

# ESSAYS THAT WORKED

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# ESSAYS THAT WORKED

## ROMALI: TIME TO SPIN THE WHEEL

For as long as I can remember, one of my favorite pastimes has been manipulating those tricky permutations of 26 letters to fill in that signature, bright green gridded board of Wheel of Fortune.

Every evening at precisely 6:30 p.m., my family and I unfailingly gather in our living room in anticipation of Pat Sajak's cheerful announcement: "It's time to spin the wheel!" And the game is afoot, our banter punctuated by the potential of either big rewards or even bigger bankruptcies: "She has to know that word—my goodness, why is she buying a vowel?!"

While a game like Wheel of Fortune is full of financial pitfalls, I wasn't ever much interested in the money or new cars to be won. I found myself drawn to the letters and playful application of the English alphabet, the intricate units of language.

For instance, phrases like "I love you," whose incredible emotion is quantized to a mere set of eight letters, never cease to amaze me. Whether it's the definitive pang of a simple "I am" or an existential crisis posed by "Am I", I recognized at a young age how letters and their order impact language.

Spelling bees were always my forte. I've always been able to visualize words and then verbally string individual consonants and vowels together. I may not have known the meaning of every word I spelled, I knew that soliloquy always pushed my buttons: that -quy ending was so bizarre yet memorable! And intaglio with its silent "g" just rolled off the tongue like cultured butter.

Eventually, letters assembled into greater and more complex words.

I was an avid reader early on, devouring book after book. From the Magic Treehouse series to the too real 1984, the distressing *The Bell Jar*, and Tagore's quaint short stories, I accumulated an ocean of new words, some real (epitome, effervescence, apricity), and others fully fictitious (doubleplusgood), and collected all my favorites in a little journal, my *Panoply of Words*.

Add the fact that I was raised in a Bengali household and studied Spanish in high school for four years, and I was able to add other exotic words. Sinfin, zanahoria, katukutu, and churanto soon took their rightful places alongside my English favorites.

And yet, during this time of vocabulary enrichment, I never thought that Honors English and Biology had much in common. Imagine my surprise one night as a freshman as I was nonchalantly flipping through a



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## ROMALI: TIME TO SPIN THE WHEEL

science textbook. I came upon fascinating new terms: adiabatic, axiom, cotyledon, phalanges...and I couldn't help but wonder why these non-literary, seemingly random words were drawing me in. These words had sharp syllables, were challenging to enunciate, and didn't possess any particularly abstract meaning.

I was flummoxed, but curious...I kept reading.

"Air in engine quickly compressing..."

"Incontestable mathematical truth..."

"Fledgling leaf in an angiosperm..."

"Ossified bones of fingers and toes..."

...and then it hit me. For all my interest in STEM classes, I never fully embraced the beauty of technical language, that words have the power to simultaneously communicate infinite ideas and sensations AND intricate relationships and complex processes.

Perhaps that's why my love of words has led me to a calling in science, an opportunity to better understand the parts that allow the world to function. At day's end, it's language that is perhaps the most important tool in scientific education, enabling us all to communicate new findings in a comprehensible manner, whether it be focused on minute atoms or vast galaxies.

It's equal parts humbling and enthralling to think that I, Romila, might still have something to add to that scientific glossary, a little permutation of my own that may transcend some aspect of human understanding. Who knows, but I'm definitely game to give the wheel a spin, Pat, and see where it takes me...

### ADMISSION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

Romila writes about her interest in words, beginning with a simple family tradition. You see her passion for reading, languages, and biology, which highlights how words have the ability to fascinate and inspire new ideas across different subjects. The intersection of linguistics and science shows how interdisciplinary study can lead to new interests and discoveries. A curiosity about the world and the ability to find connections between disciplines are characteristics of a student who would thrive at Hopkins.



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## CURTIS: AND ON THAT NOTE

The sound was loud and discordant, like a hurricane, high notes and low notes mixing together in an audible mess. It was as if a thousand booming foghorns were in a shouting match with sirens. Unlike me, this was a little abrasive and loud. I liked it. It was completely unexpected and extremely fun to play.

Some instruments are built to make multiple notes, like a piano. A saxophone on the other hand doesn't play chords but single notes through one vibrating reed. However, I discovered that you can play multiple notes simultaneously on the saxophone. While practicing a concert D-flat scale, I messed up a fingering for a low B-flat, and my instrument produced a strange noise with two notes. My band teacher got very excited and exclaimed, "Hey, you just played a polyphonic note!" I like it when accidents lead to discovering new ideas.

I like this polyphonic sound because it reminds me of myself: many things at once. You assume one thing and get another. At school, I am a course scholar in English, but I am also able to amuse others when I come up with wince evoking puns. My math and science teachers expect me to go into engineering, but I'm more excited about making films. Discussing current events with my friends is fun, but I also like to share with them my secrets to cooking a good scotch egg. Even though my last name gives them a hint, the Asian students at our school don't believe that I'm half Japanese. Meanwhile the non-Asians are surprised that I'm also part Welsh. I feel comfortable being unique or thinking differently. As a Student Ambassador this enables me to help freshman and others who are new to our school feel welcome and accepted. I help the new students know that it's okay to be themselves.

There is added value in mixing things together. I realized this when my brother and I won an international Kavli Science Foundation contest where we explained the math behind the Pixar movie "Up". Using stop motion animation we explored the plausibility and science behind lifting a house with helium balloons. I like offering a new view and expanding the way people see things. In many of my videos I combine art with education. I want to continue making films that not only entertain, but also make you think.

A lot of people have a single passion that defines them or have a natural talent for something specific. Like my saxophone I am an instrument, but I can play many notes at once. I'm a scholar and a musician. Quiet but talkative. An athlete and a filmmaker. Careful but spontaneous. A fan of Johnny Cash and Kill The Noise. Hard working but playful. A martial artist and a baker. One of a kind but an identical twin.



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CURTIS:  
AND ON THAT NOTE

A lot of people have a single passion that defines them or have a natural talent for something specific. Like my saxophone I am an instrument, but I can play many notes at once. I'm a scholar and a musician. Quiet but talkative. An athlete and a filmmaker. Careful but spontaneous. A fan of Johnny Cash and Kill The Noise. Hard working but playful. A martial artist and a baker. One of a kind but an identical twin.

Will polyphonic notes resonate in college? Yes. For instance, balancing a creative narrative with scientific facts will make a more believable story. I want to bring together different kinds of students (such as music, film, and English majors) to create more meaningful art. Understanding fellow students' perspective, talents, and ideas are what build a great community.

I'm looking forward to discovering my place in the world by combining various interests. Who I am doesn't always harmonize and may seem like nothing but noise to some. But what I play, no matter how discordant, can be beautiful. It's my own unique polyphonic note.

## ADMISSION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

Curtis compares himself to polyphonic sounds to convey how he is many things at once: musician, English scholar, filmmaker, and baker, among others. We not only get a good picture of his personality through his writing, but also what kind of student Curtis is—one who thinks across disciplines and has creative ambitions, and someone who wants to contribute to a community. These are qualities we value as an institution; the essay helps us imagine the kind of student he might be here at Hopkins.



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RACHEL:  
LEARNING HOW TO PLAY

The first board game I ever played was Disney Princess Monopoly against my mother. It was a shocking experience. My otherwise loving and compassionate mother played to win. Though she patiently explained her strategies throughout the game, she refused to show me any mercy, accumulating one monopoly after another, building house after house, hotel after hotel, and collecting all my money until I was bankrupt, despite my pleas and tears that I was her daughter and only five years old. I remember clearly the pain I felt from losing, but I remained eager to play and determined to one day beat her. Eventually, we left the princesses behind and graduated to the regular, then the deluxe, editions of Monopoly, and expanded to Rummikub. Every time we played, I carefully observed my mother's moves and habits while considering my own options. Over the years, she continued to beat me in both games, but the contests became more competitive and my losses more narrow. Finally, at twelve, I won for the first time, at Rummikub no less, a game at which she claimed to be undefeated! I felt an overwhelming sense of pride, which was only magnified when I saw the same emotion in my mother's face.

I learned so much from these games beyond the obvious. I learned how to lose, and win, graciously. I learned to enjoy the process, regardless of the outcome. I learned how to take cues from other people but think on my own, both creatively and strategically. I learned how to cope with failure and turn it into a lesson. I learned that true victory stems from hard work and persistence. And I learned that the strongest and most meaningful relationships are not based on indulgence but on honesty and respect.

This doesn't mean that losses don't sting. I was devastated when my hockey team lost the championship game by only one goal when I was the last one to control the puck. But I was still incredibly proud of my team's cohesiveness, the fluid effort we put into the season, and my own contribution. More importantly, the camaraderie and support of my teammates is ongoing and something I will always cherish more than a win. I didn't dwell over what could have been. Instead, I focused on what I was going to take with me into the next season.

This past summer, I had my first substantive work experience interning at the Michael J. Fox Foundation for Parkinson's Research, researching and writing about treatments and therapies. Working there was certainly not a game, but my strategy was the same: work hard, remain focused, be mindful and respectful of those around me, deal with the inevitable curveballs, and take constructive criticism to heart, all in pursuit of a meaningful goal. At first, I found it intimidating, but I quickly found my footing. I



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RACHEL:  
LEARNING HOW TO PLAY

worked hard, knowing that what I took away from the experience would be measured by what I put into it. I studied my co-workers: how they conducted themselves, how they interacted with each other, and how they approached their respective jobs. I carefully reviewed redlines on my writing assignments, tried not to get discouraged, and responded to the comments to present the material more effectively. I absorbed the stories relayed by Parkinson's patients regarding their struggles and was amazed at how empowered they felt by their participation in clinical trials. Through them, I discovered what it really means to fight to win. I have also come to understand that sometimes a game never ends but transforms, causing goals to shift that may require an adjustment in strategy.

My mother and I still regularly play games, and we play to win. However, the match is now more balanced and I've noticed my mother paying much more attention to my moves and habits and even learning a few things from me.

## ADMISSION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

Rachel describes how she mastered the values of hard work and persistence through experiences of loss and frustration at the hand of her mother's stellar gaming skills. In her essay, we learn about her character growth and determination. Applying these strategies to other areas of her life, Rachel demonstrates an ability to connect lessons, learn from others, and take on challenges—all important aspects of the college experience.



# ESSAYS THAT WORKED

RESHMI:  
THE VOICE OF MANY

*"It's a hot and humid day in Swat Valley, Pakistan*

*A young student boards the school bus since walking is no longer safe*

*She sits, chatting with her friends after a long day of exams*

*A man jumps onto the bus and pulls out a gun*

*The last thing the girl remembers is the sound of three gunshots*

*BANG, BANG, BANG*

*Her name is Malala and she was fourteen years old*

*Shot for no reason other than her desire to learn*

*We will FIGHT until girls don't live with fear of attending school*

*We will FIGHT until education is a freedom, a right, an expectation for everyone"*

This is the first stanza of a piece of slam poetry my friend and I wrote and performed at our school's rendition of TED Talks. Over lunch one day, we discovered we shared a common passion—an insistence on equality in all forms, feminism in particular. We discussed the difficulty of combating social issues, but agreed that spreading awareness was one effective method. This casual exchange evolved into a project involving weeks of collaboration.

We realized that together we could make a far greater impact than we ever could have individually, so we composed a ten-minute poem aimed at inspiring people to consider important issues. We began by drafting stanzas, simultaneously editing one another's writing, and later progressed to memorization, practicing together until our alternating lines flowed and phrases spoken together were completely



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RESHMI:  
THE VOICE OF MANY

synchronized. The performance was both memorable and successful, but more importantly, this collaboration motivated us to move forward to establish the Equality Club at our school.

Sophomore year, our club volunteered with organizations promoting gender equality, the highlight of the year helping at a marathon for recovering abuse victims. Junior year, we met with our head of school to convey our goals, outline plans and gain support for the coming year, in which we held fundraisers for refugees while educating students. This year we are collaborating with the Judicial Committee to reduce the escalating use of racial slurs at school stemming from a lack of awareness within the student body.

From this experience, I learned that it is possible to reach so many more people when working together rather than apart. It also taught me that the most crucial aspect of collaborating is believing in the same cause; the details will come as long as there is a shared passion.

## ADMISSION COMMITTEE COMMENTS

Reshmi's essay highlights how combining forces with others can help you achieve your goals. At Hopkins, students take advantage of interdisciplinary study to learn from different perspectives and build connections between topics. Similar to how Reshmi collaborated with a fellow student to develop an Equality Club, our students come together each day to combine ideas and resources to make progress. This essay clearly shows us how the writer intends to collaborate with her peers to inspire change, both in and outside of the classroom.



# ESSAYS THAT WORKED

STEPHANIE:  
SUPERHEROES

Legends, lore, and comic books all feature mystical, beautiful beings and superheroes—outspoken powerful Greek goddesses, outspoken Chinese maidens, and outspoken blade-wielding women. As a child, I soared the skies with my angel wings, battled demons with katanas, and helped stop everyday crime (and of course had a hot boyfriend). In short, I wanted to save the world.

But growing up, my definition of superhero shifted. My peers praised people who loudly fought inequality, who rallied and shouted against hatred. As a journalist on a social-justice themed magazine, I spent more time at protests, interviewing and understanding but not quite feeling inspired by their work.

At first, I despaired. Then I realized: I'm not a superhero.

I'm just a 17-year-old girl with a Nikon and a notepad—and I like it that way.

And yet—I want to save the world.

This understanding didn't arrive as a bright, thundering revelation; it settled in softly on a warm spring night before my 17th birthday, around the fourth hour of crafting my journalism portfolio. I was choosing the best photos I'd taken around town during the 2016 presidential election when I unearthed two shots.

The first was from a peace march—my classmates, rainbows painted on their cheeks and bodies wrapped in American flags. One raised a bullhorn to her mouth, her lips forming a loud O. Months later, I could still hear her voice.

The second was different. The cloudy morning following election night seemed to shroud the school in gloom. In the mist, however—a golden face, with dark hair and two moon-shaped eyes, faces the camera. Her freckles, sprinkled like distant stars across the expanse of her round cheeks, only accentuated her childlike features and added to the soft feel of the photo.

Her eyes bore into something beyond the lens, beyond the photographer, beyond the viewer—everything is rigid, from the jut of her jaw, to her stitched brows, her upright spine and arms locked across her chest, to her shut mouth.

I picked the second picture within a heartbeat.



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STEPHANIE:  
SUPERHEROES

During my career as a photojournalist, I lived for the action shots: the excited gestures of a school board member discussing plans, a rabbi preaching vividly, a group of teenagers chanting and waving flags downtown. To me, the most energetic photos always told the biggest and best stories. They made me feel important for being there, for capturing the superheroes in the moment to share with everyone else. The softer moments paled in comparison, and I thought of them as irrelevant.

It took about one second to tear down one year's worth of belief.

The idea dawned on me when I was trapped within the distraught weight in the girl's eyes. Sometimes the moments that speak the loudest aren't the noisiest or the most energetic. Sometimes they're quiet, soft, and peaceful.

Now, I still don't completely understand who I am and who I want to be, but really, who does? I'm not a superhero—but that doesn't mean I don't want to save the world. There are just so many ways to do it.

You don't always have to be loud to inflict change. Sometimes, it begins quietly: a snap of the shutter; a scrape of ink on paper. A breathtaking photograph; an astonishing lede. I've noticed the impact creativity can have and how powerful it is to harness it.

So, with that, I make people think and understand those surrounding them. I play devil's advocate in discussions about ethics and politics. I persuade those around me to think past what they know into the scary territory of what they don't—so to make people feel. I'm determined to inspire people to think more about how they can be their own superheroes and more.

See, that's the kind of world-saving I do.

## Admissions Committee Comments

Stephanie's openness to new interpretations gives us a sense of how she will contribute to the Hopkins community as a creative thinker, and as someone who is eager to impact how people view the world. This essay provides context for her academic and extracurricular interests as well as her character and initiative, all of which are important in an application review process where we try to learn about the whole student.



### Step 1: Get the ingredients

On the granite countertop in front of me sat a pile of flour, two sticks of butter, and a bowl of shredded beef, just like the YouTube tutorial showed. My mind contorted itself as I tried figuring out what I was doing. Flanking me were two equally discombobulated partners from my Spanish class. Somehow, some way, the amalgamation of ingredients before us would have to be transformed into Peruvian empanadas.

### Step 2: Prepare the ingredients

It looked easy enough. Just make a dough, cook the beef until it was tender, put two and two together, and fry them. What YouTube didn't show was how to season the meat or how long you should cook it. We had to put this puzzle together by ourselves. Adding to the mystery, none of us knew what an empanada should even taste like.

### Step 3: Roll out ten equally sized circles of dough

It would be dishonest to say everything went smoothly. I thought the dough should be thick. One team member thought it should be thin. The other thought our circles were squares. A fundamental truth about collaboration is that it's never uncontentious. Everyone has their own expectations about how things should be done. Everyone wants a project to go their way. Collaboration requires observing the differences between the collaborators and finding a way to synthesize everyone's contributions into a solution that is mutually agreeable.

### Step 4: Cook the beef until tender

Collaborative endeavors are the proving grounds for Murphy's Law: everything that can go wrong, will go wrong. The shredded beef, which was supposed to be tender, was still hard as a rock after an hour on the stove. With our unseasoned cooking minds, all ideas were valid. Put more salt in? Sure. Cook it at a higher temperature? Go for it. Collaboration requires people to be receptive. It demands an open mind. All ideas deserve consideration.



Step 5: Fry the empanadas until crispy

What does crispy even mean? How crispy is crispy enough; how crispy is too crispy? The back and forth with my teammates over everything from how thick the dough should be to the definition of crispy taught me a key ingredient of teamwork: patience. Collaboration breeds tension, which can make teamwork so frustrating. But it's that very tension which also transforms differing perspectives into solutions that propel collaborative undertakings forward.

Step 6: Enjoy!

### Admissions Committee Comments

Mathias is able to describe important aspects of collaboration, such as considering new ideas and finding a way to synthesize everyone's input. Through the metaphor of cooking empanadas as a novice, his essay effectively conveys the message that collaboration 'demands an open mind' and that by being receptive to other opinions, tackling any kind of puzzle—whether culinary or academic—becomes more doable. This tells us that, as a student, Mathias values the contributions of his peers and strives to bring people and ideas together to accomplish obstacles.



# ESSAYS THAT WORKED

ANUSHKA::  
LOOKING THROUGH A WIDER LENS

What does it mean to be an advocate? I didn't find the answer in any sort of textbook. Not the anatomy textbook that lay across the foot of my bed, filled with Post-Its and half-drawn diagrams. Nor the chemistry textbook that sat on top of it, covered in streaks of blue highlighter. Not even Principles of Biology, overflowing with illegible notes and loose worksheets, had the answer. Yet, in a few years, I will be promising to do just that: be the ultimate advocate for my patients.

My search for the answer began quite unintentionally. When I was initially recommended to serve on the Youth Council my junior year of high school, my perspective on civic engagement was one of apathy and a complete lack of interest. I couldn't understand how my passion for the medical field had any correlation with serving as a representative for the students at my school and actively engaging within the political sphere. I knew I wanted to pursue a career as a physician, and I was perfectly content embracing the safety net of my introverted textbook world.

But that safety net was ripped wide open the day I walked through the sliding double doors of City Hall for my first Youth Council meeting. I assumed I would spend my hour flipping through flashcards and studying for next week's unit test, while a bunch of teenagers complained about the lack of donuts in the student store. Instead, I listened to the stories of 18 students, all of whom were using their voices to reshape the distribution of power within their communities and break the structures that chained so many in a perpetual cycle of desperation and despair. While I spent most of my time poring over a textbook trying to memorize formulas and theorems, they were spending their time using those formulas and theorems to make a difference in their communities. Needless to say, that meeting sparked an inspirational flame within me.

The next Youth Council meeting, I asked questions. I gave feedback. I noticed what the students at my school were really struggling with. For the first time, I went to drug prevention assemblies and helped my friends run mental health workshops. The more involved I became in my city's Youth Council, the more I understood how similar being an advocate for your community is to being an advocate for your patients. When I volunteered at the hospital every week, I started paying attention to more than whether or not my patients wanted ice chips in their water. I learned that



Deborah was campaigning for equal opportunity housing in a deeply segregated neighborhood and George was a paramedic who injured his leg carrying an 8-year-old with an allergic reaction to the Emergency Room. I might not have been the doctor who diagnosed them but I was often the one person who saw them as human beings rather than patients.

Youth Council isn't something most students with a passion in practicing medicine chose to participate in, and it certainly wasn't something I thought would have such an immense impact on the way I view patient care. As a patient's ultimate advocate, a physician must look beyond hospital gowns and IV tubes and see the world through the eyes of another. Rather than treat diseases, a physician must choose to treat a person instead, ensuring compassionate care is provided to all. While I know that throughout my academic career I will take countless classes that will teach me everything from stoichiometry to cellular respiration, I refuse to take the knowledge I learn and simply place it on a flashcard to memorize. I will use it to help those whom I must be an advocate for: my patients.

## Admissions Committee Comments

Anushka's essay goes beyond telling us about her ambition to be a physician by describing her journey to understanding advocacy in all its forms, such as her involvement in civic engagement through Youth Council. An important part of the undergraduate experience at Hopkins is participating in extracurriculars, research projects, internships, and other activities outside of the classroom. Anushka writes how she learned to be a better advocate by immersing herself in real-world experiences instead of just memorizing flashcards. Likewise, college is about more than acquiring academic knowledge—it's also about being open to experiences that expand your worldview and discovering something new about yourself.

