

MOON PREP'S
FAVORITE ESSAYS

HARVARD
EDITION

TEN ESSAYS THAT LANDED
STUDENTS A SPOT AT
HARVARD

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ONE.

I sat on my parents' bed weeping with my head resting on my knees. "Why did you have to do that to me? Why did you have to show me the house and then take it away from me?" Hopelessly, I found myself praying to God realizing it was my last resort.

For years, my family and I found ourselves moving from country to country in hopes of a better future. Factors, such as war and lack of academic opportunities, led my parents to pack their bags and embark on a new journey for our family around the world. Our arduous journey first began in Kuçovë, Albania, then Athens, Greece, and then eventually, Boston, Massachusetts. Throughout those years, although my family always had a roof over our heads, I never had a place I could call "home."

That night that I prayed to God, my mind raced back to the night I was clicking the delete button on my e-mails, but suddenly stopped when I came upon a listing of the house. It was September 22, 2007 – eight years exactly to the day that my family and I had moved to the United States. Instantly, I knew that it was fate that was bringing this house to me. I remembered visiting that yellow house the next day with my parents and falling in love with it. However, I also remembered the heartbreaking phone call I received later on that week saying that the owners had chosen another family's offer.

A week after I had prayed to God, I had given up any hopes of my family buying the house. One day after school, I unlocked the door to our one-bedroom apartment and walked over to the telephone only to see it flashing a red light. I clicked PLAY and unexpectedly heard the voice of our real estate agent. "Eda!" she said joyfully. "The deal fell through with the other family—the house is yours! Call me back immediately to get started on the papers." For a moment, I stood agape and kept replaying the words in my head. Was this really happening to me? Was my dream of owning a home finally coming true?

Over the month of November, I spent my days going to school and immediately rushing home to make phone calls. Although my parents were not fluent enough in English to communicate with the bank and real estate agent, I knew that I was not going to allow this obstacle to hinder my dream of helping to purchase a home for my family. Thus, unlike a typical thirteen-year-old girl's conversations, my phone calls did not involve the mention of makeup, shoes, or boys. Instead, my conversations were composed of terms, such as "fixed-rate mortgages," "preapprovals," and "down payments." Nevertheless, I was determined to help purchase this home after thirteen years of feeling embarrassed from living in a one-bedroom apartment. No longer was I going to experience feelings of humiliation from not being able to host sleepovers with my friends or from not being able to gossip with girls in school about who had the prettiest room color.

I had been homeless for the first thirteen years of my life. Although I will never be able to fully repay my parents for all of their sacrifices, the least I could do was to help find them a home that they could call their own—and that year, I did. To me, a home means more than the general conception of "four walls and a roof." A home is a place filled with memories and laughter from my family. No matter where my future may lead me, I know that if at times I feel alone, I will always have a yellow home with my family inside waiting for me.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 1

Honest. Heartbreaking. Powerful.

Those were the first three words that came to mind after reading Eda's essay.

What we love about Eda's essay is its refreshing vulnerability. Too many college essays are "too" picture-perfect. Eda doesn't censor the truth, even if admitting her inner thoughts may potentially paint her in a negative light. For example, she starts the entire essay with a scene of her weeping on her parents' bed, blaming them for her misfortune. By being so honest, Eda showcases her genuine growth and maturity over time.

Her personal voice is also strong throughout the essay. When she talks about falling in love with "that yellow house," an image of said house is automatically conjured up in our minds. When she speaks of the heartbreak she experienced upon learning "that yellow house" was sold to another family, we felt pain in our hearts too. Her deliberate choice to "PLAY" the voicemail she received for us and include her subsequent internal thoughts further pulls us into reliving her journey with her.

Yet, she goes beyond merely telling us of her journey. She highlights just how atypical her journey has been. Instead of enjoying phone conversations about makeup or shoes, she is talking to agents about fix-rate mortgages and down payments... all at the age of 13. Though she does not explicitly state this (she doesn't need to): it is clear that Eda has had to grow up fast, becoming a stronger individual as a result.

Her understanding of the word "home" evolves from a physical roof over her head to a more abstract one. Home is wherever her "memories and laughter" exist. In the end, she comes to terms with the sacrifices her parents have made. Learning to be proud of her upbringing showcases Eda's evolution.

Eda is someone who will overcome whatever challenges thrown her way, making her a strong college applicant.

TWO.

James was not fitting in with everyone else. During lunch, he sat alone, playing with his own toys. During group activities, the other campers always complained when paired with him. What was wrong? As camp counselor, I quietly observed his behavior—nothing out of the ordinary. I just couldn't fathom why the other campers treated him like a pariah.

After three days of ostracism, James broke down during a game of soccer. Tears streaming down his cheeks, he slumped off the field, head in his hands. I jogged toward him, my forehead creased with concern. Some campers loudly remarked, "Why is that creep crying?" Furious indignation leaped into my heart. They were the ones who "accidentally" bumped into him and called him "James the Freak." It was their cruelty that caused his meltdown, and now they were mocking him for it. I sharply told them to keep their thoughts to themselves. I squatted beside James and asked him what was wrong. Grunting, he turned his back to me. I had to stop his tears, and I had to make him feel comfortable. So for the next hour, I talked about everything a seven-year-old boy might find interesting, from sports to Transformers.

"I have a question," I asked as James began to warm to me. I took a deep breath and dove right into the problem. "Why do the other campers exclude you?" Hesitantly, he took off his shoes and socks, and pointed at his left foot. One, two, three ... four. He had four toes. We had gone swimming two days before: All the campers must have noticed. I remembered my childhood, when even the smallest abnormality—a bad haircut, a missing tooth—could cause others, including myself, to shrink away. I finally understood.

But what could I do to help? I scoured my mind for the words to settle his demons. But nothing came to me. Impulsively, I hugged him—a gesture of intimacy we camp leaders were encouraged not to initiate, and an act I later discovered no friend had ever offered James before. Then, I put my hand on his shoulder and looked him straight in the eyes. I assured him that external features didn't matter, and that as long as he was friendly, people would eventually come around. I listed successful individuals who had not been hindered by their abnormalities. And finally, I told him he would always be my favorite camper, regardless of whether he had two, five, or a hundred toes.

On the last day of camp, I was jubilant—James was starting to fit in. Although the teasing had not completely disappeared, James was speaking up and making friends. And when, as we were saying our good-byes, James gave me one last hug and proclaimed that I was his "bestest friend in the whole wide world," my heart swelled up. From my campers, I learned that working with children is simply awesome. And from James, I learned that a little love truly goes a long way.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 2

Charles Wong takes the all too common experience of watching someone be excluded and explains how he combats it. In his personal account of being a camp counselor, Charles not only communicates that he cares deeply for others, but also displays his thought process for how he solves problems in general. Instead of just declaring these personal characteristics, he shows them through a personal account. The pointed decision to “show” not “tell” is an excellent essay tactic.

First, Charles begins with his description of the situation. His tone is casual and straightforward. He incorporates crucial details, but his writing is not superfluous. His essay is concise and easy to follow. While this approach may seem to lack sophistication, it reflects Charles’s raw, real thoughts. The reader can feel his concern; Charles walks us through his genuine dilemma. Additionally, the acts of kindness he describes—the pep talks, the hugs—offer insight into his character. The decision to include these details paint Charles as a kind and bright personality, something of value on any college campus.

Moreover, Charles does more than just describe how he solved this particular problem, but expands it to life in general. He grasps meaning from a seemingly mundane experience and explains how it changed his entire mindset. This ability to consciously grow suggests Charles’s drive to learn from all life has to offer; he is a student in more than just the classroom.

THREE.

In hazy stillness, a sudden flurry of colored skirts, whispers of “Merde!” Sternly, my fingers smooth back my hair, although they know no loose strands will be found. My skin absorbs heat from stage lights above—if only that heat would seep into my brain, denature some proteins, and deactivate the neurons stressing me out. A warm hand, accompanied by an even warmer smile, interrupts my frenzied solitude. I glance up. My lovely teacher nods, coaxing my frozen lips into a thawed smile. A complex figure, filled in with doubt, yet finished with shades of confidence: My body takes its place and waits.

One, two, three, four; two, two, three, four. On stage, the lights and music wash over me. Never having had a true ballet solo before, my lungs are one breath away from hyperventilating. Trying to achieve a Zen-like state, I imagine a field of daisies, yet my palms continue sweating disobediently. It’s not that I’ve never been on stage alone before; I’ve had plenty of piano recitals and competitions. Yet, while both performances consume my mind and soul, ballet demands complete commitment of my body.

Gently slide into arabesque and lean downward; try not to fall flat on face—Mom’s videotaping. In terms of mentality, I would hardly be described as an introvert; yet, a fear of failure has still kept me from taking risks. Maybe I was scared of leaping too high, falling too far, and hitting the hard floor. As I moved up in the cutthroat world of dance, this fear only increased; the pressure of greater expectations and the specter of greater embarrassment had held me contained. Now, every single eyeball is on me.

Lean extra in this pirouette; it’s more aesthetic. But is it always better to be safe than sorry? Glancing toward the wings, I see my teacher’s wild gesticulations: Stretch your arms out, she seems to mime, More! A genuine smile replaces one of forced enthusiasm; alone on the stage, this is my chance to shine. I breathe in the movements, forget each individual step. More than just imagining, but finally experiencing the jubilation of the music, I allow my splits to stretch across the stage and my steps to extend longer and longer, until I’m no longer safe and my heart is racing. Exhilarated and scared in the best way, I throw myself into my jumps. I no longer need to imagine scenes to get in the mood; the emotions are twirling and leaping within me.

Reaching, stretching, grabbing, flinging ... My fear no longer shields me. I find my old passion for ballet, and remember the grace and poise that can nevertheless convey every color of emotion. Playing it safe will leave me part of the backdrop; only by taking risks can I step into the limelight. Maybe I’ll fall, but the rush is worth it. I’ll captain an all-male science bowl team, run a marathon, audition for a musical, and embrace the physical and intellectual elation of taking risks.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 3

Lisa creates a winning essay by successfully invoking real emotions in the reader through her creative, descriptive prose that conveys vivid imagery, heartfelt feelings, and wholesome introspection. I instantly likened Lisa's allegory to a bird trapped in a closed cage; the cage serves as a metaphor for what we all face in our lives, our fears. Lisa's first ballet solo is brilliantly illustrated as her 'Aha! moment' where she sheds her fears (opens her cage) and, with careful self-reflection, chooses to embrace future risks (flies only forward).

In paragraphs 1-3, Lisa captivates us instantly through her beautiful, rich language and imagery, as she portrays herself immobilized by stress and a fear of failure and family/public opinion. I empathize and want to learn more! Her warm humor shines perfectly: wanting to deactivate her brain neurons and reminding herself not to fall face-first lest she gets scolded by her mother/family - wonderfully done! Lisa uses her "lovely teacher" as her grounding, comfort zone and supporter, a theme many can share. Her anxiety is relatable, and she uses this to explicate her general risk averse nature.

In paragraphs 4-5, Lisa's solo is radiantly depicted as her defining moment where she dances and realizes her transformation- fears turn to passion and excitement. She is poetry in motion in the moment, smiling, shedding her fears, and embracing risk like a warm glass of milk. A poignant question is posed, "But is it always better to be safe than sorry?" Through introspection, Lisa expresses her desire to pursue risks that will advance her personally. Acknowledging she may not always succeed, "the rush is worth it". Lisa ends with concrete examples of leadership roles and activities that she will pursue at college- admissions officers favorably view students eager to step outside their comfort zones and embark on new adventures/challenges at college. To make this essay stronger, Lisa could have highlighted precisely how she will tackle any fears that may crop up during new obstacles at college, tying to lessons learned through her ballet.

Superbly written in a distinct narrative form, this essay crafts an experience that is vibrant, funny, deep, and relatable. Lisa's brand values seamlessly flow throughout the essay: creativity, determination, overcoming obstacles, self-reflection, growth through risk and, of course, passion! We are left with a glowing lesson in motivation in the hope of ridding oneself of such negative feelings to go on and achieve greater things - 'playing it dangerous'.

FOUR.

Several years ago, my mother told me I listen to “white people music.” And I suppose that’s true—rock 'n' roll tends to spring from the middle-class basements of young, white men. Though I did point out that its origins trace back to jazz musicians of the Harlem Renaissance. Also that one of the greatest guitarists of all time—dear Mr. Hendrix; may he rest in peace—was black.

My devotion to punk rock began in seventh grade, when Green Day’s “Boulevard of Broken Dreams” came up on my iTunes shuffle. I started to look into their other releases, eventually immersing myself into the complete punk discography. My mother, having grown up in a racially segregated New York, was more likely to listen to Stevie Wonder than Stevie Nicks.

But, she must have figured, to each her own. So while my compatriots indulged in the music of Taylor Swift, One Direction, and Lady Gaga, my tacky Hot Topic headphones blasted Green Day, Ramones, and The Clash. My young adolescent ears drank in the raw, chaotic beauty, an echo of the pain of the past. The thrashing, pulsating vitality of the instruments painted a picture, connecting me to the disillusioned kids who launched an epic movement of liberation some 40 years ago.

Punkers question authority. Aggressively contrarian, they advocate for the other side—the side that seemed smothered silent during the post-Vietnam era. They rejected the established norms. They spoke out and weren’t afraid.

I had always felt different from my peers. In my girls’s prep school, the goal was to be blond and good at soccer. I was neither, which automatically deemed me “uncool”. I had a few close friends but never felt like I was part of a whole.

Then came the punk philosophy, for the outliers, for those who were different. That was something I could be part of.

Instead of trying to conform to my peers, I adopted an anti-conformist attitude. Much like the prematurely gray anti-hero of my favorite book, I sneered at all the “phonies” around me. I resented anything popular. Uggs? Wouldn’t buy them. Yoga pants? Never. Starbucks? Well, I could make a few concessions.

But I felt more cynical than liberated. I wasted so much energy on being different than I lost track of what actually made me happy. I insisted I didn’t care what people thought of me, which was true. Yet if I based my actions almost solely on their behavior, how could I deny their influence?

Luckily, as I transitioned from a private school to a brand new public high school, I got to clean the slate. I bought yoga pants and found they were comfortable. I listened to a wide variety of music, even the eh kind that wasn’t 100% hardcore punk. And I was happier.

I revised my punk philosophy: Do as you like—whether it fits into the “system” or not. The Beatles’s “Revolution” lyrics sum it up well:

You tell me it’s the institution
Well, you know
You’d better free your mind instead

What I think Lennon was getting at is questioning everything does not entail opposing everything. Defiance for the sake of defiance is unproductive at best, destructive at worst. I believe in life’s greater Truths, like Love and Justice. These Truths are what should govern my actions—not what’s popular and what isn’t. Striving to act on these ideals has helped me stay true to myself, regardless of what’s considered “conformist.”

Perhaps I’ve failed the punk movement. We’ll have to wait and see. In the meantime, I’ll do what makes me happy and change what doesn’t. I’ll wear Doc Martens instead of Uggs; I’ll partake in a grande pumpkin spice latte; I’ll watch Gossip Girl; I’ll blare my favorite guitar solo over the speakers in my room.

And that’s as punk as it gets.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 4

From the snarky title and fiery opening, I was immediately drawn in. I and many people on our team at The Art of Applying® grew up as one of the few students of color in our honors classes, being told we liked “white people things.”

When you write about very specific personal experiences you’ve had, you can strike an emotional chord and connection with people who have similar experiences, and you can simultaneously intrigue people who have had vastly different experiences.

The student’s response to her mother’s assertion and the level of knowledge the student demonstrates about punk rock’s origins and political context show that she doesn’t just enjoy punk music passively as a fan; she was curious enough to research and learn about its historical roots, and confident enough to offer a contradictory viewpoint about what punk music is and who it is and isn’t for.

I enjoyed reading the journey of how the student’s interest in punk rock blossomed from an interest into a passion and eventually an identity. Don’t just tell us the beginning and the end of a personal growth journey; show us the messy middle too.

The student concisely depicts a vivid image of her outsider status in her private school without villainizing the other students. She also uses humor and wordplay well when she makes a concession for enjoying Starbucks.

A turning point in the essay comes when the student starts questioning whether her staunchly nonconformist identity is serving her. This shows an even deeper level of self reflection and personal growth.

While including quotes and lyrics in your essay can divert attention from your own words to a famous person’s, the student effectively uses the lyrics as a launching point for further reflection.

The conclusion is strong in that we see a person who has embraced all sides of herself rather than stubbornly clinging to a rigid image of nonconformity.

It ends in the same confident, energetic voice I grew to love throughout the piece, and the final sentences read like a glorious mic drop.

This essay is an excellent example to learn from if you want to write about how one of your passions spurred personal growth, struggles with fitting in, changing your mind about who you are, and/or getting clear on your values.

FIVE.

Finally, I had found a volunteer opportunity at the Long Marine Lab, a marine biology research facility at UC Santa Cruz! I envisioned swimming with dolphins, or perhaps studying behavioral patterns of decorator crabs. But when I discovered the nature of my work on the first day of volunteering, my excitement turned to disappointment: I'd be picking through albatross boluses, the indigestible materials they cough up before going to sea. Sure enough, after three hours of separating fishing line from brown muck, I began to dread what I was in for. At that point, I had no clue of just how interesting the opportunity would turn out to be, and it would remind me of how easily I become engrossed and fascinated by all sorts of random stuff.

It didn't take long for my boredom with the boluses to shift toward curiosity. In the first place, the project itself was fascinating. The idea was to research the behavior and diet of albatrosses at sea. These birds can fly for months without touching land! When the birds have chicks, they cough up whatever they've eaten at sea to feed their young. When the chicks become old enough to fly, they cough up the hard, indigestible materials left in their stomachs. These boluses contain squid beaks that can reveal the types of squid eaten and the area where the squid were caught. We volunteers would pick through the boluses, separating out anything that looked interesting.

As I got better at dissecting these blobs, I started finding crazy stuff, and my colleagues and I would often discuss important findings. There was, of course, the search for the biggest squid beak, and the fish eyes were always interesting. But most shocking was the plastic. Beyond the normal Styrofoam and fishing line were plastic bottle caps, lighters, even toothbrushes. Occasionally, Asian writing revealed distant origins. Once, I picked through a bolus permeated with orange goo, eventually to discover the round mouthpiece of a balloon. The origins of these artifacts were sad, but also fascinating. I learned of the Texas-sized trash heap in the middle of the Pacific, the effects of which I was witnessing firsthand. I gained a heightened awareness of the damage inflicted on the oceans by humans, and their far-reaching impacts. Perhaps most importantly, I realized that even the most tedious things can blow my mind.

If dissecting boluses can be so interesting, imagine the things I've yet to discover! I play piano and can see myself dedicating my life to the instrument, but I can't bear to think of everything else I'd have to miss. I'd love to study albatrosses, but also particle physics or history, and preferably all three. At this point in my life, I can't imagine picking just one area. At the same time, though, I love studying subjects in depth. I tend to get overwhelmed by my options, since I can't possibly choose them all. But at least I know I'll never be bored in life: there are just too many subjects to learn about, books to read, pieces to play, albatrosses to save, and boluses to dissect.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 5

What immediately distinguishes the first paragraph of the essay is the emotional honesty: Taras admits how “excitement turned to disappointment” and how he “had no clue” about how the opportunity would turn out. Too often, applicants fail to recognize that admissions officers are just normal people reading essays—people who also experience a range of emotions such as disappointment and confusion. While many applicants write essays full of detail and superlatives, emotional honesty is a critical component of a great essay.

Moreover, on a simple, albeit important level, he situates readers in the very first sentence by mentioning that his research was a volunteer opportunity at Long Marine Lab. Too many applicants attempt to keep a reader in suspense when, in fact, it is always better to provide context for an experience. Admissions officers don’t want to feel like they are deciphering the seemingly mundane who, what, when, and where. Nobody has time to untangle an essay.

Moving on, Taras succeeds in clearly demonstrating a sincere passion for his research by sharing interesting details of his work, such as understanding boluses. Whether writing about birds, Model UN, or any other possible topic, details are what help applicants show the admissions committees a level of intellectual vitality.

While an overall vibrant essay that captures a reader’s attention because of the unique topic, some aspects could have been improved. For example, exclamation points may come across as contrived enthusiasm to many readers—and strip away some of the decorum of an essay. Moreover, in the last paragraph, Taras mentions particle physics and history as possible interests, which did not align with the essay (and could have hurt chances for admissions in the final “shaping” of an incoming class).

SIX.

Gazing up at the starry sky, I see Cygnus, Hercules, and Pisces, remnants of past cultures. I listen to waves crash on the beach, the forces of nature at work. Isn't it odd how stars are flaming spheres and electrical impulses make beings sentient? The very existence of our world is a wonder; what are the odds that this particular planet developed all the necessary components, parts that all work in unison, to support life? How do they interact? How did they come to be? I thought back to how my previously simplistic mind-set evolved this past year.

At Balboa, juniors and seniors join one of five small learning communities, which are integrated into the curriculum. Near the end of sophomore year, I ranked my choices: Law Academy first—it seemed the most prestigious—and WALC, the Wilderness Arts and Literacy Collaborative, fourth. So when I was sorted into WALC, I felt disappointed at the inflexibility of my schedule and bitter toward my classes. However, since students are required to wait at least a semester before switching pathways, I stayed in WALC. My experiences that semester began shifting my ambition-oriented paradigm to an interest-oriented one. I didn't switch out.

Beyond its integrated classes, WALC takes its students on trips to natural areas not only to build community among its students, but also to explore complex natural processes and humanity's role in them. Piecing these lessons together, I create an image of our universe. I can visualize the carving of glacial valleys, the creation and gradation of mountains by uplift and weathering, and the transportation of nutrients to and from ecosystems by rivers and salmon. I see these forces on the surface of a tiny planet rotating on its axis and orbiting the sun, a gem in this vast universe. Through WALC, I have gained an intimate understanding of natural systems and an addiction to understanding the deep interconnections embedded in our cosmos.

Understanding a system's complex mechanics not only satisfies my curiosity, but also adds beauty to my world; my understanding of tectonic and gradational forces allows me to appreciate mountains and coastlines beyond aesthetics. By physically going to the place described in WALC's lessons, I have not only gained the tools to admire these systems, but have also learned to actually appreciate them. This creates a thirst to see more beauty in a world that's filled with poverty and violence, and a hunger for knowledge to satisfy that thirst. There are so many different systems to examine and dissect—science alone has universal, planetary, molecular, atomic, and subatomic scales to investigate. I hope to be able to find my interests by taking a variety of courses in college, and further humanity's understanding through research, so that all can derive a deeper appreciation for the complex systems that govern this universe.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 6

Tony's essay opens with stargazing at the ocean's edge where we experience his boundless curiosity towards the natural world, sentience, and life itself. This wide-eyed wonderment is rendered artfully, yet what actually enables this essay to succeed is its ability to ponder deep concepts without getting lost in the clouds.

The story itself revolves around an event that seems far removed from the incomprehensibility of the universe: a randomized selection has assigned Tony to study wilderness arts when he preferred the path of law. He is bitter that a decision impacting his studies has been determined by chance. We see vulnerability in his admission that he was beholden to an "ambition oriented paradigm," rather than studying what interested him most. However, what we discover through the rest of the essay is that Tony's decision to remain in wilderness arts is one that has transformed him completely, changing his perspective from a "simplistic mindset" to one that is addicted to "understanding the deep interconnections embedded in our cosmos."

The strength of Tony's language helps us appreciate the breadth and excitement of his unforeseen awakening. From visualizing the "carving of glacial valleys" to reveling in the complex mechanics of natural systems, the essay showcases how much more Tony appreciates our world thanks to an event that had once seemed unfairly arbitrary. Observing Tony's thirst for life's interconnectedness, we grow confident that his evolving perspective will guide his studies into exciting unexpected realms.

SEVEN.

Red, orange, purple, gold...I was caught in a riot of shifting colors. I pranced up and down the hill, my palms extended to the moving collage of butterflies that surrounded me. "Would you like to learn how to catch one?" Grandfather asked, holding out a glass jar. "Yes!" I cheered, his huge calloused fingers closing my chubby five-year-old hands around it carefully.

Grandfather put his finger to his lips, and I obliged as I watched him deftly maneuver his net. He caught one marvelous butterfly perched on a flower, and I clutched the open jar in anticipation as he slid the butterfly inside. It quivered and fell to the bottom of the jar, and I gasped. It struggled until its wings, ablaze in a glory of orange and red, quivered to a stop. I watched, wide-eyed, as it stopped moving. "Grandpa! What's happening?"

My grandfather had always had a collection of butterflies, but that was the first time I saw him catch one. After witnessing the first butterfly die, I begged him to keep them alive; I even secretly let some of them go. Therefore, to compromise, he began carrying a special jar for the days I accompanied him on his outings, a jar to keep the living butterflies. But the creatures we caught always weakened and died after a few days in captivity, no matter how tenderly I fed and cared for them. Grandfather took me aside and explained that the lifespan of an adult butterfly was very short. They were not meant to live forever: their purpose was to flame brilliantly and then fade away. Thus, his art serves as a memory of their beauty, an acknowledgement of nature's ephemeral splendor.

But nothing could stay the same. I moved to America and as the weekly excursions to the mountainside ended, so did our lessons in nature and science. Although six thousand miles away, I would never forget how my grandpa's wrinkles creased when he smiled or how he always smelled like mountain flowers.

As I grew older and slowly understood how Grandfather lived his life, I began to follow in his footsteps. He protected nature's beauty from decay with his art, and in the same way, I tried to protect my relationships, my artwork, and my memories. I surrounded myself with the journals we wrote together, but this time I recorded my own accomplishments, hoping to one day show him what I had done. I recorded everything, from the first time I spent a week away from home to the time I received a gold medal at the top of the podium at the California Tae Kwon Do Competition. I filled my new home in America with the photographs from my childhood and began to create art of my own. Instead of catching butterflies like my grandpa, I began experimenting with butterfly wing art as my way of preserving nature's beauty. Soon my home in America became a replica of my home in China, filled from wall to wall with pictures and memories.

Nine long years passed before I was reunited with him. The robust man who once chased me up the hillside had developed arthritis, and his thick black hair had turned white. The grandfather I saw now was not the one I knew; we had no hobby and no history in common, and he became another adult, distant and unapproachable. With this, I forgot all about the journals and photos that I had kept and wanted to share with him.

After weeks of avoidance, I gathered my courage and sat with him once again. This time, I carried a large, leather-bound book with me. "Grandfather," I began, and held out the first of my many journals. These were my early days in America, chronicled through pictures, art, and neatly-printed English. On the last page was a photograph of me and my grandfather, a net in his hand and a jar in mine. As I saw our faces, shining with proud smiles, I began to remember our days on the mountainside, catching butterflies and halting nature's eventual decay.

My grandfather has weakened over the years, but he is still the wise man who raised me and taught me the value of capturing the beauty of life. Although he has grown old, I have grown up. His legs are weak, but his hands are still as gentle as ever. Therefore, this time, it will be different. This time, I will no longer recollect memories, but create new ones.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 7

This essay presents a poetic recollection of the author's early childhood experiences with her grandfather. It paints a beautiful picture of her learning a valuable life lesson on the ephemeral nature of beauty and art, while also portraying the author as an astute observer of both nature and humanity.

A challenging aspect of writing an essay about a person who has influenced you is to make sure that you strike the right balance between describing that person and still maintaining the focus of the essay on you and your own development. In this instance, Michelle manages to capture the essence of her grandfather as someone who is worldly, understanding the fleeting nature of the butterflies, and also compassionate, understanding Michelle's concern for the butterflies.

At the same time, the essay keeps its focus on showing Michelle's maturation over the years. From her grandfather, she has inherited a love of nature and the self-awareness and introspection to record her insights on life. We also see her artistic side, as she describes her butterfly wing art as a way of preserving nature's beauty.

A particularly poignant part of the essay is her realization of how her grandfather has changed when she finally meets him nine years later. The essay crafts a beautiful parallel between the aging of her grandfather and the earlier lessons about the ephemeral nature of the butterflies they used to catch. It reminds her of how fleeting life is, and it quite eloquently sets up her closing realization about creating her own new memories as the main lesson that her grandfather tried to impart to her.

Overall, even though the essay focuses on Michelle's grandfather and the influence he has had on her, we still learn quite a bit about Michelle. We learn she is quite accomplished (gold medal in Tae Kwon Do), artistic, and caring. Her thoughtfulness and introspective nature also shine through in this essay, which are undoubtedly qualities that appeal to the admissions committee.

EIGHT.

My Ye-Ye always wears a red baseball cap. I think he likes the vivid color—bright and sanguine, like himself. When Ye-Ye came from China to visit us seven years ago, he brought his red cap with him and every night for six months, it sat on the stairway railing post of my house, waiting to be loyally placed back on Ye-Ye's head the next morning. He wore the cap everywhere: around the house, where he performed magic tricks with it to make my little brother laugh; to the corner store, where he bought me popsicles before using his hat to wipe the beads of summer sweat off my neck. Today whenever I see a red hat, I think of my Ye-Ye and his baseball cap, and I smile.

Ye-Ye is the Mandarin word for “grandfather.” My Ye-Ye is a simple, ordinary person—not rich, not “successful”—but he is my greatest source of inspiration and I idolize him. Of all the people I know, Ye-Ye has encountered the most hardship and of all the people I know, Ye-Ye is the most joyful. That these two aspects can coexist in one individual is, in my mind, truly remarkable.

Ye-Ye was an orphan. Both his parents died before he was six years old, leaving him and his older brother with no home and no family. When other children gathered to read around stoves at school, Ye-Ye and his brother walked in the bitter cold along railroad tracks, looking for used coal to sell. When other children ran home to loving parents, Ye-Ye and his brother walked along the streets looking for somewhere to sleep. Eight years later, Ye-Ye walked alone—his brother was dead.

Ye-Ye managed to survive, and in the meanwhile taught himself to read, write, and do arithmetic. Life was a blessing, he told those around him with a smile.

Years later, Ye-Ye's job sent him to the Gobi Desert, where he and his fellow workers labored for twelve hours a day. The desert wind was merciless; it would snatch their tent in the middle of the night and leave them without supply the next morning. Every year, harsh weather took the lives of some fellow workers.

After eight years, Ye-Ye was transferred back to the city where his wife lay sick in bed. At the end of a twelve-hour workday, Ye-Ye took care of his sick wife and three young children. He sat with the children and told them about the wide, starry desert sky and mysterious desert lives. Life was a blessing, he told them with a smile.

But life was not easy; there was barely enough money to keep the family from starving. Yet, my dad and his sisters loved going with Ye-Ye to the market. He would buy them little luxuries that their mother would never indulge them in: a small bag of sunflower seeds for two cents, a candy each for three cents. Luxuries as they were, Ye-Ye bought them without hesitation. Anything that could put a smile on the children's faces and a skip in their steps was priceless.

Ye-Ye still goes to the market today. At the age of seventy-eight, he bikes several kilometers each week to buy bags of fresh fruits and vegetables, and then bikes home to share them with his neighbors. He keeps a small patch of strawberries and an apricot tree. When the fruit is ripe, he opens his gate and invites all the children in to pick and eat. He is Ye-Ye to every child in the neighborhood.

I had always thought that I was sensible and self-aware. But nothing has made me stare as hard in the mirror as I did after learning about the cruel past that Ye-Ye had suffered and the cheerful attitude he had kept throughout those years. I thought back to all the times when I had gotten upset. My mom forgot to pick me up from the bus station. My computer crashed the day before an assignment was due. They seemed so trivial and childish, and I felt deeply ashamed of myself.

Now, whenever I encounter an obstacle that seems overwhelming, I think of Ye-Ye; I see him in his red baseball cap, smiling at me. Like a splash of cool water, his smile rouses me from grief, and reminds me how trivial my worries are and how generous life has been. Today I keep a red baseball cap at the railing post at home where Ye-Ye used to put his every night. Whenever I see the cap, I think of my Ye-Ye, smiling in his red baseball cap, and I smile. Yes, Ye-Ye. Life is a blessing.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 8

Yueming's essay is the perfect example of an application essay that does exactly what it's supposed to do: it fills out the picture of who Yueming is and allows the admissions committee to learn things about him that are not contained in the rest of his application. Yueming uses the story of his Ye-Ye's baseball cap to show the reader what is important to him and to demonstrate key personality traits that he'd contribute to life on campus.

Even though most of the text is devoted to Ye-Ye's biography, the essay is not just about him. Ye-Ye's whole story is a prelude to the final paragraphs, which reveal the most important aspects of Yueming's personality. Just like in life, our ancestors' past is a prelude to a future generation's history, which is still emerging. This subtle parallel, unnoticeable at first glance, allows the reader to understand the profound development of Yueming's personality and his talent for looking deeper into the essence of things.

Yueming shows his ability to learn from the experience of others, and he highlights his own resilience and the positive mindset he gained from Ye-Ye. These qualities are undoubtedly essential for a future Harvard student and demonstrate his ability to embody "life is a blessing" on campus and beyond.

NINE.

Garishly lined with a pearlescent lavender, my eyes idly scanned the haphazard desk in front of me, settling on a small kohl. I packed the ebony powder into my waterline with a shaky hand, wincing at the fine specks making their way into my eyes.

The girl in the mirror seemed sharper, older, somehow. At only 12, I was relatively new to the powders and blushes that lined my birthday makeup kit, but I was determined to decipher the deep splashes of color that had for so long been an enigma to me.

After school involved self-inflicted solitary confinement, as I shut myself in my bedroom to hone my skills. The palette's colors bore in, the breadth of my imagination interwoven into now-brittle brushes. Much to my chagrin, my mom walked in one day, amused at my smudged lipstick, which congealed on the wispy hairs that lined my upper lip.

"Halloween already?" she asked playfully.

I flushed in embarrassment as she got to work, smoothing my skin with a brush and filling the gaps in my squiggly liner. Becoming a makeup aficionado was going to take some help.

"What's this even made of?" I asked, transfixed by the bright powder she was smattering on my cheeks.

"You know, I'm not sure," she murmured. "Maybe you should find out."

I did.

Hours down the internet rabbit hole, I learned that the shimmery powder was made of mica, a mineral commonly used in cosmetics. While the substance was dazzling, its production process was steeped in humanitarian violations and environmental damage. Determined to reconcile my burgeoning love for makeup with my core values, I flung the kit into the corner of my drawer, vowing to find a more sustainable alternative. Yes, I was every bit as dramatic as you imagine it.

Now 17, I approach ethical makeup with assured deliberation. As I glance at my dusty kit, which still sits where I left it, I harken back on the journey it has taken me on. Without the reckoning that it spurred, makeup would still simply be a tool of physical transformation, rather than a catalyst of personal growth.

Now, each swipe of eyeliner is a stroke of my pen across paper as I write a children's book about conscious consumerism. My flitting fingers programmatically place sparkles, mattes, and tints across my face in the same way that they feverishly move across a keyboard, watching algorithms and graphs integrate into models of supply chain transparency. Makeup has taught me to be unflinching, both in self expression and my expectations for the future. I coat my lips with a bold sheen, preparing them to form words of unequivocal urgency at global conferences and casual discussions. I see my passion take flight, emboldening others to approach their own reckonings, uncomfortable as they may be. I embark on a two-year journey of not buying new clothes in a statement against mass consumption and rally youth into a unified organization. We stand together, picking at the gritty knots of makeup, corporate accountability, and sustainability as they slowly unravel.

I'm not sure why makeup transfixes me. Perhaps it's because I enjoy seeing my reveries take shape. Yukta, the wannabe Wicked Witch of the West, has lids coated with emerald luster and lips of coal. Yukta, the Indian classical dancer, wields thick eyeliner and bright crimson lipstick that allow her expressions to be amplified across a stage. Deep rooted journeys of triumph and tribulation are plastered across the surface of my skin — this paradox excites me.

Perhaps I am also drawn to makeup because as I peel back the layers, I am still wholly me. I am still the young girl staring wide-eyed at her reflection, earnestly questioning in an attempt to learn more about the world. Most importantly, I still carry an unflagging vigor to coalesce creativity and activism into palpable change, one brushstroke at a time.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 9

This student takes a household item as common as makeup to build a narrative that is as universally accessible as it is unique. This object is inflected with facets of both her personal and cultural identity that give the reader immediate contact with the student's personality. She takes us on a sweeping journey through her investigation of the world around her, and embarks on a coming-of-age story without losing sight of the essay's main topic. This student strikes a balance between the narrative and creative writing elements that are integral to successful personal statements. The writer gives us glimpses of insight into her personal development across multiple years, using makeup as a medium for self-reflection and discovery. She masterfully leverages the colors and elements of her makeup collection to craft vivid descriptions, situating imagery as the cornerstone of this essay's approach and success. She takes up an object so easily tied to consumerism and superficiality and uses it to champion the societal and ethical battles for which she advocates.

We also see that the writer of this essay has a clearly defined voice. While many students struggle with the temptation to elevate their writing through ornamentation, this writer is able to maneuver a vibrant writing style that remains engaging, rhythmic and measured. Through each moment of this essay, we learn what the author cares about: conscious consumerism, creativity, and activism; we also learn how she thinks: curiously, selflessly, and with feminist undertones. The opening sentences of this essay employ a successful strategy for personal statement writing, rich with adjectives detailing a small scene, that is expanded upon to make a larger commentary about the author and where she stands in society. Last, the student's essay compliments her larger admissions profile in which the reader learns about years of advocacy, sustainable practices, and intentions to positively impact her community.

“You should scrub off the top layer of your skin whenever you lose a round,” my debate teammate once advised me.

“That’s not practical,” I replied.

“Neither is your refusal to wear clothes you’ve lost important debate rounds in. Your wardrobe has very little to do with your success.”

Half of me disagrees with him. I still bring three BIC Round Stic pencils with 0.7 lead to every test because my gut tells me this fastidious procedure raises my scores. I’m still convinced that labs receive better grades if written in Calibri. And I still won’t rewear clothes in which I’ve lost crucial rounds.

Yet the other half of me is equally dismissive of my own superstitions. I love logic, never failing to check that steps in a proof lead to a precise conclusion without gaps in reasoning.

Fortunately, I often abandon my penchant for pragmatism to accommodate for my unwarranted superstitions. And since I only feel the need to act logically in selective situations, I am perfectly content with the illogical nature of my other habits:

Raised with my great-grandmother, grandparents, and parents all under one roof, I never lacked a consultant to help me transcribe Korean holiday dates from the lunar calendar onto my schedule. Yet whenever all four generations of my family celebrates with a traditional meal of bulgogi, my untraceable and admittedly nonexistent Italian blood flares in protest; I rebelliously cook myself linguine con le vongole that clashes terribly with my mom’s pungent kimchi.

If I plot a graph of “hours I spend in physical activity” versus “week of the year,” the result looks like an irregular cardiac cycle. The upsurges symbolize my battles with colossal walls of water in hopes of catching a smooth surf back to Mission Bay shore. The ensuing period of rest mirrors the hours I spend researching in that one spot in my debate team’s war room that isn’t covered in papers (yet), or at the piano sight-reading the newest Adele song. Then the diastolic tranquility is interrupted by the weekends when I’m sprinting through trenches to avoid paintballs swarming above my favorite arena at Paintball USA.

I find comfort in the familiar. I treasure the regular midnight chats with my brother as we indulge in batter while baking cupcakes for a friend’s birthday, keeping our voices hushed to avoid waking our mom and facing her “salmonella is in your near future” lecture. Yet, some of my fondest memories involve talking to people with whom I share nothing in common. Whether my conversations are about the Qatari coach’s research on Kuwait’s female voting patterns, or about the infinite differences between the “common app” and the Oxford interviewing process, or even about my friend’s Swedish school’s peculiar policy of mandating uniforms only on Wednesdays, I love comparing cultures with debaters from different countries.

My behavior is unpredictable. Yet it’s predictably unpredictable. Sure, I’ll never eat a Korean dinner like one might expect. But I’ll always be cooking linguine the moment I catch a whiff of kimchi.

FEEDBACK ON ESSAY 10

Most often, it is the down-to-earth topics that make for the most successful Common App essays. My students have written on subjects as mundane as cleaning, loading the dishwasher, eraser shavings, finding a piece of driftwood, or looking after not one, but two Shiba Inus. And so, it was a delight to read Michelle Choi's essay. Choi took an idea that the rest of us probably give very little thought to - superstitions - and effectively used it as a focusing lens to explore different parts of her life.

By drawing these connections between seemingly unrelated and different aspects of her life, Choi demonstrated her ability to introspect while giving the reader a richer picture of who she is. Choi is not just another high achiever. Her superstitions - and that ever-present struggle between being logical and superstitious - is what makes her appealing. One can't help but to like her. As I often remind my students, quirky is cool.

With Choi's hook, the reader's attention is immediately captured. One could be forgiven for probably cringing a little at the thought of scrubbing off a layer of one's own skin. And besides that, what was Choi even going on about? Her opening compels the reader to want to keep on reading. Very early on in her essay, we know that debating is a core part of her identity. As she guides the reader through the rest of her essay, she skillfully connects her superstitions to other important aspects of her life, including her cultural heritage, family, surfing, music, paintball, baking, conversations with random strangers, and examinations of different cultures around the world. These various connections give the reader insight into what drives Choi as someone who is profoundly curious and quirky, someone who takes a different approach to things, whether it be intentionally combining Korean and Italian cuisine (I picture the likes of Gordon Ramsay already shuddering at the clash of flavors) to playing pop on the piano (perhaps a refreshingly different take than Mozart or Beethoven).

If I could offer one suggestion, it would be that after reading Choi's essay, I was craving a little more. Perhaps she could have expanded slightly: what did she learn from this process of being unconventional? How did it influence the way she saw the world and influenced her actions? And in what ways did she apply this learning? That said, even with her essay, Choi does what many other students don't with their Common App essay; she takes that a unique approach using a down-to-earth topic as a focusing lens to draw connections to various parts of her life.