring to him/her, use “whom”.

**EXAMPLE:** *Who reserved this table? (Did he reserve it, or did she?) To whom do I need to speak to resolve this? (Do I need to speak to him, or her?)*

**RULE:** “Whose” is possessive, but “who's” is another contraction, meaning “who is”.

**EXAMPLE:** *Whose wallet is this? Who's in charge of Lost and Found?*





## 9. “Alot” vs. A lot vs. Allot

**RULE:** “Alot” is not a word; it’s a misspelling of “a lot” which means “many” or “several”, etc.

**EXAMPLE:** *There are a lot of weeds growing in the backyard.*

**RULE:** To “allot” is to designate something, like time, for a specific purpose.

**EXAMPLE:** *Teachers recommend allotting at least two hours per evening for homework.*



## 10. Then vs. Than

**RULE:** “Then” is used in reference to time.

**EXAMPLE:** *We’ll meet you in the parking lot after the game; we can decide what to have for dinner then.*



**RULE:** “Than” is used when comparing two things.

**EXAMPLE:** *I prefer sushi rather than pasta.*

## 11. Use of Commas

**RULE:** Commas are used to indicate a pause in a sentence, when ideas are related.

**EXAMPLE:** *We were planning to go to the beach today, but it’s too cold, and it looks like it may rain.*

## 12. Semicolons

**RULE:** Semicolons are used to indicate a pause in a sentence between two different but connected ideas.

**EXAMPLE:** *I haven’t had a chance to call her back; do you think she will want tickets, too?*







### 13. Farther vs. Further

**RULE:** “Farther” is used in terms of distance.

**EXAMPLE:** *The lake is a few miles farther beyond the campsite.*

**RULE:** “Further” is used in terms of progress.

**EXAMPLE:** *No spoilers; he’s read further in the book than I have.*



### 14. Between vs. Among

**RULE:** “Between” is usually used when referring to two objects, and “among” for three or more objects, often in a group. However, “between” can also be used when naming distinct objects; two, three, or more.

**EXAMPLE:** *Your choices are between fruit or cake. Or: You can choose fruit or cake, among several dessert options. Or: You can choose between fruit, cake, pie, ice cream, or pudding.*



# FREE GRAMMAR CHECKER

---

Even the best writers can use some help sometimes. Grammarly is a free grammar checker; it is also one of my favorite writing tools. The 'free' part is a wonderful feature.

It is an app that once downloaded can be used to check for spelling and grammar in your email, Word docs, and more.

<https://app.grammarly.com>

In addition to Grammarly, don't forget about good old-fashioned spell check. Every time you save a new version of your essay, run it through spell check first.



# APPENDIX—REAL

## ESSAYS

---

This section contains essays that worked. Essays that helped land students in their dream university.

### The Costco Essay—Brittany

This essay was published on Business Insider and countless other essay writing blogs. Brittany was accepted into four Ivy League universities, plus Stanford. This is her “Ivy League Essay” about Costco.

Managing to break free from my mother’s grasp, I charged. With arms flailing and chubby legs fluttering beneath me, I was the ferocious two-year-old rampaging through Costco on a Saturday morning. My mother’s eyes widened in horror as I jettisoned my churro; the cinnamon sugar rocket gracefully sliced its way through the air while I continued my spree. I

sprinted through the aisles, looking up in awe at the massive bulk products that towered over me. Overcome with wonder, I wanted to touch and taste, to stick my head into industrial sized freezers, to explore every crevice. I was a conquistador, but rather than searching the land for El Dorado, I scoured aisles for free samples. Before inevitably being whisked away into a

---

**Prompt:**  
**Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

---





shopping cart, I scaled a mountain of plush toys and surveyed the expanse that lay before me: the kingdom of Costco.

Notorious for its oversized portions and dollar fifty hot dog combo, Costco is the apex of consumerism. From the days spent being toted around in a shopping cart to when I was finally tall enough to reach lofty sample trays, Costco has endured a steady presence throughout my life. As a veteran Costco shopper, I navigate the aisles of foodstuffs, thrusting the majority of my weight upon a generously filled shopping cart whose enormity juxtaposes my small frame. Over time, I've developed a habit of observing fellow patrons tote their carts piled with frozen burritos, cheese puffs, tubs of ice cream, and weight loss supplements. Perusing the aisles gave me time to ponder. Who needs three pounds of sour cream? Was cultured yogurt any more well-mannered than its uncultured counterpart? Costco gave birth to my unfettered curiosity.

While enjoying an obligatory hot dog, I did not find myself thinking about the 'all beef' goodness that Costco boasted. I instead considered finitudes

and infinitudes, unimagined uses for tubs of sour cream, the projectile motion of said tub when launched from an eighty-foot shelf or maybe when pushed from a speedy cart by a scrawny seventeen-year-old. I contemplated the philosophical: If there exists a thirty-three-ounce jar of Nutella, do we really have free will? I experienced a harsh physics lesson while observing a shopper who had no evident familiarity of inertia's workings. With a cart filled to overflowing, she made her way towards the sloped exit, continuing to push and push while steadily losing control until the cart escaped her and went crashing into a concrete column, 52" plasma screen TV and all. Purchasing the yuletide hickory smoked ham inevitably led to a conversation between my father and me about Andrew Jackson's controversiality. There was no questioning Old Hickory's dedication; he was steadfast in his beliefs and pursuits—qualities I am compelled to admire, yet his morals were crooked. We both found the ham to be more likable—and tender.

I adopted my exploratory skills, fine-tuned by Costco, towards my intellectual endeavors. Just as



I sampled buffalo chicken dip or chocolate truffles, I probed the realms of history, dance, and biology, all in pursuit of the ideal cart—one overflowing with theoretical situations and notions both silly and serious. I sampled calculus, cross-country running, scientific research, all of which are now household favorites. With cart in hand, I do what scares me; I absorb the warehouse that is the world. Whether it be through attempting aerial yoga, learning how to chart blackbody radiation using astronomical software, or dancing

in front of hundreds of people, I am compelled to try any activity that interests me in the slightest.

My intense desire to know, to explore beyond the bounds of rational thought; this is what defines me. Costco fuels my insatiability and cultivates curiosity within me at a cellular level. Encoded to immerse myself in the unknown, I find it difficult to complacently accept the “what”; I want to hunt for the “whys” and dissect the “hows”. In essence, I subsist on discovery.

- The opening paragraph leaves you wanting more. Where is this essay going? The reader is eager to keep going to find out.
- Costco is a metaphor to the larger world. It shows Brittany’s curiosity and sense of wonder. She shows her curiosity through her story, instead of simply telling the reader: I am a curious person.
- She took a mundane topic (Costco) and made it interesting. Many students get stuck trying to find a life-changing experience to write about. Brittany took a simple story and used it to describe herself.
- Costco is a relatable topic. Who hasn’t had a \$1.50 hot dog + soda at Costco? Any reader can relate to this story and visualize it.



# The Mom Essay—Lyle

This essay was published in The New York Times and, just like the Costco essay, many essay writing blogs. This is the essay that helped Lyle get accepted to NYU.



---

**Prompt: Some students have a background, identity, interest, or talent that is so meaningful they believe their application would be incomplete without it. If this sounds like you, then please share your story.**

---

While resting comfortably in my air-conditioned bedroom one hot summer night, I received a phone call from my mom. She asked me softly, “Lyle, can you come down and clean up the restaurant?”

Slightly annoyed, I put on my sandals and proceeded downstairs. Mixing the hot water with cleaning detergents, I was ready to clean up the restaurant floor. Usually the process was painstakingly slow: I had to first empty a bucket full of dirty water, only to fill

it up again with boiling water. But that night I made quick work and finished in five minutes. My mom, unsatisfied, snatched the mop from me and began to demonstrate the “proper way” to clean the floor. She demanded a redo. I complied, but she showed no signs of approval. As much as I wanted to erupt that night, I had good reasons to stay calm.

Growing up in rural China, my mom concerned herself not with what she would wear to school every day, but





rather how she could provide for her family. While many of her classmates immediately joined the work force upon completing high school, my mom had other aspirations. She wanted to be a doctor. But when her college rejections arrived, my mother, despite being one of the strongest individuals I know, broke down. My grandparents urged her to pursue another year of education. She refused. Instead, she took up a modestly paying job as a teacher in order to lessen the financial burden on the family. Today, more than twenty years have passed, yet the walls of my parents' bedroom still do not bear a framed college degree with the name "Tang Xiao Geng" on it.

In contrast, when I visit my friends, I see the names of elite institutions adorning the living room walls. I am conscious that these framed diplomas are testaments to the hard work and accomplishments of my friends' parents and siblings. Nevertheless, the sight of them was an irritating reminder of the disparity between our households. I was not the upper middle class kid on Park Avenue. Truth be told, I am just some kid from Brooklyn.

Instead of diplomas and accolades, my parents' room emits a smell from the restaurant uniforms they wear seven days a week, all year round. It's funny how I never see my mom in makeup, expensive jeans, lavish dresses, or even just casual, everyday clothing that I often see other moms wearing. Yet, one must possess something extraordinary to be able to stand in front of a cash register for 19 years and do so with pride and determination.

On certain nights, I would come home sweaty, dressed in a gold button blazer and colored pants, unmistakable evidence of socializing. In contrast, my mom appears physically and emotionally worn-out from work. But, she still asks me about my day. Consumed by guilt, I find it hard to answer her.

Moments such as those challenge my criteria of what constitutes true success. My mother, despite never going to college, still managed to make a difference in my life. Tomorrow, she will put on her uniform with just as much dignity as a businesswoman would her power suit. What is her secret? She wholeheartedly believes that her



son's future is worth the investment. The outcome of my education will be vindication of that belief.

In hindsight, I'm astounded at the ease with which I can compose all my views of this amazing woman on a piece of paper, but lack the nerve to express my gratitude in conversations. Perhaps,

actions will indeed speak louder than words. When I graduate on June 1st, I know she will buy a dress to honor the special occasion. When I toil through my college thesis, I know she will still be mopping the restaurant floor at 11:00 PM. When I finally hang up my diploma in my bedroom, I know she will be smiling.

- My favorite part of this essay is that it makes you feel. It evokes a sense of empathy and compassion. Truthfully, it evoked a few tears in my eyes the first time I read it. I believe it is impossible not to like Lyle. Being likable is an important component in the admissions process.
- What a great way to end a paragraph: "As much as I wanted to erupt that night, I had good reasons to stay calm." The reader wants to know: what is your good reason to stay calm? It leaves them wanting more. A great example of how to end a paragraph (a hook).



# John Hopkins— Admission Staff Favorites

Each year the Admissions Staff at John Hopkins publishes a few essays from their admitted students that stood out. They even tell you what they liked about them.

Six of our favorites are below.

More examples can be found at:  
<https://apply.jhu.edu/apply/essays-that-worked>

## The Musketeer in Me— Vikas

One fundamental rule of reincarnation is that you do not know your past life. Well, it seems as though I broke that rule. In fact, I am absolutely certain that my past reincarnation was none other than d'Artagnan, the fourth musketeer.

Knowing that is a gift. It makes the arduous process of describing the entirety of my personality in 500 words or less, possible. I can simply toss Alexandre Dumas' biographical recount of my past life and say, "That's me," and those two words would mean everything. They make me that



noble and heroic Gasconian that set out to Paris with nothing more than a yellow, hairless pony and a dream of grandeur.

Alas, times have changed. The Musketeers, dueling, and horses, they have all become relics of the past.





A new era and new circumstances bring a different life. Now, I am a first generation, 17-year-old American living in Jersey. My yellow, hairless horse is an old, squeaky Toyota Camry: its modern equivalent. My stunning silver-gilded rapier and armour have been replaced by a BIC pen and legal pad.

However, all those changes are superficial. Inside, I still dream of the same grandeur. I dream, with every fiber of my body, that one day I will become a Newtonian giant holding a Nobel Prize. That one day I will support the innovation and ingenuity that fuels our evolving world. The only challenge is that there are millions of people that share the same dream as me, so what makes me different?

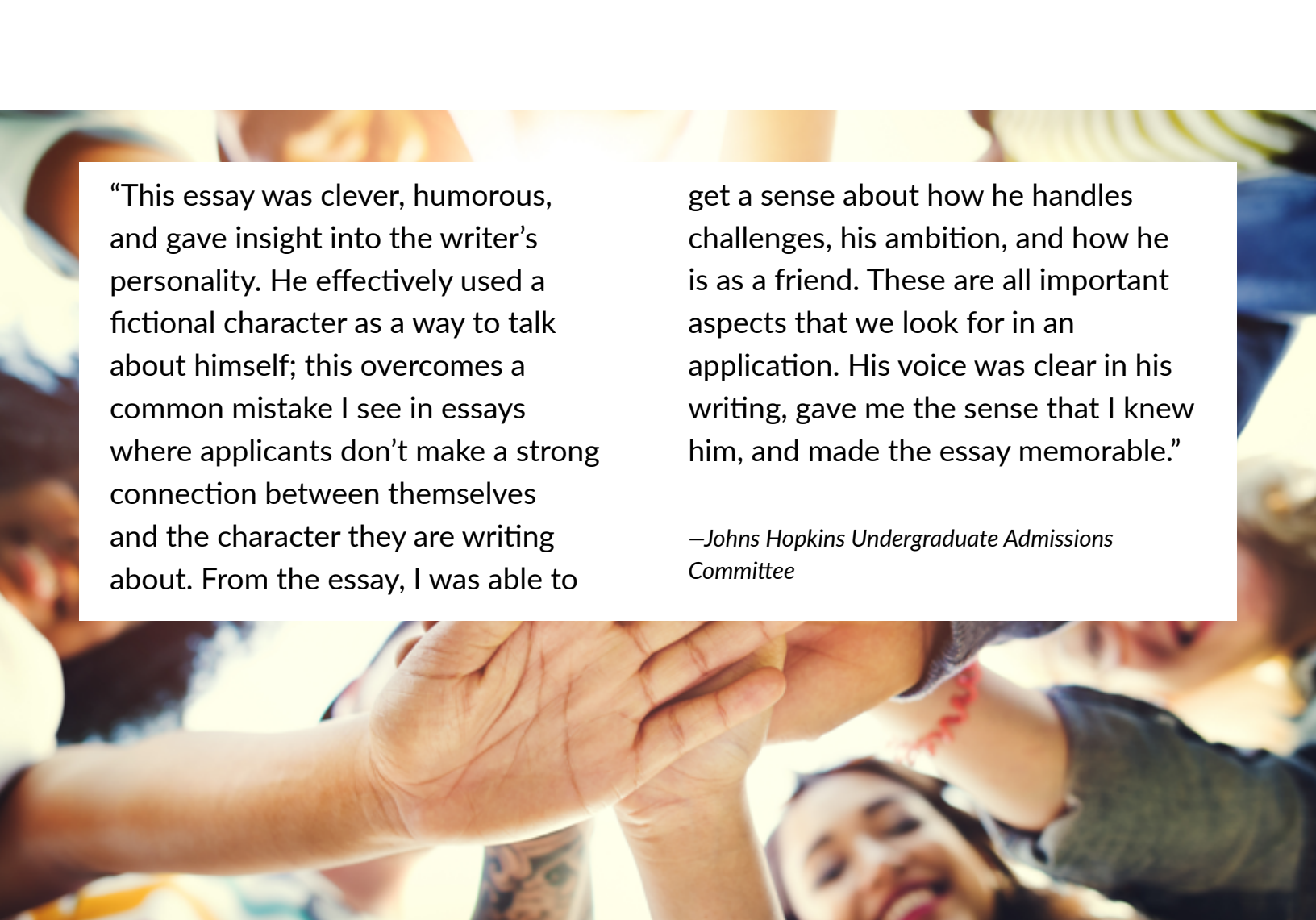
Well, even if the shell of who I am has changed, I am still d'Artagnan at heart. That means being young, foolish, and audacious all at the same time. With pride, I charge first and then think second, knowing that my intuition and passions will forge my path. With conviction, I duel my enemies under the slightest provocation (as long as you consider a pen a weapon). The result is that I've been beaten to the

ground an ungodly number of times. But, from those moments, I learned the most. And, in those adventures, where I got bruised and battered, I had friends that brought to life "All for one and one for all."

Yet, the greatest part of being d'Artagnan that I believe in myself to the point that I believe in something larger than myself. I believe in the people around me, my community, my country, and even the world. And I believe every day is going to be better than the one before it.

So, when times like these come, being d'Artagnan makes me strong. The following months are going to change everything. My town. My home. My friends. Everything is going to become college and that proposition is as equally frightening as it is exhilarating. Anyone who says otherwise is lying. Yet, with all those changes, being d'Artagnan is my constant. It is what is going to help me not only overcome the challenges brewing in the future, but also excel. And, if the past is any indication of the future, then the Nobel Prize already has my name written on it.





“This essay was clever, humorous, and gave insight into the writer’s personality. He effectively used a fictional character as a way to talk about himself; this overcomes a common mistake I see in essays where applicants don’t make a strong connection between themselves and the character they are writing about. From the essay, I was able to

get a sense about how he handles challenges, his ambition, and how he is as a friend. These are all important aspects that we look for in an application. His voice was clear in his writing, gave me the sense that I knew him, and made the essay memorable.”

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee

## Spy—Elana

Ten years ago, I was a spy.

Secret identities, awesome spy gadgets and undercover operations consumed my imagination. This was serious business and I took training seriously.

My brother was Public Enemy No.1. He’d come home and I’d use Mission Impossible stealth moves to follow him

everywhere. I’d pick his bedroom door with a nail file and steal his allowance. I’d climb the tree outside his window and take reconnaissance photos.

The proudest moment of my young espionage career was Operation Secret Crate. One Saturday afternoon, Mom drove up with my brother and his friends, who were coming over to play Grand Theft Auto, make stupid jokes and eat junk food. My mission: eavesdrop.



My high-tech tool was a plastic moving crate, two and a half feet square, forgotten behind the living room couch. It had eye-holes big enough for an intrepid spy.

I was small and flexible, but fitting inside that crate was a stretch. Still, the mission was on. Quick jumping jacks and toe touches to loosen the limbs. Squat, knees to chest, crate over head...

Slam! The boys banged through the front door and swarmed onto the couch. Peering out I saw tennis shoes and hairy ankles. My heart thumped so loud I worried it would overpower their excited voices and the hum of the X-Box. The smell of Pizza Hut cheese sticks was in the air.

The moment of truth. Would they notice the girl crouched in the crate inches away?

One minute. Five minutes. Ten minutes. They didn't notice! Fifteen minutes. Twenty minutes. Still safe. Thirty minutes. I realized the flaw in my plan. I might learn their secrets, but my body was so contorted and aching that

soon I might never walk again.

Something had to be done. Something bold, drastic, unthinkable.

ARGGHHAHGHGHGHGHGHGAHDHG  
HGHHGHGHG!!!!!!

I shouted at the top of my lungs, flung the crate off me and jumped onto the couch. They all screamed. The cheese sticks went flying. The coke spilled. My brother, for once, had nothing to say.

Elana, girl of mystery, strikes, I said. Be warned.

I strutted out of the living room.

Since those first spy trainings, I've never stopped preparing for a future clandestine career. I've cracked codes





in computer science and cracked jokes with a CIA operative. I've slogged through 10k of mud at the Camp Pendleton mud run and four years of Chinese in high school. I've flown planes with the Civil Air Patrol in Santa Monica and beat drums with Sudanese refugees in Tel-Aviv. I have launched a rocket, administered CPR, operated ham radios, set a broken arm

and helped a rescue team look for a downed plane.

I could end up as a spy, a diplomat, a soldier, an astronaut, or a fighter for a lost cause. I could end up famous or completely unknown. I know two things for sure: I won't be at a desk job, and I'll be good to have around when there's trouble.

"I like this essay because you really get to see the adventurous side of Elana, an intangible quality that cannot be seen in her transcript, test scores, or list of activities. By telling a story from her youth and connecting it to current activities and personal qualities, her sense of humor shines through and lets the reader know she is not afraid to take risks. After reading this essay, I saw her as someone who would make a difference on our campus, someone who wouldn't hesitate to get involved and try something new. She seemed like a great fit for Hopkins."

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee



## Outgrowing the Garage—Elijah

The air is tainted with unnatural fumes of grease, wood, and burnt electrical tape. Oil slicks stain the floor. Thick wooden shelves sag unnervingly close to buckling under the weight of old house paint and power tools. A workbench lies buried beneath papers, rulers, cans, and metal shards. An uncomfortable growl pours from the water heater. Most people wouldn't describe my grimy garage as pleasant, but I love spending my free time here. It's where I built a 2 ft trebuchet in sixth grade, a 4 ft trebuchet in seventh grade, and plan to build an 8 ft trebuchet this winter break. It's where I built a battlebot and slapped an Arduino microcontroller on top to give it intelligence. Ever since I sat watching jets shake the sky and explosions rock the screen in the movie *Iron Man* as a stunned sixth grader, I've spent weekends experimenting in my garage, trying to learn everything I can about engineering and robotics.

Sure, outside of my garage I love wildlife and hiking, history, and weird foods. I love classic rock, jazz, and maybe even secretly Katy Perry.



Nevertheless, I've always had a life plan centered on robotics: go to a great college, learn robotics, build robots, get a Bernese mountain dog, and live happily ever after in a beautiful forest home. It seems strange that I've committed myself to robotics so easily despite my many interests, but in reality, robotics combines nearly all of them. Computer science, electrical engineering, and mechanical engineering are crucial to the robot, but combine them with biology, astronomy, music, or ecology, and that's when robotics becomes amazing. I could help the sick with robots that give surgeons more dexterity while operating. I could help the poor with affordable, robot-made products. I could aid the elderly, replace the limbs of wounded warriors, and keep fire fighters from harm's way, all with robots. Although these robots may not



be the crimson and gold Iron Man suit that first got me interested, I love the realistic and heroic possibilities in the field of robotics.

Almost as exciting as imagining the robots I could build, is imagining where I could build them. I could become a professor and research cutting edge A.I. algorithms. I could become an entrepreneur and bring my creations to market. I could even become an employee for a tech company and devote myself to its latest innovations.

Maybe next year around this time, I will even be studying on the Freshman Quad. With the LCSR robotics lab, the minor in robotics, a top-notch engineering program, a beautiful campus, incredible seafood, and what the visiting admissions counselor described as a “vibrant a cappella scene,” Johns Hopkins will both make college fun and satisfy my inner nerd. But for now, I will go on working in my garage, competing for space with the family car.

“We like Elijah’s essay because you really get a sense of his personality—the essay is light-hearted, but still does a good job of highlighting his interest in robotics in a descriptive and entertaining way by comparing it to his fascination with Iron Man. He ties his interests back to opportunities at JHU like the freedom to combine multiple academic fields, research

in the LCSR lab, and the a cappella scene. As you are reading his essay, you picture someone who will explore academic programs, student groups, and opportunities on and off campus—you picture a dynamic member of our Hopkins community.”

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee





## Hometown—Quan

Life without language: all the ideas, thoughts, and emotions present, but unable to be expressed. This is how I picture my grandfather when he first immigrated to America with my grandmother and their nine children. Lost, he wanders around, hoping to bump into someone who can understand him. He raises his own children to know Vietnamese and hopes his future grandchildren would also be connected to the language of their ancestors. But when I form my lips into unnatural shapes to speak these words, they come out pathetically.

I cannot speak Vietnamese.

As a child, the conversations between me and my grandfather consisted of feeble attempts at speaking each other's language. Only a couple of familiar words could momentarily break the wall that divided us. Whenever I visited his house, I exchanged a shaky "Chào ông" for his heavily accented "He-llo," and ran off before the shame from my inability to understand could affect me.

At the time, I was unaware of the synchronized rhythm that beats in



the hearts of me, my father, and my grandfather. My grandfather loves playing the violin. Although he is not classically trained and can hardly keep a beat, he loves it and I can sense it every time he plays. When my family came to America, my father struggled to adjust as any teenage immigrant would. Vietnamese was confined to his family's home and English was difficult to learn, so instead, he picked up the guitar and taught himself how to play "Yesterday" by the Beatles. Forty years later, he claims he still cannot get it down perfectly. On the piano in our living room, he sings in broken English...

"Yesterday, all my troubles seemed so far away..."

Like my grandfather, music is a part of my father's design. By the unchangeable threads of heredity, I was also fated to



have a connection to music, just like them. And it was music that could break the language barrier between me and my grandfather.

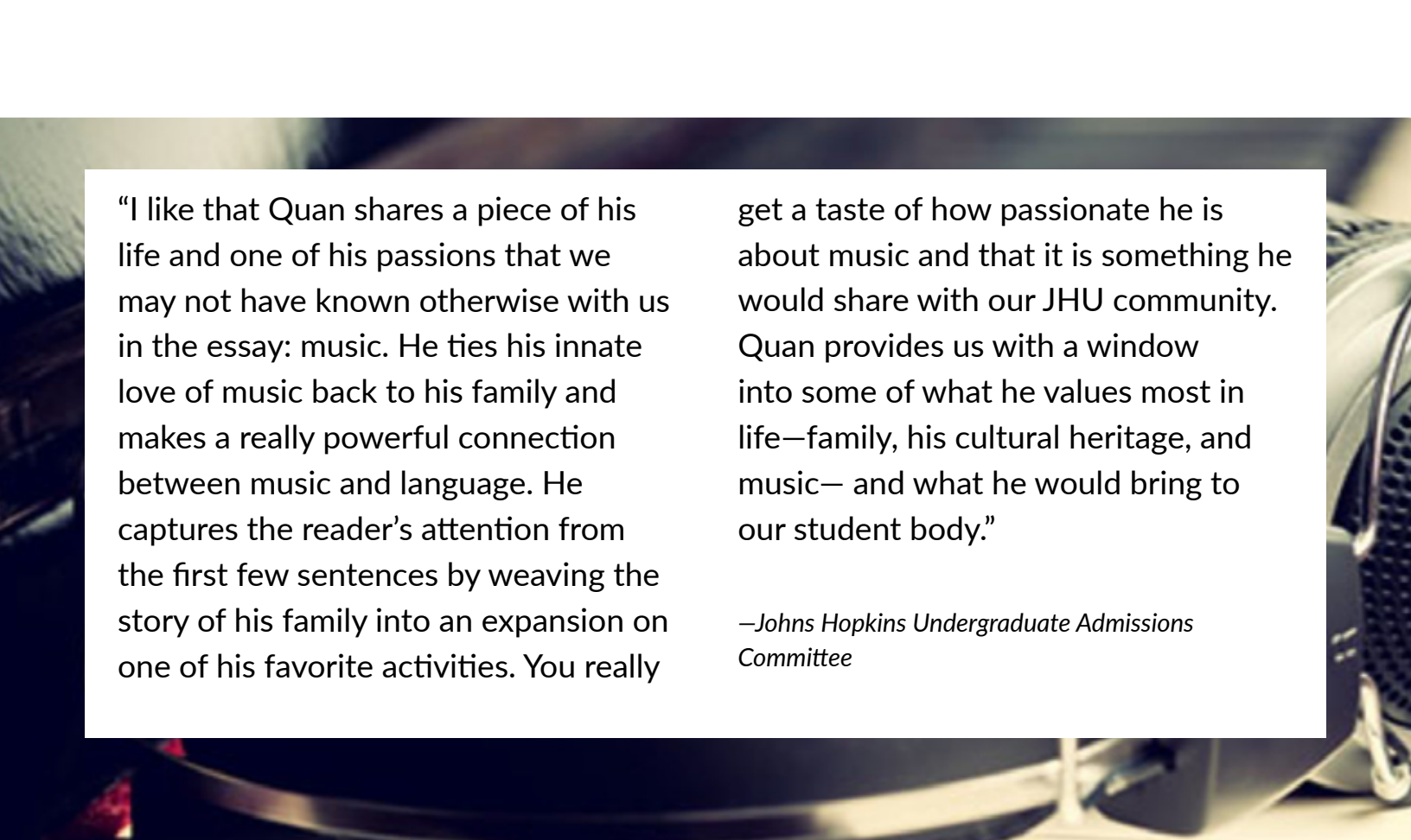
A single sheet of music sat in front of me. It was a beautiful piece, no doubt, but we, the All-State Senior Band, were playing it without any emotion. After a couple of unsuccessful run-throughs of this piece entitled “Hometown,” our guest conductor Samuel Hazo told us to look at measure thirty-three, reflect on a personal memory that reminded us of that part, and write about it right there on our sheet music. Soon after instructing us to do the same in the other parts of the piece, everyone’s sheet music was filled with our lives



in the form of tiny scribbles between the lines of melodies. When we played the piece again, we were finally able to “sing our life stories,” as Mr. Hazo would call it. Every musical phrase became a vessel for retelling our most precious memories: stories of first loves and recollections of childhood memories. No one had to say a single word.

There in the music, I finally spoke to my grandparents. As I played measure thirty-three, I pictured them sitting there on that boat in the middle of the ocean, holding onto a faint glimmer of hope for a new life in America, looking for their own new “hometown.” I said “thank you” for their courage to come to the strange and unknown America and “sorry” for being unable to speak Vietnamese. After the concert that night, I received a bigger hug than usual from them and I knew that they had heard and understood me. Being a part of a family and culture is more than just knowing the language. Emotions are enough to make words unnecessary. In my family, we speak three different languages: Vietnamese, the language of our origin, English, the language of our new home, and music to connect everything together.





"I like that Quan shares a piece of his life and one of his passions that we may not have known otherwise with us in the essay: music. He ties his innate love of music back to his family and makes a really powerful connection between music and language. He captures the reader's attention from the first few sentences by weaving the story of his family into an expansion on one of his favorite activities. You really

get a taste of how passionate he is about music and that it is something he would share with our JHU community. Quan provides us with a window into some of what he values most in life—family, his cultural heritage, and music— and what he would bring to our student body."

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee

## Spring Instead of Summer—Jacqueline

Sometimes I had dreams of being in plane crashes with my twin brother, Matt.

We're standing on the wing of a plane, balancing in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Matt is screaming, "No! I don't want to jump! Where's the water? Where's the water?" A wave rushes over the wing and takes us under. Matt calls, "Jacqui!" reaches for my hand, and I wake up.

I know a lot about my backstory because it has shaped who I am and who I want to be. Knowledge of this story is necessary—I need to keep the words alive, even if time wants to quiet them. I know my story so that I do not forget, so that I can tell others.

My brother, Matt, is visually impaired and has autism. We were born in May instead of August, sixteen weeks early, during spring instead of summer. Of all the seasons, maybe we should have been born in winter. Matt and I clung together on the icy medical tables. Winter children, at home in the frost,





trying to take air into translucent lungs.

The facts of our story are easy to tell. I can tell about the identical scars that run from our shoulder blades to our chests. How our doctors and parents looked at us, in our isolettes, with heavy eyes. About the five percent chance of survival that we beat, or the likelihood that Matt would never be able to see and I would never speak. I can tell others that I would not change our story—that I want to tell it throughout my lifetime, because it has a purpose. I can say that the dream of us clinging together on the plane wing in the middle of the Atlantic is a continuation of how I feel and who I am.

It's harder, though, to tell of the pride I feel whenever my voice carries across the room. Nine years of voice therapy, nine years of learning how to project and nurture my one working vocal cord—I'm afraid people won't understand. They might just think of it as a story with a nice ending. But my goal is not to tell a nice story—it is to make others feel something deep in their chests, like I do.

It's even harder to share the very core of who I am; the fact that Matt and I are forever tied together with the story of how we were born. We are here for different reasons—mine to write and be his guide; his to make others happy, like he makes me. Where we come from and how we got here makes us who we are in this moment. That's the purpose of our story; that's what I want others to know.

My half of our story allows me to exist in a world that is parallel to Matt's. Few others fit in his world—but I must. And my ability to fit into his world drives... everything. It makes me strive to see him smile, even if it's a hint of one that appears when I tell him his socks are totally cool. It brings my dreams of plane crashes alive, so I can release those feelings into my writing, and truly be part of his world. I must fit into Matt's world forever, and so I must be a good enough sister to tell his story.

My backstory makes me who I am—a writer, a guide, a sister. I am a girl standing on the wing of a plane, eager for my words to stretch to every continent. Eager for everyone to know my story.



"I often read essays where the student writes about someone who has influenced their life. Admissions officers want to get a better understanding of YOU. These essays can be tricky because there is a tendency to focus on the person who has influenced you, instead of focusing on how you have been changed. Jacqueline did a fantastic job of focusing on how her brother has shaped HER life. Her writing style is personable with vivid parallels and

divergences between herself and her twin. The reader feels like they are on a journey through Jacqueline's life in just a few hundred words. This essay captivated me with details that would not have shown up at any other point in the application. We get a sense of passion and purpose about her that reminds us of the energy Hopkins students bring to campus."

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee

## Shelves One Through Five—Neha

Pushed against the left wall in my room is a curious piece of furniture. Initially, it was a six foot tall and three foot wide red oak bookcase. Strangely, as the five shelves began to fill with books, the dimensions of the bookcase slowly evolved into a looking glass. Now, years later, my reflection is almost complete: each bookshelf cradles the stories of my life.

Shelf One is the base, and rightfully so. It contains my building blocks. Among the bright covers and large lettered titles lie countless fairy tales, fables, and legends. My Indian heritage mixes with my American lifestyle as the spines interchange from gifts from my father's father to Barnes and Noble bought, creating a cocktail of the morals I grew up on. The heroes in my childhood storybooks were my teachers, driving me to my own heroic actions of enthusiastic community service, whether it was volunteering at the



Parks and Recreation center or serving at the Special Olympics.

As I grew out of the innocence of Aesop's Fables, I developed a ravenous hunger for words. I wanted to read as much as I could, absorbing each book that chanced my way. Shelves Two and Three sag with the weight of the dialogues that satiated my hunger. Everything ranging from the science fiction of *A Wrinkle in Time* to the ridiculous amusement of *The Big Friendly Giant* to the horrors of *Columbine* gathers in those shelves. Here is the embodiment of my curiosity and thirst for knowledge. Here is the explanation for my desire to do more, learn more, and see more. My parents aided these passions, constantly introducing me to new cultures and new places. Our travels all over the country and the world taught me the

importance of adaptability and an open mind. With these characteristics, I am always able to communicate to whomever I speak to, regardless of their language or culture.

Shelf Four is the stinging slap I received from reality in my early teens. No longer could I spend all my time trying out the delicious foods at this new restaurant or learning from the displays at the rare exhibit. Now my weekends were filled with daunting math textbooks, designed to help me conquer the beast of numbers. While Shelf Four holds the memories of slogging through countless hours of math, it also displays my development of a logical and rational mind. This is where I grew the qualities of being a strong leader. Now, well versed in the feeling of failure, I am also educated in perseverance and success. I use these





experiences to help those who come my way. I am able to connect with others easily because I am willing to share the trials I have faced, and the knowledge I have gained from them.

Looking to the very top, Shelf Five waits patiently. It is partially filled with an assortment of articles from The Economist, New York Times, and Washington Post, all of which highlight my love for the political sciences, fostered by the debate team. Alongside those, stacked neatly, are aerospace engineering papers, about plasma propulsion, pork chop plots, and Hohmann transfers. They feature my fascinations with physical science and

innovation for the future. Countless college brochures, scribbled on with notes and reminders, complete the first half of this top shelf, and they are the present.

Now, standing in the front of a bookcase, I find that I am completely content. I can see myself with a simple, yet comprehensive clarity, like staring into a mirror. Though Shelf Five is unfinished, it is no less hopeful or less promising than the previous four. Soon, I will fill this shelf with the ideas that will further define who I am. I will look upon this shelf in the future with a sense of wholeness, because I know that this bookshelf is me.

“By transforming her bookshelf into a metaphor for her life, Neha’s essay is creative and shows an affinity for learning beyond textbooks. She writes about books in a way that demonstrates a process of self-

reflection. We got a good sense of who she is and how she would participate in the intellectual community at Hopkins.”

—Johns Hopkins Undergraduate Admissions Committee



# Math, Music & Football—Brenden

Brenden gained acceptances at Harvard, Yale, MIT, Columbia and the University of Virginia.

Brenden's essay was published on Business Insider; he discussed how he merged two of his passions—music



and math—to explain how each has shaped his life and improved his happiness.

I think about the converging waves of the notes I play, the standing waves being created by plucking a string, and the physics behind the air pockets being forged that eventually find a listening ear whenever I sit down to play my bass. Thus, my passions of math and music synergistically become more together than they could ever be apart. I started thinking about this when a former math teacher of mine approached me one afternoon and asked me if I was interested in giving the induction speech at the Mu Alpha Theta induction ceremony. Being a member of the honor society and recounting the memorable induction speech given the year prior at my own induction, I wholeheartedly

agreed. I decided on the topic of music and math because I play upright bass in the orchestra and electric bass in the jazz ensemble and being a math enthusiast, it is impossible for me not to see the mathematics and physics present in music.

At music's core, math is present in the tempo and rhythm of a piece, with the time signature being represented as a fraction and the tempo being represented by a numerical value in beats per minute. The relationship between the two gets even more intriguing when applied to actual notes being played. The best sounding music is that which uses flawless mathematics.



It is common knowledge that each note has a letter name—A through G—but also has a number value, measured in hertz. An A4 for instance is 440 hertz. In Beethoven's "Moonlight Sonata," there exist triads in triplet form. These triads are made up of D, F#, and A. Since sound is a vibrational energy, notes can be graphed as sine functions. When the triad notes are graphed, they intersect at their starting point and at the point 0.042. At this point the D has gone through two full cycles, the F# two and a half, and the A three. This results in consonance, something that sounds naturally pleasant to the ear. Thinking about this opened my eyes to all the aspects of my life with which I utilize math to enhance.

There is also an incredible amount of unseen math present in football. At 5 foot 10 inches and 160 pounds with pads on, I fall short of the average player at my position who is usually at least 6 feet tall and well over 200 pounds, so applying math to football is

intellectually stimulating, but is more importantly a survival mechanism. When I have to go up against an opponent who is over twice my size and looks like he eats freshmen for lunch, brute force is not on my side and it helps having equations for momentum and attack angle running through my head. Math not only helps me survive, but also thrive. As an opponent running back is darting down the sideline with seemingly cheetah-like speed, I can trust that my angles and velocity will allow me to make the play and possibly save a game-changing touchdown. Or when a ball is sailing through the air caught in the stadium lights, I can picture a projectile motion problem with constant acceleration downward and a near constant velocity in the x-direction, and know that I have a leg up on the player next to me who does not think about it the way I do. When I look at aspects of my life in a math context, they make more sense and make things that I love even better and more enjoyable.

- Brenden used his story to express his love and enjoyment of math. He did not tell, he showed.
- Brenden did a great job providing examples of how math is

incorporated into his daily life and the activities he enjoys. By reading this essay, I get a good sense of his interests and passions.





# Family Values— Isabella

Isabella wrote a personal, compelling essay. It provided insight into her family and the values she was raised with. This is the essay that helped her get accepted into New York University.



My small body and head of curly hair trotted over to the refrigerator in search of some butter for my bread. I shifted some cans of half-opened Goya beans and the remnant of a brick of dulce de leche that had seen better days. After much shuffling, I spotted the big brown container of margarine. Carefully placing the tub on the kitchen table and readying for my “feast,” I opened the container. To my dismay, it was filled with arroz con pollo. My eyes tightened and my stomach made Chewbacca noises. Maybe I could mash the dulce de leche on top of the bread.

My finding was not a surprise. Rather it was lesson number 73 engraved within the book of Dominican-bred frugality. Why buy 99 cent storage containers when the products we buy already

provide them for free? These lessons came in Spanish with the speed of a bull in a bullring. It is a struggle for immigrant parents to successfully pass on values of frugality to their children while living in a developed country with a perceived flow of plenty. But my mother’s iron will was the perfect match for those incongruences.

For a child, things like magic, fairy tales, and free MacBook offers make it difficult to grasp the value of money and to quantify the struggles that some families face to make ends meet. The collective hope is that through hard work and a miracle, one ends up figuring out how to make five dollars out of five cents.

This fervor to be frugal and purposeful is something that was passed down to



me much like some families pass down an obsession with monogramming or Thanksgiving Day traditions. My trailblazing family's thrifty efforts were legendary in our neighborhood. We started reusing and repurposing way before it was trendy. We made do with what we had and made what we had do more in order to awkwardly swim toward the Dominican American dream.

Frugality is a game, or at least we made it into one. A game of who can save the most money by turning off lights, keeping the heater off and going to the library when the apartment got too hot. A game of who could make a skirt out of a short dress or find a scholarship for swimming lessons at the Y.M.C.A. The act of conserving money, the audacity to solve problems no one has thought of before is what set my family apart. Together we share our victories in a little tribe of four Amazon warriors partaking in our own version of the show, *Survivor: NYC* edition.

The phrase "making do" could evoke connotations of stagnation and despair for some; but for me it is about understanding my situation and being

proactive. The values I gained from being able to make do are unparalleled. Making do gifted me with resiliency and gratitude. Making do allowed me to internalize acceptance and to value effort.

Lesson 978 took place last winter. I woke up at home with numb toes. The temperature inside the house was evidently no different from outside. I questioned my seemingly crazy mother to which she replied, "Come cuddle with me." With closer inspection, I found my two sisters under the covers. The average family can spend up to \$1,000 on heating their apartment, but my home is already comforting in its own way. A small bed with too many people in it, arms and legs perfectly intertwined. It doesn't get better than that on a cold morning.

The laughs we exchange keep me warm, my grandmother's advice, *sigue adelante*, or keeping moving forward, resonates with me, the *arroz con pollo* in the butter container satisfies me and our love for each other fuels me with drive to excel. We make do everyday and through our doing and making I know in my heart, the best is yet to come.



- Isabella did a great job on the opening paragraph. This is a perfect example of an anecdote. The reader is thrown right in the middle of her story.
- The essay is personal. It gives the reader insight into her family and their values. It also makes Isabella likable.
- The closing paragraph makes reference to the opening. It ties everything together.

## The Confession— Erica

Erica's essay contains a great deal of self-reflection. She confesses a shortcoming and then discusses how she plans to grow as an individual. Erica was admitted to Stanford University.

In 2015, Northville, the place I consider to be my hometown, was named the snobbiest city in Michigan. I prefer to describe Northville as reckless.

The more enterprising students of Northville High School specialize in the selling of three goods: marijuana, Adderall and test answers, all goods many of my peers don't think twice about using. We're from Northville. Most of us know nothing of consequences or responsibility for our actions, because our fathers can cover for us with cash and connections. We've been raised in such privilege that we feel enabled to say and do whatever we want, thoughtlessly.

Several years back, when the rap aesthetic was particularly prominent, most of the males came to school in ill-fitting jeans that sagged below their designer boxers, sporting T-shirts and necklaces that likely cost more than the weekly income for the average person, in imitation of their favorite rapper. They carried themselves like Eminem and spewed out Jay Z verses about being raised in extreme urban poverty and racism, before parroting their parents' views on the "communist" welfare programs.

Derogatory terms for gays, the disabled and people of color are shouted in the hallway, right over the heads of people





to whom those refer. From experience, I can certify that the administration does little besides halfheartedly admonish reported bullies and send them on their way to continue their reign of terror.

To my chagrin, I have occasionally fallen into a similar mindset. I once asked a friend, whose family I knew was struggling, what AP tests she planned to take. She replied that her family couldn't afford any. I had forgotten how bad her circumstances were and had asked my question without thinking. I found myself victim to the disease that infiltrates Northville, the same carelessness I despise. Northville's gilded bubble caused me to forget that some don't have the luxury of affording even the reduced price of standardized tests.

Aside from being potentially harmful, this recklessness creates a sense

of emptiness for me. Superficial, materialistic and shallow, we're all too busy going on to the next thing, focusing on getting an A and not about learning the material, and getting our rib into a conversation without listening to what was actually said. Our sole aim is to keep moving. Where, how and at what cost are irrelevant questions to us, and thus we manage to remove all trace of purpose from our actions.

My most prominent goal has always been to leave Northville behind, to find a world in which people act consciously, aware that their actions affect others, and choose to delve deeper by asking questions and seeking legitimate answers that may differ from their limited understanding. In the meantime, I aspire to prepare myself by being more thoughtful, informed and, most of all, careful.

- The opening paragraph leaves the reader wanting more. "I prefer to describe Northville as reckless." Why?
- Erica addresses the "elephant in the room." She admits she has fallen reckless herself and partook in this mindset. The confession.

She reflects on her shortcoming and wraps up the essay in a positive light—being aware and growing as an individual.

