

12 College Admission Essays That Worked

Real Examples of Winning College Essays to Inspire Your Writing



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Introduction

This document is a collection of **college admissions essays that worked**. They were written by high school students and submitted as part of a successful application at some of the leading colleges and universities in the United States.

Although essays and personal statements comprise only a portion of the total application, they have become a critical component. With more and more well-prepared students applying to college, the admissions process has become a lot more competitive.

The essay is **one of the major ways applicants can distinguish themselves**, and it is the one of the few that is completely in your control when you apply (after all, your grades, activities, and test scores are already set by the time you apply).

We assembled this collection of winning essays to help you think about and inform your own essay writing efforts. Application deadlines can be stressful, and often the essay is left to the last minute, for whatever reasons. This is unfortunately a missed opportunity for applicants to put their best foot forward into a competitive arena.

These are just examples that worked for particular students. Some of them are heavy and deep, some overtly “creative”, some are even trite, and others are rather silly. Many approaches can work. As you develop your own topic and start writing, we hope one or more of these essays will spark an idea, or inspire you to find your own voice for a winning essay.

To your success,

Peter Buckley

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Additional resources:

For more essay examples and resources, visit:

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For a comprehensive, step-by-step guide to writing a winning application, see:

<http://tinyurl.com/htrce-lp>

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Essay #1 (Stanford University)

As you reflect on life thus far, what has someone said, written, or expressed in some fashion that is especially meaningful to you. Why?

According to Mother Teresa, “If you judge someone, you have no time to love them.” I first saw this quote when it was posted on my sixth-grade classroom wall, and I hated it. Rather, I hated Mother Teresa’s intention, but I knew that the quote’s veracity was inarguable. I felt that it was better to judge people so as not to have to love them, because some people don’t deserve a chance. Judgments are shields, and mine was impenetrable.

Laura was my dad’s first girlfriend after my parents’ divorce. The first three years of our relationship were characterized solely by my hatred toward her, manifested in my hurting her, each moment hurting myself twice as much. From the moment I laid eyes on her, she was the object of my unabated hatred, not because of anything she had ever done, but because of everything she represented.

I judged her to be a heartless, soulless, two-dimensional figure: she was a representation of my loneliness and pain. I left whenever she entered a room, I slammed car doors in her face. Over those three years, I took pride in the fact that I had not spoken a word to her or made eye contact with her. I treated Laura with such resentment and anger because my hate was my protection, my shield. I, accustomed to viewing her as the embodiment of my pain, was afraid to let go of the anger and hate, afraid to love the person who allowed me to hold onto my anger, afraid that if I gave her a chance, I might love her.

For those three years, Laura didn’t hate me; she understood me. She understood my anger and my confusion, and Laura put her faith in me, although she had every reason not to. To her, I was essentially a good person, just confused and scared; trying to do her best, but just not able to get a hold of herself. She saw me as I wished I could see myself.

None of this became clear to me overnight. Instead, over the next two years, the one-dimensional image of her in my mind began to take the shape of a person. As I let go of my hatred, I gave her a chance. She became a woman who, like me, loves Ally McBeal and drinks a lot of coffee; who, unlike me, buys things advertised on infomercials.

Three weeks ago, I saw that same Mother Teresa quote again, but this time I smiled. Laura never gave up on me, and the chance she gave me to like her was

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a chance that changed my life. Because of this, I know the value of a chance, of having faith in a person, of seeing others as they wish they could see themselves. I'm glad I have a lot of time left, because I definitely have a lot of chances left to give, a lot of people left to love.

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Essay #2 (Duke University)

Topic of your choice: Me(s): A One-Act Play

(Several of me occupy themselves around my bedroom. Logical me sits attentively in my desk chair. Lighthearted me hangs upside-down, off the back of my recliner. Existentialist me leans against my door, eyebrows raised. Stressed me, Independent me, and Artistic me are also present.)

Stressed: So, come on, what's this meeting about?

Logical: (Taking a deep breath) Well, it's time we come together. It's time we create "Jeremy."

Lighthearted: (Furrowing his brow, but smiling) What? Is this "Captain Planet," where all the characters join fists and out bursts the superhero?

Logical: No, this meeting is an opportunity to evaluate where we are in life, like a State of the Union Address.

Existentialist: Speaking of which, I've been meaning to ask all of you: college? Honestly, is it worth it? You . . . (gestures toward Logical) you're writing that philosophy book, which should do well. And look at Artsy over there! He's composing music, making beautiful art; why don't we see where we can get with that? Not to mention the endless possibilities if Lighthearted aims for Saturday Night Live. Think about the number of successful people in this world who didn't go to college! (Logical shakes his head) I mean, let's be realistic: if we go to college, eventually we'll be required to declare a major. Once we earn a degree, it might be harder to pursue our true passions—comedy, music, art . . .

Logical: Not true. First of all, you failed to mention my fascinations with neurology and psychology, which are potential majors at every university. Furthermore, opportunities to study comedy, music, and art are available at all colleges too; we just have to go after them. (Sends a reassuring nod toward Artistic) In fact, if anything, college will facilitate our involvement in activities like drawing, improvisational comedy, piano, psychological experiments, Japanese, ping-pong . . .

Artistic: Yeah—imagine how much better I'd be at writing music if I took a music-composition course.

Logical: Exactly. And what about our other educational goals such as becoming fluent in Japanese, learning the use of every TI-89 calculator button . . .

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Independent: I agree. Plus, I was thinking of college as a social clean slate. I am looking forward to living on my own—away from our overprotective, over-scrutinizing family. No more hesitating to ask girls out!

Lighthearted: (He has not been paying attention to the discussion) What ever happened to Captain Planet? He was like, really popular in 1987 and then . . .

Stressed: Enough out of you. (Lighthearted makes a mocking face at Stressed) You're giving me a headache. By the way, everyone, we're not making much progress here, and I'm beginning to feel a stress-pimple coming on. (All except Existential gather around Stressed and comfort him)

Existential: There's really no reason to be stressed about anything. If you think about how trivial—how meaningless—all this worry is, it's kind of pathetic that your anxiety is about to get us all stuck with a pimple.

Independent: I don't know what you're talking about, Mr. I-Know-Everything-And-It-All-Means-Nothing, but mightn't we as well calm down Stressed?

Existential: If you consider that your top priority right now. I thought we came here to do something else.

Stressed: He's right, I'm fine. Let's just get back to work, and the problem will heal itself. Where were we?

Lighthearted: We were searching through the late 80s for Captain Planet's mysterious disapp . . . (Stressed plugs his ears and momentarily steps out of the room; Independent shoves Lighthearted; Logic buries his face in his hands; Artistic begins doodling; Existential laughs)

Existential: We're a bunch of fools. It amazes me that we all squeezed into the same person. You know, if you think about the conversation we just had, it does reveal a lot about "Jeremy."

Artistic: (Chewing his pencil) He's got a point. And I thought of a cool song. So we were productive, after all. We should congregate like this more often. We can go places if we stick together.

All: Yeah, we can. (They all put their right fists together, and there is a sudden burst of light and thunderous sound, as in the old "Captain Planet" cartoons, followed by a knocking on the door)

Parents: Jeremy, are you OK? What's all that noise?

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Jeremy: Yeah, I'm fine. Just puttin' myself together. I think I've got a good idea for a college application essay . . .

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Essay #3 (Connecticut College)

Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you

Finding Truths

In my life, I have taken many journeys without which I would not have experienced important truths. My father started us off early, taking us on many journeys to help us understand that true knowledge comes only from experience. We took trips every winter break to Madrid, Mexico, Costa Rica, and to Jamaica and Trinidad, my parents' homeland for Christmas. Silly things I remember from those trips include the mango chili sauce on the pork in Maui, the names of the women who gave out the towels by the pools in Selva Verde, Costa Rica, eating dinner at 10 p.m. in Spain. These were all tourist experiences that I, at first, found spellbinding. My truths were the truths of the tourist brochures: beautiful hotels, beaches, and cities. I did not see the blindfolds. I did not appreciate how being held hostage by the beauty of the surface—the beaches and cities—blinded me to the absence of Puerto Rican natives on the streets of San Juan; I did not understand how the prevalence and familiarity of English conspired to veil the beauty of the Spanish language beneath volumes of English translations.

I learned more about these truths in my sophomore year of high school, when I was among a group of students selected to visit Cuba. My grandmother was born in Cuba, yet I had never thought to research my own heritage. I have remained the naïve American who saw Castro as some distant enemy of my country, accepting this as fact because this seemed to be the accepted wisdom. I soon became intrigued, however, with this supposed plague to my freedom, my culture, and everything good and decent. I began to think, just what is communism anyway? What's so bad about Castro and Cuba—and I hear they have good coffee. I believed that what was missing was a lack of understanding between our two cultures, and that acceptance of our differences would come only with knowledge.

My first impression of Cuba was the absence of commercialism. I saw no giant golden arch enticing hungry Cubans with beef-laced fries; I did see billboards of Che Guevara and signposts exhorting unity and love. I realized, however, that much of the uniqueness that I relished here might be gone if the trade blockades in Cuba were ever lifted. The parallels and the irony were not lost on me. I was stepping out of an American political cave that shrouded the beauty of Cuba and stepping into another, one built on patriotic socialism, one where truths were just as ideological as, yet very different from, mine.

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History, I recognized, is never objective. The journeys I have taken have been colored by my prior experiences and by what my feelings were in those moments. Everyone holds a piece of the truth. Maybe facts don't matter. Perhaps my experience is my truth and the more truths I hear from everyone else, the closer I will get to harmonization. Maybe there is no harmony, and I must go through life challenging and being challenged, perhaps finding perspectives from which I can extract—but never call—truth. I must simply find ways to understand others, to seek in them what is common to us all and perhaps someday find unity in our common human bond. This is what life has taught me so far, my sum of truths gleaned from experiencing many cultures. I don't know if these truths will hold, but I hope that my college experience will be like my trip to Cuba—challenging some truths, strengthening others, and helping me experience new ones.

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Essay #4 New York University

A range of academic interests, personal perspectives, and life experiences adds much to the educational mix. Given your personal background, describe an experience that illustrates what you would bring to the diversity in the college community or an encounter that demonstrated the importance of diversity to you.

I feel sick. I'm nervous and my stomach's turning. The room is lined with neat rows of desks, each one occupied by another kid my age. We're all about to take the SATs. The proctor has instructed us to fill out section four: "race."

I cannot be placed neatly into a single racial category, although I'm sure that people walking down the street don't hesitate to label me "caucasian." Never in my life has a stranger not been surprised when I told them I was half black.

Having light skin, eyes, and hair, but being black and white often leaves me misperceived. Do I wish that my skin were darker so that when I tell people I'm black they won't laugh at me? No, I accept and value who I am. To me, being black is more than having brown skin; it's having ancestors who were enslaved, a grandfather who managed one of the nation's oldest black newspapers, the Chicago Daily Defender, and a family who is as proud of their heritage as I am. I prove that one cannot always discern another's race by his or her appearance.

I often find myself frustrated when explaining my racial background, because I am almost always proving my "blackness" and left neglecting my Irish-American side. People have told me that "one drop of black blood determines your race," but I opt not to follow this rule. In this country a century ago, most mixed-race children were products of rape or other relationships of power imbalance, but I am not. I am a child in the twenty-first century who is a product of a loving relationship. I choose the label biracial and identify with my black and Irish sides equally. I am proud to say that my paternal great-grandparents immigrated to this country from Ireland and that I have found their names on the wall at Ellis Island, but people are rarely interested in that. They can't get over the idea that this girl, who according to their definition looks white, is not.

Last year, at my school's "Sexual Awareness Day," a guest lecturer spoke about the stereotypical portrayal of different types of people on MTV's The Real World. He pointed out that the white, blond-haired girls are always depicted as completely ditsy and asked me how it felt to fit that description. I wasn't surprised that he assumed I was white, but I did correct his mistake. I told him that I thought the show's portrayal of white girls with blond hair was unfair. I went on to say that we should also be careful not to make assumptions about people based on their physical appearance. "For example," I told him, "I'm not white." It was

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interesting that the lecturer, whose goal was to teach students not to judge or make assumptions about people based on their sexual orientation, had himself made a racial assumption about me.

I often find myself wishing that racial labels didn't exist so that people wouldn't rely on race alone to understand a person's thoughts, actions, habits, and personality. One's race does not reveal the content of their character. When someone finds out that I am biracial, do I become a different person in his or her eyes? Am I suddenly "deeper," because I'm not just the "plain white girl" they assumed I was? Am I more complex? Can they suddenly relate to me more (or less)? No, my race alone doesn't reveal who I am. If one's race cannot be determined simply by looking at a person, then how can it be possible to look at a person and determine her inner qualities?

Through census forms, racial questionnaires on the SATs, and other devices, our society tries to draw conclusions about people based on appearance. It is a quick and easy way to categorize people without taking the time to get to know them, but it simply cannot be done.

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Essay #5 (Carleton College)

If you could have lunch with any person, living, dead, or fictional, who would it be and what would you discuss?

We met for lunch at El Burrito Mexicano, a tiny Mexican lunch counter under the Red Line “El” tracks. I arrived first and took a seat, facing the door. Behind me the TV showed highlights from the Mexican Soccer League. I felt nervous and unsure. How would I be received by a famous revolutionary—an upper-middle-class American kid asking a communist hero questions? Then I spotted him in the doorway and my breath caught in my throat. In his overcoat, beard, and beret he looked as if he had just stepped out from one of Batista’s “wanted” posters. I rose to greet Ernesto “Che” Guevara and we shook hands. At the counter we ordered: he, enchiladas verdes and a beer, and I, a burrito and two “limonadas.” The food arrived and we began to talk.

I told him that I felt honored to meet him and that I admired him greatly for his approach to life. He saw the plight of Latin America’s poor and tried to improve their state but went about it on his own terms, not on society’s. He waved away my praise with his food-laden fork, responding that he was happy to be here and that it was nice to get out once in a while. Our conversation moved on to his youth and the early choices that set him on his path to becoming a revolutionary.

I have always been curious about what drove Che Guevara to abandon his medical career and take military action to improve the lot of Cuba’s poor. Why did he feel that he could do more for the poor as a guerilla leader than as a doctor? His answer was concise: as he came of age he began to realize that the political situation in Latin America had become unacceptable and had to be changed as soon as possible. He saw in many nations “tin-pot” dictators reliant on the United States for economic and military aid, ruining their nations and destroying the lives of their people. He felt morally obligated to change this situation and believed he could help more people in a more direct manner as a warrior rather than as a doctor. Next I asked why he chose communism as the means of achieving his goals.

He replied that communism was merely a means to an end. That end was a Central and South America run by its citizens, free of foreign intervention. In his opinion communism was the best way to realize this dream. I agreed that a nation should be run by and for its citizens, but I hesitated to agree wholeheartedly. I was concerned by his exclusive emphasis on Latin Americans. His description, as I interpreted it, implied a nationalism and exclusion of others, most notably Americans. I felt that this focus on “Latin Americanism” could easily lead to the outbreak of war in the region.

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Moving from Cuba's past to its present, I asked him if he sees the revolution begun in 1959 as successful. Has Cuba fulfilled his vision for it? Che Guevara sighed and gathered his thoughts for a moment. Then, speaking slowly, he said that he didn't think that Cuba had fulfilled the revolution because the revolution never spread beyond Cuba, as he had hoped it would. The revolution did not spread, he reasoned, because of the success of the United States in propping up corrupt dictators and the inability of Cuba to build a viable economy upon which to support the export of revolution. I countered his negative view, pointing out that today many of the Latin American countries once under totalitarian rule are democratic, partly due to the spirit of reform he exemplified nearly half a century before. He acknowledged the progress made but remained adamant that the nations were still not free of foreign intervention.

At this point one of the Mexican teams on TV scored a goal, and we broke off our political conversation to talk about soccer. Though I know about European soccer, I know next to nothing about the South American game. He enlightened me, although he admitted his information was a bit out of date. I asked him if he had seen the great Argentinean striker Alfredo Di Stefano play, but Che Guevara said he couldn't remember.

In light of the events of September 11th, I asked about violence. In his view, when is it justified? Che Guevara responded by saying that violence is justified because those who hold power unjustly respond only to violence as a tool for change. They will not willingly relinquish power unless shown that the people will overwhelm and destroy them. I disagreed vociferously, citing Peru and Guatemala as places where violence had been used and failed, only further impoverishing the nations. Che Guevara explained these failures as the inevitable outcome of the revolutionaries losing sight of their original moral goals. Reflecting upon his answers so far, I realized that I had lost some of my admiration for him. By taking up the standard of Pan-American unity, I felt he lost some of his humanity that led me to identify so closely with him. To me he had become more of a symbol than an actual person.

At this point I realized that I had to be home soon and thanked him profusely for his generosity in answering my questions. As we walked toward the door, I noticed that I had left my hat on the table. I turned back to retrieve it, but by the time I had reached the doorway again, Che Guevara had disappeared into the mix of the afternoon sunlight and shadow cast by the "El" tracks, as mysteriously as he had come. -- END --

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Essay #6 (Washington University)

Topic of your choice.

Psst! I have a confession to make. I have a shoe fetish. Everyone around me seems to underestimate the statement a simple pair of shoes can make. To me, though, the shoes I wear are not merely covering for the two feet on which I tread, but a reflection of who I am.

So, who am I? Why don't you look down at my feet? I could be wearing my high-platform sandals—my confidence, my leadership, my I-want-to-be-tall-even-though-I'm-not shoes. My toes are free in these sandals and wiggle at will. Much like my feet in my sandals, I don't like being restricted. I have boundless energy that must not go to waste! Or maybe I'm wearing my furry pink pig slippers. I wear these on crisp winter nights when I'm home spending time with my family.

My slippers are my comforting side. I can wear them and listen to a friend cry for hours on end. My favorite pair of shoes, however, are my bright red Dr. Martens. They're my individuality, my enthusiasm, my laughter, my love of risk-taking. No one else I know has them. When I don't feel like drawing attention to my feet or, for that matter, to myself, I wear my gym shoes. These sneakers render me indistinguishable from others and thereby allow me to be independent. I wear them running, riding my bicycle alone through the trails surrounded by signs of autumn, and even when I go to a museum and stand, transfixed by a single photograph. My hiking boots typify my love of adventure and being outdoors. Broken in and molded to the shape of my foot, when wearing them I feel in touch with my surroundings.

During college I intend to add to my collection yet another closet full of colorful clodhoppers. For each aspect of my personality I discover or enhance through my college experiences, I will find a pair of shoes to reflect it. Perhaps a pair of Naot sandals for my Jewish Studies class or one black shoe and one white when learning about the Chinese culture and its belief in yin and yang. As I get to know myself and my goals grow nearer, my collection will expand.

By the time I'm through with college, I will be ready to take a big step. Ready for a change, I believe I'll need only one pair after this point. The shoes will be both fun and comfortable; I'll be able to wear them when I am at work and when I return home. A combination of every shoe in my collection, these shoes will embody each aspect of my personality in a single footstep. No longer will I have a separate pair for each quirk and quality. This one pair will say it all. It will be

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evidence of my self-awareness and maturity. Sure, I'll keep a few favorites for old times' sake. I'll lace up the old red shoes when I'm feeling rambunctious, when I feel that familiar, teenage surge of energy and remember the girl who wore them: a young girl with the potential to grow.

I am entering college a naïve, teenage bundle of energy, independence, and motivation. My closet full of shoes mirrors my array of interests, and at the same time my difficulty in choosing a single interest that will satisfy me for the rest of my life. I want to leave college with direction, having pinpointed a single interest to pursue that will add texture and meaning to my life.

So there you have it. I've told you about who I am, what I enjoy, and what I want from college. Want to know more? Come walk a day in my shoes.

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Essay #7 (University of Pennsylvania)

Describe a challenge you overcame.

The stiff black apron hung awkwardly on my hips as I casually tried to tie the strings around my waist. I had been at Gino's Restaurant for only ten minutes when Maurizio, the manager, grabbed my arm abruptly and said, "Follow me to the dungeon." Unsure of whether or not he was joking, I smiled eagerly at him, but his glare confirmed his intent. I wiped the smirk off my face and followed him through the kitchen, which was louder than Madison Square Garden during a Knicks/Pacers game. A tall woman with a thick Italian accent pushed me while barking, "Move it, kid, you're blocking traffic." I later learned she was a waitress, and waitresses did not associate with the low-level busboys. Maurizio brought me to a dangerously steep staircase that looked like it had been purposely drenched in oil to increase the chance of a fall. As he gracefully flew down each step, I clutched onto the rusty tile walls, strategically putting one foot first and then the other. Eventually, I entered the "dungeon" and was directed to a table to join two men who were vigorously folding napkins.

Pretending to know what had to be done, I took a pile of unfolded starched napkins and attempted to turn them into the Gino accordion. I slowly folded each corner, trying to leave exactly one inch on both sides, and ignored the giggles and whispers coming from across the table. When I finished my first napkin, I quickly grabbed another and tried again, hiding my pathetic initial attempt under my thigh. On my second try, I sighed with relief when I saw that what I had constructed slightly resembled an accordion shape. However, when I looked up, I saw that the other two men had each finished twenty perfect napkins. "Hurry up, little girl," they said in unison, "We have lots left." They pointed to a closet overflowing with white linens as I began to fold my third. The next couple of nights afforded me the opportunity to master such tasks as refilling toilet paper dispensers and filling breadbaskets. Just as I began to find solace in these more manageable jobs, I felt a forceful tap on my shoulder. A heavysset waiter who was sweating profusely barked, "I need one decaf cappuccino. Understand?"

"Um, okay," I stuttered, unable to get up enough courage to admit that I had never attempted to make a cappuccino. I glanced over at the intimidating espresso machine and started to pace back and forth. The waiter reappeared and with a look of irritation snapped, "If you didn't know how to do it, why didn't you say so? I don't have time for this!" Returning to the unnecessary re-cleaning of silverware, the only job I could comfortably perform, it dawned on me that my fear of showing ignorance had rendered me incompetent. I had mastered the art of avoidance and had learned nothing. I continued to clean vigorously, making sure to keep my eyes on the silverware so that no one would ask me to make another cappuccino.

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Having barely made it through my first weekend at the restaurant, I was amazed at how relieved I felt to return to the familiarity of physics class. We were starting a new chapter on fiber optics. Moving through the material with greater ease than I had anticipated, we hit upon the topic of optical time domain reflectometers, and sweat began to form on my chest as I frantically flipped through my notebook. I marked my paper with an asterisk so that I would know to ask my teacher to explain this material when I met with him privately during my next free period. My teacher then said, "So, I'm sure you all understand OTDR, so let's move on." As all of my peers nodded in agreement, I suddenly realized that I was still not asking how to make cappuccino. I took a deep breath and the fear of not learning overcame my usual fear of looking foolish and I raised my hand. After my question had been answered, I felt like the Red Sox lifting the curse. I erased the star I had made on my notebook and confidently listened as we moved on to the next topic.

I'm not suggesting that raising my hand and asking a question in physics class was a life-changing moment. It did not suddenly rid me of my fear of showing ignorance, but it definitely marked a new willingness to ask questions. When I returned to Gino's the next weekend, I continued to spend some time unnecessarily cleaning silverware, but after asking Maurizio how to use the espresso machine, I soon added making cappuccino to my list of life skills.

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Essay #8 (University of Chicago)

It was 1995 and I was 7 years old. Easter was in 4 days, and the only cause for celebration was that my teacher was walking around my first-grade classroom handing out bags of candy. I searched through mine, and held up a Reese's Peanut Butter Cup for my neighbor, Becky, to see. She smiled knowingly, and passed me a Crunch bar.

"I can't believe you don't like peanut butter, Katy." She said.

Upon inspecting my bag farther, I found over-sugared goods that contained no peanut butter, bananas, or coconut and promptly consumed them. Not until I had piled up the wrappers on my desk did I notice the tag attached to the bag. Written in black marker were the words: 'To: Katy, From: The Easter Bunny', accompanied by a rabbit paw print on the side. I laughed, and shouted into the overheated classroom: "Mrs. Gelormini, the Easter Bunny isn't real!"

Twenty innocent faces turned towards my desk, many open-mouthed and drooling chocolate. My teacher stopped her routine of dropping bags and saying "Happy Easter!", and turned towards me with a stiff face.

"Why do you say that, Katy?"

I explained to my teacher that having two older brothers not only guaranteed me my own room, but also ruined surprises, like the secret of the Easter Bunny, the Tooth Fairy, and Santa Claus. I then proceeded to detail the actions taken by our parents to ensure a decorated basket, heaps of candy, and a certain amount of surprise every Easter morning. Instead of allowing me to continue explaining, Mrs. Gelormini whisked me into the hall, where she then scolded me.

"Katy, some surprises are meant to be kept secrets. You had no right to ruin such a special day for all of your classmates," she said, trying desperately to suppress anger. "I realize that you learned something new, and wanted to share it with your classmates, but some things are meant to be left unsaid."

With those words ringing in my head, I followed Mrs. Gelormini back into the classroom, and slumped into my seat. The rest of my day was spent fending off glares from my classmates, and remaining as quiet as possible. When I left the classroom that day, I knew that I never wanted to be put in a situation like that again. I do not want to be the only one who is knowledgeable about a subject. I want to be able to speak freely, and have my knowledge and intelligence appreciated, rather than criticized. I want to be put in situations where every student knows about the Easter Bunny, or better yet, about all the storybook creatures that surround our childhood.

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Essay #9

Ladies are swooning and fainting all around the room. A man sits intently on a bench “twiddling” his fingers and gyrating his body. One, especially a man, cannot understand how such absurd movements can generate such a ruckus among members of the opposite sex. Yet this man “twiddling” his fingers is no ordinary man, he is Franz Liszt. He is playing piano in the crowded living room of a woman’s house. The hostess invited him to her house for entertainment and to show off her wealth and cultural knowledge. Furthermore, Liszt was a very attractive man with high cheekbones and a patrician nose. But being beautiful was not his only talent; Liszt was a talented pianist who mesmerized audiences throughout Europe in the 19th century.

Frankly, being a heterosexual and a pianist, I envy Franz Liszt to the utmost. In my opinion, he was the greatest virtuoso of the Romantic period and also one of the greatest womanizers of his time. I did a research paper on his music and life in my junior year and to my great delight, I discovered that he had a young mistress when he was an old man in his 70’s. Certainly I don’t advocate Liszt’s lifestyle, but I find that tidbit of information interesting. What I do admire is his music and his piano playing. At the moment, I am learning Liszt’s *Funérailles*, which he wrote in 1849 for three of his revolutionary friends that died in battle. The piece is multifaceted with multiple sections that greatly contrast each other. I have been working hard for the past 4 months trying to interpret the piece and insert my own feelings into it. However, I have not been able to truly build the piece into an expressive masterpiece, which Liszt intended it to be, since it celebrates the heroic deaths of revolutionaries. Maybe it’s because I haven’t felt any deep pain or anguish in my life, so I can’t truly convey the musicality of Liszt’s composition. However, I have still grown in my abilities as a pianist. Also, spending those two to three hours a day at the piano has taught me patience and has also given me a certain tenacity that I will carry forward into other areas of my life.

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Essay #10 (Swarthmore)

I hesitated on the ground for only a moment before sprinting to the huddle. Through the light drizzle on artificially bright Astroturf, a mist rose from my teammates—the product of fourth quarter determination and weeks of preparation. I took my place behind a tackle and steadied my breathing as the linebacker began to boom out orders. “Third and eleven, fifty-two bobcat, ready...hit!” My legs twitched, my eyes focused, and the ball snapped. Ripping to the outside, I saw my opportunity: the quarterback was only two steps away. This tackle is mine. I will sack the quarterback. Suddenly, I was flying towards the ground.

My body hit the ground with a sickening thud as the enemy completed his pass for a first down. I had been blindsided. This time there was no hesitation; I pushed off the ground and regrouped with my teammates thirteen yards closer to my end zone. I should have anticipated the trap; I had almost cost my team the game. Physical pain paled in comparison to my mental anguish. As formations came in via linebacker, the other defensive end gave me a fraternal thump on my pads.

I broke out of the huddle and my chagrin hardened into resolve. Thoughts of how much we had all sacrificed brought our August practices abruptly to my mind. How many times did we take respite in grilling burgers or floating down the river after an especially grueling practice? Strong left, strong left. Again I locked eyes with an opposing tight end, our faces equally grim and determined. My body calmed, a smooth anticipation prepared me to test and break my limits.

“Down, green nineteen, green nineteen, set, hit!” boomed the rival quarterback, his red #7 jersey a matador to my bull. The center’s arm twitched and I fired into my man—the sort of collision that makes mothers shudder and dads grin. Again, I fought to the outside, but it came too easy. Years of drills turned technique into instinct and I could almost hear Coach’s familiar words, “That’s it, fight pressure. Don’t let him set the pace.” Almost without meaning to, I spun around and now faced a somewhat surprised running back.

In a split second, we were two gladiators, sizing each other up and feeling only the rhythmic beat of an excited heart. He stepped right and my cleat mirrored his, the few yards still between us crumbling away. As I moved closer, his dark eyes and furrowed expression became distinguishable and infused me with renewed determination to make the play. He faked left, opening his arm to me. Seizing my opportunity for redemption, I drove into his hips with a gratifying CRACK! Together, we hit the ground—a perfect tackle.

It was a few moments before I heard the roar of the crowd, an orchestra of excitement brought alive with air horns, stomping feet, and whistling. I regained my footing to see the teammate who had bolstered me moments before, now carrying the ball down the field. I had caused a fumble! Sprinting after the ball, I caught up with my brothers in the end zone and jubilantly joined them in

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celebration. As, we jogged off the field I could not help but look around at my teammates, my family—“the wrecking crew.”

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Essay # 11 (Amherst)

I have eaten
the plums
that were in
the icebox

and which
you were probably
saving
for breakfast

forgive me
they were delicious
so sweet
and so cold
- "This is Just to Say", William Carlos Williams.

You could call him a greedy wretch but presented with such fine plums, he never stood a chance. You could wonder how he could have shown such callousness, as he had only a shadow of an apology to offer in exchange for the plums so carefully preserved. But, after all, the plums were so delicious, so sweet, and so cold.

Greed - the ultimate survival instinct. Does a croc think about the lion cubs when it seizes the lioness's prey? Does a vine crawling upwards consider the tree beneath; does it consider the tree's need for light? The world is not run on theories of selfless service but rather on self-help taken to the extremes. From inside a single cell to the large, wide world, a battle perpetually rages on – a battle of greed for the survival of the fittest.

Greed - human nature at its finest. From feisty plum heists by a wayfarer to the gargantuan wars for "some more riches", the *raison d'être* is always greed. With so much longing filling their lives, it is quite a wonder that humans sometimes manage to think of something else.

How come such a lengthy dissertation on greed, you might wonder? Today, after days of procrastination, I finally managed to pick myself up to write something. I cast my mind around for topics and turned back the pages of my life to find some common denominator. Look what I found!

From birth onwards, greed has characterized my life. My bawling on birth – my demand for rehabilitation to the comfort and safety of my mother's womb – was probably my first display of the most primal of my instincts. My infancy was filled with many such displays, filled with my incessant demands for breast-feeding, my irrational longing for the shiny and the colorful, and a million other trivial desires.

Childhood too was filled with displays of self-interest and greed. I fought non-stop

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with my brother for the TV remote; I competed non-stop in the classroom for the teacher's attention; I vied for the best food, best clothes, the best seating, and the best available at everything I encountered.

With age came finesse – my acts for self-help became less and less obvious. However, my greed was evident in my search for perfection, my thirst for knowledge, and my desire to succeed.

Today, I still have the same desires. I still have the same longing for the delicious plums, and for a million other trivial and not-so-trivial things. I still commit the same acts of petty larceny in order to sate my momentary temptations. Today, however, I seek for perfection not only in what I do but also in what I see around me. Today, I act to bring about that perfection, both in myself and the world about me. Today, I know there is no easy path to success; I know the futility of a one-man-band. Today, I value hard work and teamwork – the only routes to success.

Yet, I am still greedy and forever shall be. After all, why shouldn't I be?

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Essay #12 (Boston College)

It was a toilet in Fiji that brought me to tears. I had seen hundreds in the past year, but this one affected me in a way I never expected. That morning, the pounds of emotion that I had forced away came crashing into my life, leaving me to reevaluate everything I had become.

The summer before my senior year, I sought comfort in simplicity, focusing on what was important in my life: my faith, my family, and my future. In my heart, serving others is a celebration of grace. I was alive; I was blessed; and despite my concerns, I was entirely thankful. Fittingly, I first heard about Fiji through my pastor. People of all ages from around the world were working together to improve the infrastructure of rural communities, and Reverend Clayton did not have to ask me twice. Four weeks later, I was on a plane with one large backpack, an address, and little other information concerning my stay. In the month to come, we worked wherever we were needed and slept wherever we could. I cannot think of a time when I was so dirty, yet so happy. I learned to love the plates of cassava, to embrace our communal river baths, and to thrive in uncomplicated village life. However, it truly was the work I valued most. We painted. We laid cement. We tiled. We put together fences. We built toilets. I never thought that sanitation would mean so much to me.

Fiji was a far cry from the world I left behind. Almost exactly four months earlier, I walked away from a physically abusive relationship. In its aftermath, I was left lost and confused. My pain brought me face to face with the one thing I despised – apathy. There was a part of me that gave up on idealism. Nevertheless, with time and pure determination, I began to heal. I refused to let the experience define me, but in my heart the pieces did not fit. I could march for peace in the streets of Los Angeles, but when the time came for me to speak on my behalf, fear left me without words.

My abuse made violence real. Images of hate and destruction were not just stories but my reality. I came to understand that heartbreak requires much more than an apology; it craves a response. Today, I am no longer angry but instead frustrated with inaction. There is a point where we must stand, scream if necessary, and if all else fails, jump onto the table and demand that something be done. I am passionate about non-violence, conflict resolution, gender equality, and tolerance. However, I was unsure about their future in a world seemingly filled with indifference. Never before had I identified so closely with the Jackson Pollock paintings in my father's art books. Complexity had taken on a new connotation.

Five thousand miles away in the small village of Nasivikoso, we were working on a new plumbing system. There I had been tribally adopted and lovingly embraced by one of the local families. Just a month before, they had lost their baby boy to an infection, possibly preventable with better hygiene. As we laid the piping, I began to cry for my Nene's (mother's) loss. Poverty was her abuse, and it simply was not fair. Sitting there, sobbing at the sight of the village's first flushing toilet, I

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realized how confused I had once been. Devastation had left me uncharacteristically skeptical, but here were Americans, Fijians, Australians, Brazilians and Israelis working together. Their sweat-drenched faces proved me wrong. Our reality may include injustice, but it will not go unanswered. What we did was neither televised nor broadcast, but it meant the world to a community that deserved every minute of our labor. I know now that progress will not be mandated nor photographed; instead, it will come as a result of simple acts, quietly done, cloaked in humility. Whether it is domestic violence or racism or poverty, it can be changed one toilet at a time. Covered in dirt in Fiji, I was reminded that I had the strength to love and to heal and to forgive and to change what was broken in my life and in the world. Losing myself in the service of others, I had found myself.

I understand the cliché of infinite possibility. I have also begun to learn the limitations of my heart and my reality, but in the same moment I have been refilled with hope. Something terrible happened, but I survived, driven by strength I had forgotten. Today is about reclaiming action. Somewhere there is someone without a voice. For that individual, we must jump onto our tables, scream as loud as we can, and remind the world that apathy is unacceptable.

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Bonus Essay (Brown)

Open essay: On doing something different: An essay in which clothes DO make the man (into a squid)

I AM A GIANT SQUID. The words stood out, a bold white on my black shirt, as I moved past hundreds of schoolmates in extravagant dresses and expensive suits, attracting a handful of giggles and a significantly larger handful of stares. At the entrance to the hall, the girl behind the counter tried unsuccessfully to hide her laughter as she tore my ticket and told me to enjoy the night. As I grinned and told her I already was, I was slightly surprised to find that I actually meant it.

This was a night I had been dreading for months. While my peers spent the days leading up to it excitedly discussing the fancy dresses, hairdos and makeup they planned to wear, I cringed inwardly, buried my face in yet another book about mollusks and tried very hard not to think about it. Dressing up in anything more than a T-shirt and jeans or pants has always been a chore to me, and though I had grudgingly accepted formal attire as a necessary evil in my life, it was just not a part of me. I could not imagine truly enjoying my Graduation Night clad in an uncomfortable dress and smelling of makeup and hairspray.

“There’s no official dress code, you can wear whatever you want,” pointed out my classmate as she noticed my misery. Still, I knew the reality as well as anyone else; everyone from the Class of 2007 would be dressed to the nines, donning tailor-made dresses and suits, some costing more than the school fees for my entire two years of junior college. The same was somehow expected of me, even by those familiar with my habit of bucking trends and doing slightly unconventional things. This time round, any failure to conform would make me an automatic target for stares and whispers – certainly not the best way of ending the school year.

As the dreaded night approached, I toyed with the idea of avoiding the event completely. It seemed the easiest, most obvious way out of the situation. But what a shame it would be to miss this last night together with my friends of two short years of junior college, simply for fear of deciding to be different!

While dressing up is not in my nature, I like to believe that cowardice is even less so. With that belief firmly in hand, I found my final decision straightforward, and any apprehension regarding it was gone by the time I pulled on my very typical attire of jeans and the shirt that very proudly advertised my affinity to a certain favourite cephalopod that December evening.

When I finally joined my classmates inside the hall, turning heads for all the wrong reasons, I was mildly surprised by their warm welcome and positive responses to me. To them, I was no different from what I had always been – the same short bookish squid-obsessed girl with no fashion sense and a slightly warped sense of humor. What everyone else was wearing or doing that night had not, could not and would not change that.

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“I think you’re really very brave,” said one classmate, after her initial amusement at my attire had passed. Another was far more enthusiastic. “Way to go! The best thing to do is to be yourself!” As the night went on, I noticed that the multitude of stares went beyond mere shock or amusement. In the eyes of both classmates and total strangers alike was a slow, perhaps grudging respect for me and for the crazy decision I had made. It was a strangely satisfying discovery to make.

I had more fun that night than I ever expected to have at a formal event. After all, what better way is there to spend Graduation Night than by being yourself (or a giant squid, for that matter)?

-- END --

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