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Favorite Essays

HARVARD EDITION

Nine Essays that landed students a
spot at Harvard

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One.

I look over at the digital clock at the front of the bus just as the time changes to 8:30. The engine begins to rumble, the seat begins to shake, and the bus slowly pulls onto Route 6 and heads toward JPA—the Jay Pritzker Academy—near Siem Reap, Cambodia. The bus is alive with chatter. Peace Corps volunteers trade stories about their experiences in their assigned villages; international schoolteachers discuss their plans for the day’s lessons. I overhear one of the Peace Corps volunteers, Deidre, say, “I have to say, the Peace Corps offers incredible health care. They medevaced me to Bangkok when I got dengue fever.”

Today, I find myself unable to join the conversation. I stare blankly at the blue cloth seat in front of me, trying to gently coax my knotted stomach out of my throat. All I can think about is the empty seat beside me and the uncomfortable feeling of entering uncertain territory alone.

My friend and co-teacher, Shahriyar, is in the Angkor Hospital recovering from a serious bout of amoebic dysentery. I visited him yesterday. He was lying in bed with his summer reading in his right hand and an IV in his left. Looking pale and exhausted, he weakly lifted his head and greeted me. “I don’t know if you know this yet,” he said, “but I’m flying home tomorrow. Are you coming with me?” Though the news didn’t surprise me, the question caught me off guard. As I left the hospital room, I couldn’t help but think how easily this could have been me in his situation.

The bus drives over a speed bump faster than it should have, and I’m jolted back to the present. I try to take my mind off Shahriyar and look out the window at the world around me. Everything is so much different than it is in Deerfield, yet it all somehow feels very natural to me. To my left I see an elderly woman wearing a mask sweeping dust off the street; I smile at her, but she doesn’t notice. As the bus gets closer and closer to JPA, the fact that I will have to teach today’s lessons by myself begins to set in. I wonder if I’m physically capable of teaching three hours of class by myself in the ninetydegree heat and 90 percent humidity. In the past, Shahriyar and I had always taken turns leading the class, giving each other a few moments to rest and rehydrate while the other taught. A part of me is afraid to do it. I’ve never had to lead the class without the comfort and support of having Shahriyar by my side. As I think about the challenges I will face, I realize how easy it would be to turn back. I only have to call Sokun—a local tuk-tuk driver and he’d take me to the airport. Knowing my co-teacher has become seriously ill, nobody would think less of me if I went home today.

As I sit in my seat, planning my trip home, the bus slows nearly to a stop and then turns onto a narrow red dirt road. I’ve suddenly plunged into a new world. The mess of worn-down concrete buildings and mopeds gives way to miles of flooded rice paddies stretching as far as I can see. Every few hundred yards I see boys and young men working barefoot in the fields. The bamboo huts that dot the landscape make me think back to my visit to the house of one of my students, Dari. I remember looking into his room and seeing a wooden table on his dirt floor. Close by, a bamboo shelf was filled with books. The globe he had won for being on the Honor Roll was proudly displayed on the bookshelf among his prized possessions. Smiling ear to ear, he told us that JPA was the best thing in his life. I realize that it really is too late to go home. I’ve already fallen in love with my students.

As the bus pulls into JPA’s driveway, the rest of the teachers begin gathering their materials. I remain seated, deep in thought. “Are you coming?” I hear a familiar voice ask me. I look up and see Deidre looking at me.

“Of course I am.”



One - Review.

In essays about community service, it is easy to fall into the trap of self-aggrandizement—emphasizing your own personal sacrifices and good deeds and in the process making yourself look like someone more interested in self-service than community service. Josh’s essay, on the other hand, steers well clear of this pitfall, skillfully conveying compassion, humility, and devotion to the people with and for whom he works—he does not stay on because he pities his students, but because he loves them. As a result, instead of coming off like résumé padding, Josh’s work feels motivated by a genuine desire to do good.

Structurally, Josh’s essay is solid—it traces the trajectory of his thought process from uncertainty to renewed resolve. This seemingly straightforward story arc is enlivened by choice details and images—the off-hand conversation about dengue fever in the first paragraph, for example, adds a good jolt of surprise, and the descriptions of the Cambodian countryside are vivid and well-executed. The passage detailing Josh’s visit to his student Dari’s home is one of the essay’s highlights, a scene that is both believable as the essay’s “inspiration moment” and memorable for the deep empathy it contains.

While it’s true that Josh has the advantage of a rather unique experience—not every Harvard applicant is in a position to write their personal statement about volunteering with the Peace Corps—the main strengths of his essay are certainly translatable beyond this context. Josh’s essay is a personal statement at its best: it not just narrates an experience but hints at deeper elements of his personality and expresses them in a way that does not come off as forced. Someone reading Josh’s essay can tell that his volunteering experience was far more to him than résumé fodder. And as the admissions office gets deluged with more and more applications every year, this spark of sincerity goes very far indeed.



Two.

A light breeze caressing the cornfield makes it look like a gentle swaying sea of gold under the ginger sun of late summer. A child's chime-like laughter echoes. As I rush through the cornfield, I hear the rustling of leaves and the murmur of life hidden among the stems that tower over me.

I remember the joy of the day when I solved one of my first difficult combinatorics problems at my parents' house in the countryside. I felt so exhilarated that I ran outside and into the cornfield. As I was passing row after row of stems, I realized the cornfield was actually a giant matrix with thousands of combinations of possible pathways, just like the combinatorics problem I had just solved. I looked at the sky and I thought about the great mathematicians of the past that contributed so much to this field and about how I have added yet another dimension to my matrix. Suddenly, mathematics appeared to me as a 3D live map where staggering arrays of ideas connect each other by steady flows of sheer wisdom.

Suddenly a loud laughter from the next room wakes me up from my reverie. I am back in my room in the drab dormitory where I lived since I was fifteen. The dim sunset barely lightens up my room, while the cold November wind rushes from the broken-and-mended-with-tape window on the hallway, whistling beneath my door. My roommates haven't returned yet, and I feel alone and isolated.

In moments such as these I always take out the ultimate weapon against gloominess: the picture of my family. I look at myself, my parents, my little sister, and my grandfather at the countryside, under a clear blue sky, hugging, sharing the joy of being together. It reminds me of the old times, when life was simpler, but it also reminds me of why I came to Bucharest to live in a dormitory. It was because mathematics fascinated me with its beautiful and intricate theories and configurations, and my parents and my family supported me 150 percent. They put in long hours at work to pay for school costs and they selflessly accepted my long absences. I decided then to honor their support, follow our common dream, and become an accomplished mathematician.

Finally today I consider I matched at least an infinitesimal part of my parents' work. After countless Olympiad stages and fierce selection programs, I managed to win a gold medal at the International Mathematical Olympiad, along with scoring what is called "an ace": getting gold medals in the National Olympiad, the Balkan Olympiad, and the International Olympiad.

Math, for me, is a vast map of knowledge where theories intersect each other like pathways in a cornfield, and that explains the laws of nature and the universe itself. However, no matter what mathematical sphere shall I soar in, I will always have my family with me and the joy of that day when I was running freely in the cornfield.



Two - Review.

Octav's essay succeeds through its sophisticated use of narrative shift and juxtaposition. He transforms a youthful pastoral image of running through a cornfield into a wholly unexpected and exhilarating mathematical epiphany. The metaphor proves effective by merging his richly tactile experience with a cognitive experience that is maximally abstract: navigating a matrix of thousands of combinatorial pathways. Within this reverie, we see Octav's intellectual freedom and ability to lose himself in both the contributions of great thinkers and his own original insights.

After leading the reader into his experience of pure mathematical reasoning, the essay takes a deft biographical turn. Through Octav's austere study in a drab Bucharest boarding school we realize for the first time just how far he has travelled and how much has been sacrificed for his dream of becoming a mathematician. The cornfield takes on further dimensionality, now representing both a nostalgic connection to his family and the unbounded expansiveness that accompanies the life of the mind. When Octav mentions his mathematical "ace" it is almost besides the point—we already wholly believe in the promise of his curiosity-driven journey.



Three.

I sat under the table, burying my head tightly in my folded arms, while the other children sat on the carpet, listening to the teacher's story. The language barrier was like a tsunami, gurgling with strange and indistinguishable vocalizations. Elementary school wasn't as fun as I expected at all.

"Hello?"

Hearing a whisper, I raised my head up, only to notice a boy's face merely inches away. I bolted up in surprise, my head colliding gracefully with the underside of the table. Yelping in pain, I noticed that the entire class was staring at me.

That was the story of how I met my first friend in Canada.

That boy, Jack, came to visit me during my lonely recesses. It was rather awkward at first—I could only stare at him as he rambled on in English. But it was comforting to have some company.

From there, our friendship blossomed. Our initial conversations must have been hilarious to the hapless bystander. Jack would speak in fluent English while I spurted sentence after sentence of Mandarin. It was like watching tennis—rallies of English and Mandarin back and forth. But I learned quickly, and in no time I was fluent.

Jack also showed me the ropes of Western culture. Heaven knows how embarrassing my birthday party would've been if he hadn't told me about those so-called "loot-bags" beforehand.

Today, I volunteer at a community service agency for new immigrants where I work with children. I do it because I understand the confusion and frustration of dealing with a strange and sometimes hostile environment; I remember how it feels to be tangled up in an amalgam of unfamiliar words and sounds. And so I teach them; I give seminars on reading, writing, and speaking skills as well as Western culture, history, and sometimes, a bit of social studies. But I strive to do more than just that. I try to be a friend—because I remember how Jack helped me. I organize field trips to the science center, the museum, and the symphony: double-whammy trips where children can have fun while improving their literacy skills. Through these experiences, I try to understand each of them as unique individuals—their likes, dislikes, pet peeves, background.

Everyone needs a guiding light through the lonesome process of adaptation, a friendly bump to lift them from the dark shroud of isolation. That's what Jack did for me—with a rather painful bump to the head—and it's also what I do for these immigrant children.

My hope is that, one day, these children will also feel compelled to do the same, helping others adapt to an unfamiliar environment. With this, we can truly create a caring and cohesive network of support for the children of our society.



Three - Review.

Lucien's essay depicts a personal connection with his community service activity and provides the why to an extracurricular that probably shows up college application. He starts off with an endearing anecdote of meeting his first friend in Canada and connects the encounter to his current passion, then delves even deeper by concluding with self- reflection and a bigger goal for society that he hopes to achieve. His personal statement gives the reader a glimpse at his background and assimilation into a new culture, and how his own experience as an immigrant motivates him to help other immigrants adapt to life in a new place.

The strengths of this essay lie in the vivid and charming recounting of his first encounter with Jack, his first friend in a foreign new environment, and how he uses that story to explain his passion for volunteering. He connects his community service to a bigger goal at the end of the essay that leaves the reader feeling inspired, and alludes to his thoughts, hopes, and dreams. There is a tone of humility and humor as he depicts how he met his first friend by bumping his head under the table, and makes a motif out of the head bump by referring to it again later when he's talking about helping other immigrant children. He modestly credits his noble deeds at the community service agency to meeting his first friend, and humbly reveals his hope that his own good deeds will inspire others to pay it forward. He does a good job of exhibiting his accomplishments in community service without sounding like he's bragging.

Lucien could also make the essay more memorable and distinctive by including anecdotes of his experiences at the community service agency where he gave seminars and organized field trips. He denotes his volunteering responsibilities in list form, which can seem a bit impersonal and résumé- like. For example, he mentions how he tried to understand the people he helped, but does not include how he goes about doing this, or whether learning about those unique individuals contributed to his experience. Adding a story of how he changed the lives of the immigrants he helped would enhance his message and create a fitting parallel with the anecdote of how Jack helped him as he assimilated only one line on the activities portion of his into Western culture. Overall, Lucien combines humor with humility and leaves the reader feeling inspired.



Four.

I wrap my scarf more firmly around my neck, feeling the chill of the brisk January air as I trudge my way to practice. The bus stop isn't actually that far from the pool, but with a heavy backpack and the fancy shoes that my host sister insisted I wear, the three-minute trek seems to last forever. Turning the corner three blocks down, I finally make it to the parking lot and see one of my friends.

“Salut, Thomas.”

He knows that it's me without even looking. “Salut, Danielle.” He finishes fiddling with his bicycle lock and stands to greet me. I lean in for my customary kiss, and he obliges, bisous-ing me once on each cheek, before we walk toward Piscine Bréquigny together.

Easy conversation flows between us as our well-trained feet follow the paths to our respective changing rooms. I punch in the code on the girls' side and open the door. Familiar figures stand in various states of undress, and bisous go all around while we change and speculate on the various tortures Marc will put us through today. Then we head down to the pool deck, ready to meet our fates.

I get to our coach first, and mentally switch back into English. “Hey, Marc, what's up?”

He shrugs. “Fine.”

I laugh and give him a high five, then move on to bisous and *ça va?* the rest of the boys. When I get to Islem, who is Algerian, the two of us proceed to execute our exceedingly complex non-French secret handshake, recently perfected at Tours during last week's three-day meet. (We foreigners have to stick together, after all.) We end with a perfect fist bump, and I smirk.

Islem winks back at me. “Et ouais.” That's how we roll.

Marc eventually yells at us to get to work, and we all start to put on our caps and goggles. I pull out my team cap from home, reflecting on how much I've changed since I left. Four months ago, I was mute, standing awkwardly to the side, hoping that English instructions for the new and frightening social interaction would suddenly appear out of thin air. Now, flawless French rolls off my lips as I greet my friends, laughing freely at inside jokes, not thinking twice about kissing swimsuit-clad swimmers on the cheek. I'm not just on the team anymore—I'm part of it, and every single bisous reminds of that fact.

Someone pushes me into the pool and my shriek is swallowed by the water. I surface and swear my revenge, glaring all the while at Pierre, the obvious culprit, who is grinning unabashedly. Then he yelps and falls as he himself is pushed in as well. The whole team eventually follows us into the water to start the day's warm up, and a small smile, fond and content, flits across my face before I join them.



Four – Review.

One of the first pieces of advice that I share about what makes a strong essay is for a student to not overthink it. Not everybody needs to cure a disease by the time they turn 16 or have had a research paper published in a professional journal. Let me get to know who you are as a person – and it's often the simplest day-to-day stories that help students do this most effectively.

Admittedly, I'm not a big fan of athletes writing about sports (which often come across as thin and cliched) so I was bit trepidatious when I read the opening paragraph. I got over it quickly.

Here are the notes I took while reading this essay:

Opening: Sets the scene effectively, draws me in to want to learn more about her abroad experience, seems very friendly.

Changing room / interplay with team: Comes across as personable with a fun sense of humor. Exchanges with coach and the conversations and handshakes with teammates show adaptability and an ability to bring people together.

Practice / reflection moment: Spending four months away from home can be intimidating for most people, let alone a high schooler, and shows a true sense of commitment and perseverance. At the beginning of her trip she seemed scared and vulnerable but she learned to push past any initial anxiety and now presents herself as self-aware and appreciative.

End: She has grown from this abroad experience and her spirit, likability and sense of camaraderie are evident.

When I read an interesting and descriptive essay like this, it's almost like I'm drawn into a mini-movie. I want to keep reading to see how things play out. By the end, I feel like I know the student and I have a sense of how their unique personal attributes would make them an appealing candidate to any college admissions officer.



Five.

I am standing behind my high school when a snowball pelts my side with a thud and splatters across my jacket, covering me with a fine, icy dust. My bewildered eyes trace the snowball's trajectory until they fall upon a pair of snickering hoodlums crouched behind a small mountain of snowballs. They must have been waiting all afternoon for an unsuspecting student to walk by, and perhaps for emphasis, one of the boys looks me in the eye and raises a grimy middle finger. Quickly, I mold a handful of snow into a sphere with cupped hands and cock my arm back.

I haven't thrown anything in a while, but muscle memory guides me through the requisite motions. I played softball for eight years, and my athletic strength was always my throwing arm; in fifth grade, when my coach asked me to throw the ball from third to first, I hurled the ball with such force that the catch knocked him off-balance. Upon entering high school, it seemed natural that I would play on the school's softball team.

However, my body had other ideas. Throughout middle school I'd developed increasingly painful body aches, and in freshman year I awoke one morning with a brutal headache penetrating the crown of my head and the bones of my face as though a vice had been clamped to my skull overnight. After consulting more doctors than I can remember, I was diagnosed with fibromyalgia.

Fibromyalgia is characterized by chronic widespread pain and extreme sensitivity to touch. My neurologist describes fibromyalgia as "headache of the body." Personally, I favor my father's description; after one particularly painful and exhausting day he aptly proclaimed, "Fibromyalgia is your body's way of giving you the finger."

Agonizing muscle cramps mocked me constantly, preventing me from walking longer than five minutes without growing exhausted. The pressure above my eyes sneered at me whenever I attempted to read or write. Even after I found medications to temper the headaches just enough so I could return to school with sporadic attendance, sharp pains gnawed at my body with haughty derision if I even thought about returning to the softball fields and the activities I loved.

For months I tried to ignore the cruel obscenities fibromyalgia hurled my way, steadfastly believing the pain would soon subside and I would achieve everything I had planned for myself if I simply disregarded the taunting aches and worked doggedly to catch up at school. But when softball season arrived, it became apparent that while determination and intelligence could preserve my GPA in the face of fibromyalgia, there was no personal attribute or skill that could heal my body and allow me to join my teammates on the field.

It was time to confront the beast.

In doing so, I kept in mind the schoolyard aphorism that there is strength in numbers. I did not face fibromyalgia alone, but with mathematics by my side. Baseball is a game of statistics, and if fibromyalgia threatened to steal the sport I loved through physical deterioration, I would outsmart this insolent illness and reclaim ownership of baseball through intellectual pursuits. I began a mathematical research project, analyzing the effectiveness of current baseball statistics, as well as deriving my own.

Fibromyalgia forced me to redefine my goals and personal standards for success. This baseball project was my first step toward reclaiming my life and laying the foundation for victory over my illness. As calculations replaced pitching drills, my passion for baseball was channeled into a burgeoning love of science and math. Hours I had previously devoted to softball became filled with scientific journals and books, and summers I used to spend at athletic camps were devoted to research at local universities. Baseball provided a link to my pre-fibromyalgia life at a time when I desperately needed one, and through baseball I realized that if I wanted to beat fibromyalgia, I could not simply hope it would disappear overnight. Whether I modified my medications or adapted my schedule, I needed to devise my own way to face fibromyalgia's antagonizing aches head-on.

So when that taunting rascal waves his middle finger in my direction, my cheeks do not flush with angry humiliation and my legs do not run away, but my hands mold a snowball and my arm pulls back. As I follow through with my throw, pain radiating up my arm, I know instantly that I will pay for this exertion in the morning. But my icy comeback hits the sniggering boy squarely in the chest, knocking him backward into the snow as his accomplice's mouth lies agape in shock.

Well. I guess I've still got it.



Five - Review.

Sarah's story opens with a vivid anecdote of being pelted by a snowball that brings the reader to the scene of the crime with detailed sensory descriptions. She skillfully ties the story to her talent for athletics, which in turn leads to her struggle with fibromyalgia and how in the face of physical limitation she redirected her passions to science and math. The story comes full circle and ties together nicely at the end with the conclusion of the snowball scene, which leaves the reader feeling victorious and vindicated for Sarah, as well as proud of her determination.

Sarah manages to cover a lot in this essay. The personal statement is an evident combination of overcoming obstacles and discovering academic passions, and also discreetly includes résumé-worthy accomplishments, such as her own mathematical research project on baseball statistics and summer research at local universities. What is important about her personal statement is that she goes beyond the résumé and gives the admissions officers a look at her character and personal struggle. Even though her essay is a bit long, Sarah does not waste a word and ensures that every detail she includes contributes in some way to the overall message she is trying to convey about herself. Rather than simply evoking sympathy for her situation, Sarah weaves humor and a cheeky attitude throughout her narrative. She introduces her love of mathematics with a creative twist on the common saying, "strength in numbers," and affectionately alludes to her father's depiction of fibromyalgia as "your body's way of giving you the finger."

Her vivacious and tenacious personality shines through in her colorful and descriptive language, painting a clear picture of Sarah as a determined person who doesn't let a chronic illness defeat her and instead finds another passion.



Six.

Why a Republican Read The Communist Manifesto

I am a conservative. Point-blank. I'm not talking "hardcore, no gay marriage, abortion equates to eternity in Hell, Catholicism is the only religion worthy of my acknowledgment" conservative, but I believe in limited government intervention in private business. I may seem like an unlikely candidate for such beliefs; I live in Springfield, Massachusetts, an urban environment where the majority of the population utilizes some sort of government assistance to supplement the costs of living. Well, maybe not the absolute majority, but I certainly see a lot of it. Though raised as a Catholic, I believe in nothing more than simple spirituality, and do not abide by all the stipulations of the strict Catholic community (although I do continue to attend church because I find the environment welcoming and the people overwhelmingly happy and uplifting). I attend the Drama Studio, a small, conservatory style acting community where I am considered the token Republican (artsy and conservative—is this what Harold Camping meant by the Rapture?) Not surprisingly, my colleagues have made many attempts at conversion ("Watch MSNBC, Danielle; I promise you'll love it!") But I stick to my guns—no pun intended. However, I have found that sharing the majority of my time with those of conflicting opinions has enlightened me in the ways of respect and compromise.

Enter Jacob Mueller. Literally the son of a preacher man (his father is the minister at Trinity United Methodist Church), his political views on Facebook are listed as "Member of the Communist Party of America." Oh, boy ... He entered my Advanced Scene Work class in its second semester, and as is the Drama Studio custom, I welcomed him with open arms and commenced what I soon discovered to be the long and interesting process of getting to know him. Through this, I discovered a few important things; like me, he loved politics. Like me, he was well informed. And, like me, he was more than willing to argue his opinion.

Through our Odd Couple dynamic, we found an endless number of conversation topics. Every day was a new, "Did you see what the Tea Party's newest legislation entails?" countered by a, "How about that Scott Brown, eh?" I was the Michele Bachmann to his Al Gore. But the remarkable thing about our debates was not their intensity or their depth, but how much I was learning by listening to him talk.

A strange thing was happening to me. For the girl who had always been staunchly opinionated and stubborn, who had never been one for agreeing with the opposition, who took pride in her ability to stand her ground even when she represented the minority view, compromise suddenly had a new meaning. Its connotation was no longer negative. And, in turn my ability to not only understand but also respect a view contradictory to my own was growing in strength. In order to foster this newfound mind-set, I presented myself with the ultimate challenge. In a moment of excited passion, I logged on to Amazon.com and, for \$4.95, ordered a copy of The Communist Manifesto. The little book, with its floppy laminated cover depicting a hammer and a sickle on a glossy black background and plain white block letters spelling out its title with inconspicuous innocence, took its place at the head of my bed, where it resided for the next month. Bit by bit, it began to fill with marks of pensive notation, speckles of yellow appearing in odd places where the highlighter had bled through, its fragile pages curving with the insistent pen marks that filled their margins.

As I devoured the words of Marx and Engels, I realized something remarkable. I'm not going to tell you I agreed with them; in a lot of instances, I didn't. But I did understand what they were saying, and I was able to respect them both as visionaries and intellectuals. Where the old voice in my head would have said, "Wow, what idiots," my new voice was open to more than just the fundamental ideas, but the intelligence it must have taken to form them and the thought process behind them.

When I register to vote, I will not be registering as a Democrat. You won't see me at any PETA meetings, and you certainly won't hear me speaking fondly about President Obama's plans for health care. But I can proudly say that The Communist Manifesto taught this Republican what it means to compromise, and to respect.



Six – Review.

Lessard's essay “works” and earned its author a spot at Harvard, yet it circumvents a general guideline of college essay writing by speaking directly about politics and religion—albeit in a funny and personal way. Lessard explains humorously and intimately her status as a curious conservative. If one is going to talk about controversial topics like politics in a college essay, avoid entirely (as this essay does—and even if you do make mention of *The Communist Manifesto*!) providing your own manifesto. The main problem with manifestoes is that they are not personal, but abstract. By contrast, the college essay needs to tell us all about you, ideally in an unforgettable, up-close, down-to-earth way. Nobody wants to read the RNC or DNC policy platform coughed up as an essay. Instead colleges want to get to know the real you.

One way this essay could be improved might include providing more detail about what exactly Lessard found meaningful in the works of Marx and Engels. As it stands, the essay only touches on *The Communist Manifesto* in a cursory way despite Lessard's reading of that work being pivotal to the arc of the essay. Even another couple of sentences explaining the writer's “respect” (Is it grudging admiration for the Marxist theory of history? Some element of the text's social critique?) could deepen the essay's analysis.

Very effectively, however, Lessard positions herself in this essay as a person on an intellectual journey who is open to new ideas and experiences. This is an excellent posture to demonstrate to an admissions committee. College is all about learning—intellectually, socially, politically, and beyond—and colleges often find students irresistible when they are hellbent on learning to the utmost. Be an intellectual astronaut and demonstrate that in your college essay, as Lessard did quite effectively.



Seven.

Soft Wooden Heart

The backbone of my life is my writing desk. I like to describe its surface as an organized mess (despite my parents' overdramatized description of a bomb site), a state of positive entropy and minimum energy. Math exercises overlap an organizer, set next to almost-empty tubes of paint and overdue library books. A constantly filled bottle of water sits behind a glasses' case full of guitar picks, and carved into a mountain of paper, right in the middle, is a space reserved for my laptop—on days when I am slouching, *The Complete Works of William Shakespeare* needs to be slid under it. An eclectic desk shows an eclectic personality; mine has had the honor of being the training grounds prior to the Great (final) Battle (exam) of Chemistry, the peaceful meadow of relaxed reading afternoons, and all in all the pristine-turned-colorful canvas of an inquisitive mind.

I remember buying it with my mother five years ago, when my bruised knees protested against the tiny white-paint-gone-yellow one I had used since childhood. My new desk was made of native Rimu heartwood—solid, resilient, dependable—a perfect role model for me to grow into. Over the years, its material became representative of my New Zealand identity, its surface slowly coated in quirky personality, and its compartments filled with treasured memories; the heartwood desk echoed my heart.

At first, it did not fit with the decor of the rest of my room, which even now appears boxy and stark next to my grandiosely elegant writing desk, but its quiet strength is unafraid of individuality, just as I have learned to become. It has watched as I grew stronger branches, a straighter trunk, firmer roots; whereas I had once been but a shy young seedling, I sprouted leaves and with them the ability and yearning to provide shade for others. I have certainly physically grown into it, but although I would like to think that I have become completely independent, I remain human; in inevitable times of need, it is still my steadfast, sturdy desk that offers its support.

I sit here and, well, I write: joyfully, desolately, irately, wistfully—at times paralyzed by excitement, at others crippled by fear. I scrawl notes in my organizer (which is, naturally, not in the least organized), words overflow my blog, overemotional oranges and blues plague my illustrations; shallow scratch marks indent the wood from where I have pressed too passionately into paper. It may be solid, but it is elastic enough to be shaped, resilient enough to adapt: This is my soft wooden heart.

It can take it. My desk remains constant despite scars of experience—unassuming, stoic, ever watchful. Even when I dismembered dying cell phones, their frail key tones pleading for mercy, the desk stood there, nonchalant. Regardless of what fervor goes on from time to time, it knows there will eventually be a constant calm; my lively nest of rebuilt mobiles still calls this place home. Sometimes, I rest my uncertain head on its reassuring solid surface and the wood presses back into my heartbeat, communicating in Morse: “Don’t worry. Some things will never change.”

And, like a mother, it always turns out to be right. Beneath my seemingly chaotic coat of papers and objects; beneath the superfluous, temporary things that define my present life, my desk and my heart remain still—solid, stable, and evergreen, ready to be written onto and scratched into by experience.



Seven – Review.

Winnie’s piece shows us that a meaningful essay doesn’t have to be about a major accomplishment or a painful personal experience; oftentimes, the most inspired writing can evolve from something as simple and unexpected as a writing desk. Winnie’s essay is successful because it invites readers into her world, where we discover a smart, unique, and self-aware young woman. Through her “eclectic” desk, we see her interest in the arts, her academic prowess, and her challenges with procrastination. We glimpse her pride in her heritage, her struggles with self-doubt, and her faith in herself to adapt to change and embrace new experiences. By the final sentence, we feel that if we heard Winnie’s voice in a classroom or sat next to her in the library, we would recognize her right away.

Winnie’s ability to bring herself to life through language also creates some challenges in her essay. She has so much to show us and does so in such creative ways that readers can feel overwhelmed by the information and figurative language that competes for our attention. Your college essay is a valuable opportunity to show who you are, but it’s not necessary to weave every aspect of your life into 650 words. For even the most gifted writers, less is often more.



Eight.

I think the most tragic part of my childhood originated from my sheer inability to find anything engraved with my name. I never had a CHAFFEE license plate on my hand-me-down red Schwinn. No one ever gave me a key chain or coffee mug with the beautiful loops of those double Fs and Es. Alas, I was destined to search through the names; longingly staring at the space between CHAD and CHARLOTTE hoping one day a miracle would occur. Fortunately, this is one of the few negative aspects of a name like “Chaffee Duckers.”

My name has always been an integral part of my identity. Sure, it sounds a bit like my parents created it from a bag of Scrabble tiles, but it comes from a long-lost ancestor, Comfort Chaffee. Now it’s all mine. In my opinion, a name can make or break a person. The ability to embody a name depends on the individual. My greatest goal in life is to be the kind of unique person deserving of a name so utterly random and absurd.

I began my journey in preschool. Nothing about me screamed normal. I was not prim, proper, and poised. I preferred sneaking away from my preschool classroom, barefoot, in the purple velvet dress I wore every single day to resting obediently during nap time.

I grew up in a family akin to a modified Brady Bunch. Stepsisters, half sisters, stepbrothers, and stepparents joined my previously miniscule household. But in a family of plain names like Chris, Bill, John, Liz, Katherine, and Mark, I was still the only Chaffee.

I was a bit of a reverse black sheep in my family. My name helped me carve an identity separate from my myriad of siblings. Instead of enriching my brain with Grand Theft Auto, I preferred begging my parents to take me to the bookstore. While my parents mandated homework time for my brothers, they never questioned my work ethic or wiretapped my assignment notebook. The thing that set me apart from the herd was that I was self-disciplined enough to take control of my own life. From the very beginning I never depended on my parents’ help or motivation to finish my schoolwork. Putting school first came naturally to me, much to the distaste and confusion of my siblings. My work ethic became known as the patented “Chaffee Method.”

As I got older, I began to embody my name more and more. I didn’t want to be that girl with the weird name in the back of the class eating her hair, so I learned how to project my ideas in both written and spoken forms. I was often picked to lead classroom discussions and my complete disregard for making a fool of myself bolstered that skill. The manner in which I operate academically is perfectly described as Chaffee-esque; including but not limited to elaborate study songs, complex pneumonic devices, study forts, and the occasional John C. Calhoun costume.

I take pride in the confusion on a person’s face when they first read my name. Seeing someone struggle over those two unfamiliar syllables fills me with glee. I feel as though I am adding a new word to their vocabulary. So on my last day as a page in the U.S. Senate, I prepared myself for the anticipated awkward stumbling as Senator Harry Reid thanked me by name in his closing address. But the stumble never came. I felt very humbled by his perfect pronunciation. Perhaps Chaffee is actually catching on!



Eight – Review.

Chaffee’s essay is strong because it follows a clear narrative, all enabled by her rather unusual name. While not everyone has a name as unique as “Chaffee,” and are therefore unable to use this approach, writing an essay about an experience or aspect of one’s life that is singular to oneself is a smart approach for any college essay. She shapes her development from preschool to high school in the lens of her name, demonstrating the importance that it has played throughout her life.

Chaffee’s initial anecdote immediately grips the reader; many people have shared the experience of looking for engraved merchandise, and the fact that she can find none bearing her name sets the stage for the rest of the essay. Chaffee quickly qualifies her discontent with her name, stating that this anecdote “is one of the few negative aspects of a name like ‘Chaffee Duckers.’” Unfortunately this qualification is a bit misplaced since she immediately returns to tell a story of her upbringing while failing to address any of the positive aspects of her name until paragraphs later. This is a bit of hedging that isn’t entirely necessary in the limited space allowed by most personal statements.

Yet, the essay works quite well. Chaffee spends a great deal of time elaborating on how she was different from both her family and others with examples of her transgressions in preschool and her penchant for schoolwork and education as opposed to procrastination or video games like Grand Theft Auto. Chaffee toots her own horn just a little bit when describing the merits of her work ethic, but it is still fairly endearing overall, and there is no shame in sharing a desire for learning. Chaffee states in the conclusion of her essay that she now takes “pride in the confusion on a person’s face,” as they try to read her name, demonstrating how she has now accepted and come to appreciate the fact that she does not share a name with the average Mary, Dick, or Jane.



Nine.

“Let’s face it, you’re slow,” my violin teacher said.

He was, as always, complaining that running was detracting from my practice time.

That summed up what running had always meant to me, ever since I was a seventh grader, choosing his sport for the first time. I was fine and content, however. I always had Jeffrey and Archie, classmates like me who ran slowly. We were good friends. We laughed together; we raced together; we pushed each other, and endured tough workouts together. But after middle school the people I trained with went on to do things they were better at. I remained, even though I was not good enough to be considered for varsity.

High school running was hell. I struggled with workouts, most of which I had to run alone. In the hot, dry days of autumn, I often coughed on the dust trails left by my teammates as they vanished into the distance. During the workouts, I got passed incessantly, almost getting run over on occasion. It hurt not to be important; to be dead weight for the team. I looked forward to the next year, when I could hopefully run with the incoming freshmen.

It didn’t happen that way. Even a year later, I was still the slowest on the team. How could the freshmen who had snored off the whole summer beat me, a veteran from middle school and high school with decent summer training? I nevertheless reconsidered the effectiveness of my training, and looked forward to getting “back in shape.” It was only after my condition had been deteriorating steadily for a few weeks that I began to feel a new level of humiliation. I started to have trouble keeping up with old ladies in the park, and each day I worked frantically to prevent the discovery of that fact by my teammates, running toward the sketchy areas of the ramble, in the south, where there’s barely anybody. My mother, worried about the steady deterioration of my condition, contacted a doctor.

I was anemic.

The doctor prescribed a daily iron pill, and the results were exhilarating. I joked that I was taking steroids. I sunk into endless oxygen. I got tired less. During the workouts, I felt more machine than man. Iron therapy taught me something fundamental. It reminded me why I was running; why I had stuck to this damn sport for four straight years. When I was anemic, I struggled to gather what little motivation I had for those painfully slow jogs in those parks. Putting the effort in, and seeing the dramatic results fooled my mind like a well-administered placebo. Iron therapy was the training wheels that would jump-start my dramatic improvement.

It took four months—four months of iron pills, blood tests, and training—to get back to my personal best: the 5:46 mile that I had run the year before. Early February that year, the training wheels came off. I was running close to seven miles a day on my own. But I wasn’t counting. I could catch a light. I could walk as many stairs as I wanted without getting tired. I was even far ahead of where I was the year before. After two and a half years as a 5:50 miler, I finally had a breakthrough race. I ran a 5:30. I asked coach if I could eventually break 5 minutes. He told me to focus more on maintaining my fitness through spring break.

I ran the mile again, this time outdoors. Coach had me seeded at a 5:30. I ran the first lap, holding back. I didn’t want to overextend myself. I hoped to squeeze by with a 5:35. The euphoria was unprecedented as I realized by the second lap that I was a dozen seconds ahead and still holding back. I finished with a 5:14.

On the bus ride back from the meet, one of my long-standing dreams came true. I pretended to ignore Coach sitting next to me, but he kept on giving me glances. He was excited about my time. We talked a lot about the race. We talked about my continuous and dramatic improvement. He said it was early in the season and that I would break 5 minutes after only a few weeks of training.

Six weeks later, Mr. Song, my chemistry teacher, asked me if I had broken 5 minutes for the mile yet. I told him all about how I had run in three meets over the past month and had failed to break 5:15 on every one of them. I told him that 5 minutes was now for me a mirage in the distance. Mr. Song, however, did not show much concern: “You’re just overtrained. Once you ease up before the big meet, you’ll drop in time once more.”

Even though these consoling words were from the man who had baffled my nutritionist when he had guessed that I was anemic, I still doubted his wisdom. On Sunday, I would run the mile once. My last mile of the year. This was it. Using my tried-and-true racing strategy, I finished with a 5:02, a 12-second drop in time. Mr. Song’s predictions had again turned out to be correct.

Before I was anemic, the correlation between hard work and success was something that only appeared in the cliché success stories of the talented few. Now, I am running more mileage than I ever have before. And my violin teacher still complains.

But I smile. I know it’s going somewhere.



Nine - Review.

John opens this essay by illustrating the iconic “grabber” done well: simple, unexpected, and leaving the reader wanting more. Is he actually “slow” at the violin (but that doesn’t quite make sense, does it)? We then learn all about John’s true passion: running.

Although challenging (and not to mention the fact that he always finishes last), John has stuck with running for many years. Eventually, his “slowness” deteriorates to the point where he needs medical intervention and finds his kryptonite: iron. This magic mineral allows him to heal, excel in his running, and ultimately exceed his wildest expectations by almost breaking the 5-minute mark by a few seconds. The themes that permeate this essay are perseverance and tenacity: that all-powerful “grit” that distinguishes this student. John guides us through his story through the lens of his infallible work ethic. Even though he did not reach his exact goal, he is seconds away from it, and the reader knows he will keep pushing to achieve it.

As a reader, I would love to hear more about what happens next. Is there another instance that demonstrates John’s persistence or has he applied this newfound confidence and self-awareness to other aspects of his life? This self-reflection section is the most important element of the essay as it allows admissions readers a window into what drives a student. It is important to develop this and “show” the evidence of how the student has changed or what they have learned from this experience.

As the essay culminates, John makes us smile as he smiles (even though his violin teacher is still not too happy with him). We know John has learned to appreciate the beauty of the journey rather than the destination and we are just thrilled for him!

