



MOON PREP'S
Favorite Essays

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Six Essays that landed students a spot
at Johns Hopkins

One.

My eyes widen. “It’s all Greek to me,” I whisper under my breath. Sure enough, The Apology by Plato is in Greek.

My eyes dart across the page, looking for a word or phrase to grasp onto. Unable to find a familiar word, I take a deep breath. The Greek letters jumble into incoherent words and I am left to the mercy of an incomplete translation. I shake my head, unsure of what to do next. My eyes drag from one word to another, heavy with defeat. Upon the sixth word, however, they stop. My initial scan of the text left me negligent of a simple word meaning “number.” Passion overwhelms my senses. “Number” becomes the most important word of the clause, providing context to the adjacent words. I turn to the lexicon and search for words that fit into a coherent translation. With the last word, I feel satisfaction and pride. The whirlwind of emotions repeats: Confusion, passion, satisfaction. Before the bell rings, I finish translating 20 lines of The Apology.

I was fifteen when I successfully translated The Apology, and soon after, I fell in love with translation. Through translation, I learned the value of perseverance and hard work; it even helped me convey ideas in different mediums such as figure skating.

On a bright January morning, cold wind slapped against my face, chastising me for falling again. I stood up and brushed thin sheets of ice off of my knees. A shock of pain went through my body as I lightly touched a new bruise. I contemplated defeat. In the midst of choreographing my next program, I speculated the translation of music into skating. I yearned to convey every pitch and emotion in a visual performance, so I listened to Chopin once again and closed my eyes. Upon hearing the cadenza, I went back on the ice, picked up speed and turned my body. Leaping from the ground, I wrapped my arms around my torso and spun one, two, three times. My body descended and a sharp skid sounded the air. I smiled, waiting in anticipation for the next jump. That day, I translated every note into a jump until my body understood the music.

Translation has become my frame for viewing life and now I am using it to translate passion into activism. In July 2018, part of my activism was conservation focused. Recognized as a Discovery Guide Leader, I was chosen to lead a Mugwort removal cleanup at Meadow Lake. The tedious logistical process of scheduling a time, obtaining a permit, and learning the proper removal process made July a strenuous month. Still seeking to translate my plan into action, I persevered with the importance of conservation in mind.

Finally, the day came. Twenty pairs of eyes watched me as I pointed out Mugwort along the shore. The hot sun hit my back as I pushed the shovel deeper in the soil. The ground released its hold on the plant and I picked it up by the stem. I walked throughout the shore and helped each person learn the proper removal technique. Together we were able to eliminate 4.2 pounds of Mugwort. I was proud of everyone and myself. I learned the benefits of conservation, translated that knowledge into a productive plan to remove an invasive species, and spread that knowledge by leading my eager group of volunteers.

Despite translating The Apology by Plato years ago, the lessons I learned from translation continue to thrive in my actions today. Just as I translated texts from Greek to English, I will convert more songs into programs, and I will change more plans into action. Although there are still many things in the world that are all Greek to me, I strive to learn and translate my knowledge into action that creates change.



One - Review.

Rachel shows effort, resilience, and celebration in the outcomes of her hard work. She provides the admissions committee more insight into her interests (Greek language, figure skating, and conservation) beyond just what was provided in her transcript or activities list. From this essay, we learn about her willingness to work hard and persevere in various endeavors, as well as her ability to plan ahead and guide a group toward a common goal—traits that will come in handy in college.



Two.

I could still hear her words, the words my teacher said as she handed me the packet, “This is a challenge. But I think you’re up for it.” I held the math packet in my hand. On the cover, the title ‘Mission Possible!’ screamed at me. I could feel my fingers tingling, and the goosebumps rolling up my arms. I stared at the black italicized letters of the title as I walked home. They seemed to stare back, alluding to the mysteries that lay underneath them. As soon as I got home, I ran to the top bunk where I slept, grabbed a pencil, and signed a mental contract with the packet: “I, Zerubabel, promise to prioritize you, put you above all else in my life, not rest, and not eat until all the problems that lay in your pages are solved.” I was a pretty dramatic 11-year-old.

This is but one example of the many challenges I’ve faced throughout my life. My love for challenges and the tenacity with which I approach them was instilled in me through observing my family and through my own experiences. Ten years ago, my family and I packed our belongings, sold everything we had, and flew across the Atlantic to our new home in America. During our first year in Minnesota, we were faced with the omnipresent challenge of money. My sister, rather than having the comfort of her crib, was forced to share a bed with my mom and I. My dad was forced to sleep on a makeshift bed my mom made for him every night, using cushions from a torn and scratchy old sofa. My mom was forced to wake up early and stay up late working, at home, and her minimum wage job. My parents never complained. To them, this was just another stage of life, another challenge to overcome. They worked tirelessly—my mom providing stability by maintaining one job while my dad, the creative one, was always switching between multiple in his pursuit for better pay. With each day, the consequences of their hard work showed; one bed became two, the second bed split into a bunk, and within that little room, each of us had a bed to sleep on.

I now reflect on this, and many other challenges my family and I have faced during our ten years in America. I realize that it is through observing how my parents never slowed down that I learned the value of perseverance, through watching my mom’s devotion to a single job that I learned the value of commitment, through my dad’s consistent job switches that I learned the value of ambition, and through observing my sisters willingness to live with less that I learned the value of sacrifice. Through my own experiences, I learned I can apply these values and overcome any challenge that comes my way. My 11-year-old self figured this out after a grueling two months of working on the packet, finishing with all the questions answered.

Throughout my time in middle and high school, my value of ambition has led me to take the most challenging courses available at my school. In my community, my value of commitment has allowed me to serve at my church for the past five years. These learned values have molded me into the person I am today and will continue to guide me as I pursue my goals in life. It is because of these values and the way they were instilled in me that I have decided to pursue a career as a surgeon; I know it is through the guidance of these values and the people who first showed them to me that I will be able to achieve this goal.



Two - Review.

In his essay, Zerubabel shares with the admissions committee the values he has learned from observing his family members. Zerubabel connects these observations to how he applies his values of ambition and commitment to everyday life. Through his reflection and analysis, the admissions committee is able to understand how Zerubabel would contribute his personal qualities and skills to our campus community.



Three.

- 3 tablespoons butter
- 2 eggs, whisked
- 2 medium carrots
- 1 small white onion
- 1/2 cup frozen peas
- 3 cloves garlic
- salt and pepper
- 4 cups cooked and chilled rice
- 3-4 green onions
- soy sauce (to taste)
- 2 teaspoons oyster sauce (optional)
- 1/2 teaspoons toasted sesame oil

I bet you didn't read those numbers.

I'll let you in on a secret – I didn't either.

The ingredients above were copied and pasted from the first Google search result for “fried rice recipe.” But, without any disrespect to the recipe's owner, I can tell you it's wrong. The only true fried rice recipe is no recipe at all. There are no measurements, no exact instructions, no timer for how long something should sizzle in the pan. There are only smells and feelings and memories. I learned to cook fried rice on the rickety stool covered in Blues Clues stickers, surrounded by the scents of my nainai's Minnie Mouse apron, my yéyé's cashmere sweater, or my mama's Pantene shampoo; in the comfort of our cozy condo and our sweltering Hángzhou apartment; by watching the eggs crack over delicate china bowls, tossed and stirred in woks using slanted wooden spatulas. We used however much leftover rice we had, however many eggs we found appropriate, and a combination of anything and everything or nothing sitting in the fridge.

Yet-

I've always been more of a baker than a cook. I enjoy recipes – I enjoy the process of being exact and finding details, tweaking and leveling and weighing. Other people will have recipes passed down from their great-grandparents; I will have memories, held dear, but no way to pass anything on besides the recreation of childhood moments. From a young age, I found solace in the meticulous baking recipes found in Western cookbooks.

This coveting of all things exact doesn't flow into the rest of my life. My mom will tell you my desk is a mess – I call it “room for creative license.” My mom will tell you my closet is also a mess – I call it “fashionably curious.” My mom will tell you my life is sometimes, you guessed it!, a mess. I call it MAPWIFOWISTBSIDMOTBOML, also known as “my-artistic-phase-where-I'm-figuring-out-who-I'm-supposed-to-be-so-I-dumped-myself-out-to-be-organized-much-later.” That's a mouthful, so I shorten it, obviously.



Three – Cont.

On the flip side, I like measuring the liquid in my graduated cylinder from the exact bottom of the meniscus. If your text message has a typo in it, I feel the nagging urge to annoyingly correct you. If the origami swan I folded has an uneven tail, I will take it apart and start over. (This was certainly detrimental to my life during my middle school’s mission to fold 3,000 paper swans.)

But I understand the beauty of spontaneity and organic creation. There’s something special in realizing that no two recreations of my grandpa’s fried rice will ever be the same, and really, isn’t that what life is? Creation, without recipe?

It’s funny. This may contradict everything I’ve written thus far, but the more I bake, the more I realize perhaps baking is spontaneous too. I don’t always need to weigh my flour beforehand in order to get perfect cookies, nor do I really need to add the copious amounts of sugar the recipe calls for. My signature food is brownies, but I challenged myself to use a different recipe every time. You’d be surprised at how different brownies taste when you add an extra egg, and you’d be especially uncertain about my baking skills if you tried my brownies that had wayyy too much baking soda (trial and error...).

I’m learning to love improvisation. It’s not mutually exclusive with loving precision, and it’s such an integral part of my culture, I’d be missing out otherwise. Coming to terms with and embracing the unknown is scary and definitely a process, but I assure you: One day, I’ll master my own fried rice.

Three – Review.

What we learn about Jess from her essay is a willingness to experiment, to take risks and find failure, and to learn from the past—whether it is from her parents and grandparents or just her own experiences. Her essay is clever and well written, but more importantly it shows us her willingness to try different things, to embrace the different interests and aspects of her own personality, and to approach different things with a positive attitude.



Four.

It was a wet and dreary October evening. I shook off the dirt from my cleats on the concrete with frustration. Click, clack, click. The sound echoed through my head until I finally rested my heavy legs on the wooden bench in front of my locker. Up until that practice, I had done everything just the way I had the year before in the Netherlands, yet I still did not reap the same successes. At home, I relished being on the national under 15 field hockey team, consistently having high grades, and knowing just about everyone. At Deerfield, however, simply doing my best at practice, finishing my homework and socializing did not yield the same results. Looking down, I began to wonder why I had ever moved to Deerfield and traded my field hockey gear for muddy soccer cleats.

In search for answers, I decided to tell Deerfield's field hockey coach about my tough transition. But instead of an answer, Ms. McVaugh offered me to join a girls' field hockey practice. I felt thrown off by the unusual opportunity at first, yet I quickly relished a warm rush of excitement surging through my veins as I imagined putting on field hockey cleats again. When I set foot on the turf the following day, however, my initial anxiety rejoined my exuberance. I felt more eyes turning towards me with each step I made. "Boys do not play field hockey," I could hear the girls think. As I trailed behind the girls during the warm-up, the thought of quitting seemed more tempting with each second of silence that passed. But when the whistle blew and the ball was finally in play, I was surprised to see how quickly the gender barrier vanished. Where there was silence and separation at first, I could now see the shared fanaticism through our red faces and hear the emotion in our clamor. At the end of practice, I felt a burning glow of joy overtake my body as I caught my breath on the bench. In that moment, I gradually realized how I should not let obstacles, like gender boundaries in field hockey, hold me back from exploring new opportunities.

Realizing the joy I had found in trying the unconventional, I took this experience to the soccer field to take on its new athletic challenges once again. Rather than agonizing over playing time or titles, I simply redirected my focus on the joy and beauty of the sport. Within days, I noticed the same atmosphere of sweat and screams from the turf take hold of the soccer field. Over time, this helped me take in feedback more readily, ask questions about tactics, and try out new skills. With each new improvement I made through this, I slowly began to grasp the value of my new approach to the sport.

As a result, I decided to bring the same open, curious, and risk-taking mindset with me to the other opportunities that boarding school holds. In the classroom, I began asking deeper questions to fully comprehend new material. Back in the dorm, I turned the cultural differences between my peers into opportunities to learn from and contribute back to. From truly grasping nucleophile-electrophile reactions in organic chemistry to sharing Dutch 'stroopwafels' with my hall, such moments remind me of why I sacrificed my field hockey gear to go to Deerfield; even as my new mindset gradually led to the grades, friendships, and even athletic achievements I sought before, I realized that I value the exploration, growth and joy behind such successes far more.

Now, before I put on my cleats, walk into the classroom or enter my dorm, I do not worry about the successes I might fail to reach or the obstacles that might hold me back. Rather, I pour my heart into such opportunities and take their experiences with me.



Four - Review.

Sam's essay connects the skills he learned from switching sports—seeking out advice, taking risks, and being open-minded—to other aspects of his life. He shares with the admissions committee traits that he values as well as concrete examples of how those traits have defined the way he handles situations. By doing so, Sam demonstrates that he understands the larger significance of his experience and how he'll carry those takeaways with him moving forward.



Five.

Oreos. On the exterior, a firm chocolate crust; however, when opened, a creamy white center awaits. Unbeknownst to me, a social meaning awaited behind an Oreo that left a lingering poor taste in my mouth.

From the seductive, powerful attacks within a tango melody to the upbeat, peppy nature of Top 40 hits, I find myself within a new story with each note. Ballroom and pop music, while vastly different styles, have been interconnected since I was a little girl listening to both Hans Zimmer's 'Discombobulate and One Direction's Kiss You. In high school, when I shared my musical taste with my black peers, I received confused stares back.

"Faith, that is the whitest thing. You are such an Oreo!" a friend exclaimed.

I didn't recognize the connection between two seemingly different commodities until I later learned that an Oreo means a black person who displays characteristics typically associated with white people, therefore betraying their black roots. I never saw ballroom and pop music belonging to a certain race, but the negatively charged implications behind 'betraying' introduced new guilty sensations. Should I embrace my musical interests and face social alienation from those who share my skin tone? Or set aside my so-called white core and conform to the expectations of an African-American woman that have been placed upon me?

I didn't cut music completely out of my life. Being a clarinet player in my band meant being exposed to various musical styles each day. During my freshman year, I decided to challenge myself and perform a solo for the county solo & ensemble festival. Lyrical Composition No. 6 was a piece for which I could play the notes, the rhythms, and everything else on the page. To me, that was all I needed to do, but my band director thought otherwise.

"You're great at playing the right note at the right time. But where is your interpretation? What can you do to add to this piece?"

At first glance, all I saw were measures of black ink permanently etched into the sheet – resistant to change. How do I add to a composition that exudes such a definitive nature? Then at second glance, I looked below the measures. Beyond the notes, beyond the rhythms, I noticed white space – unblemished and waiting for me to create my own contribution. Once I stopped and determined what I wanted someone to feel from this composition, I picked up my pencil and wrote in crescendos, decrescendos, breath marks, and other musical markings that I felt needed to be included. I didn't want to simply regurgitate the black ink, but rather take the audience on a dynamic journey that reaches a climactic precipice. This realization made the distinction between style and stereotype clear.

Being categorized as an Oreo was jarring because the documented definition couldn't simply be erased. Most stereotypes are never fully expunged because they are deeply ingrained in how society views certain races. While I cannot easily change the minds of the many, I can change the mind of my own.

I am my own music maker. I will celebrate the intricacies of ballroom music and belt out a One Direction tune as a proud black woman. That is my style. That is my choice of expression. If allowed, stereotypes can snowball until I am completely consumed by my desire to become the black woman society expects. But I refuse to be held down by its grip because I decide my definition of the black experience. My musical interests are not a betrayal that isolates me from my roots, but rather a beautiful addition that enhances my ever-evolving character. Am I an Oreo? Yes, but by my own design. The creamy white center does not represent a betrayal, but rather a blank canvas patiently waiting for my own input. With pencil in hand, I will not hesitate to make my mark.



Five - Review.

Faith provides strong insights into herself, her culture, and her interests by weaving them together in a compelling narrative. She explores herself within the context of societal expectations, considers her own goals and interests, and ultimately shows a mature approach to pursuing her interests. From this essay, we can see Faith as someone who is independent and thoughtful, ambitious in her interests, and open to introspection—all skills that will help her as she enters college.



Six.

Whether I was blowing out candles, writing a letter to santa, or waiting for the clock to turn 11:11, my one wish growing up was not for something, but for someone. I wanted a sibling. I would always look to my friends and think how lucky they were to have brothers and sisters to play with, while I was stuck at home alone with my parents.

However, these sentiments soon changed and my life was transformed, when my parents came home with my new sister, Mia. And while Mia was a furry, Lhasa Apso dog, rather than the human baby sister or brother I dreamed of, she helped me accept and even cherish my life as an only child. I came to realize, however, that it would take much longer for me, and much more than a dog, to accept the other ways I felt alone within my group of friends and my community as a whole.

Living in a predominantly white town and attending a school with a population of about 75% white students has had a huge impact on the way I view my Filipino self. While my friends ate turkey and cheese sandwiches at lunch, I would secretly pick at the traditional adobo chicken my mom had sent me that day. I stood by as my classmates made jokes stereotyping and generalizing Asians into one category, even though I knew there were vast differences in our cultures. During social studies classes, I noticed that I learned more about the ancestry of my friends, rather than my own. Consequently, I began to accept the notion that my heritage was of less importance and something to be ashamed of. I masked the pungent aromas of the Filipino delicacies my immigrant parents made with pasta and hamburgers when my friends came over, I laughed off incidents when parents or teachers would mistake me for the only other Filipino girl in my grade, and I recognized that learning solely about European and East Asian history in world history classes was the norm. I started to believe that assimilation was the only pathway to acceptance, along with the only way I could feel less alone within my community.

It was not until I entered high school that I realized how wrong I was. Although I did not encounter an increase in diversity in terms of ethnicity, I saw an increase in the spectrum of perspectives around me. Through electives, clubs, and activities, the student body I was met with since my freshman year was open-minded, as well as politically and culturally active and engaged, and I immediately joined in. At speech and debate tournaments, I talked with students from across the globe, while at discussions between the High School Democrats Club and Young Conservatives Club at my school, I enjoyed listening and being exposed to different viewpoints. Suddenly, I was no longer willing to feel defeated and instead began to feel confident in displaying my Filipino pride. I introduced my friends to an array of Filipino dishes from lumpia to toron, I asked my social studies teachers questions about the history and current state of the Philippines, and I no longer saw myself and my background as what differentiated me from others and caused my feelings of aloneness, but as something that I should embrace.

I changed my narrative from “alone” to “unique,” and I strive to spread the message that being different can and should be the norm to my peers. I would not be who I am without my Filipino background, and although the community I live in is what previously made me feel alone, it is also what gave me the potential to learn, grow, and broadened my appreciation for what made me unique.



Six - Review.

Isabella's narrative shows how her Filipino identity has developed over time from feeling "alone" to "unique" in her community. Without this piece of the application, the admissions committee may not have understood this important aspect of her experience. We knew from Isabella's activity list and letters of recommendation that she is active in her community, but this essay showcases why particular clubs, conversations, and questions are significant to her. We can imagine Isabella thriving at Hopkins given her examples of finding opportunities to embrace diversity of viewpoints and identities.

