Section 4: Essays That Worked

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College essays, both common app essays and supplement essays, can take a variety of forms. We've grouped them into four types of essays: experience, reflection, strict prompt, and short response. We recommend writing the first couple drafts of your essays first, and then using these examples as inspiration for how to structure and set the tone of your essays.

Chapter 18: Experience Essays

Common App Essay 1: Shifting Gears
I gestured to the sunglasses. "Nice pull," a Turkish rider exhaled while passing. I tucked in behind. Six Pentair and Target jerseys fluttered in my shadow. Their time to "pull," to face the faceless prairie winds, would come. Mine just passed. The switch-grass quilt rippled under the sky, and my thoughts soon spun faster under my helmet than my wheels.

And so, there I was again—looking down a gravel driveway, my cheering mom and dad holding Band-Aids and disassembled training-wheels. I remembered years later peering into a dusty garage and seeing a rusty, cobwebbed road bike in the corner. It was beautiful. I remembered repair manuals, greasy fingers, and my first sun-drenched ride. My hands clenched. I remembered counting Christmas money, studying the newly broken frame, and rolling my bike into a dark garage.

A Pentair rider swept by and relieved the Turkish rider who now drank from his water bottle. I checked my odometer and the riders behind yet to pull. With sweat cascading down my face and my legs feeling bitter, I cuddled back within my mind, going back five years to my doctor's office. I heard two knocks. Dr. Rogers few strands of hair waved hello as he bustled into the room. After my first physicals inevitable awkwardness, Dr. Rogers signed my sport forms, asked about school, and then mentioned he saw me biking. He smiled when my hands jumped to describe my self-repaired 1973 Schwinn Traveler but frowned as I revealed its current condition. Dr. Rogers nodded slowly, found his feet, and said, "It'll work out." Later that night, I got a call. My doctor disassembled his winter bike-trainer and now had a bike to spare—if, adding a clinical touch, I wore a helmet.

The next day, I walked into my doctor's white, organized garage and saw a crush-blue 1987 Cannondale. It was beautiful. After explaining clip-in pedals and giving me bike shorts and shoes, Dr. Rogers added, "While it's not the fastest bike, it'll get you out the door." I looked up, shook my head, and grinned. That night, the bike leaned against my bed.

My doctor gave me an opportunity. I seized it. My mornings filled with dusty sunglasses, hot pavement, and cool wind. I guzzled gallons of water, devoured books like Super Foods Rx and The Cycling Training Bible, and stationary-biked in the winter. Throughout it all, if I ever had a question or needed advice, my doctor was there—a hand on my shoulder. Four years later, I was here: cycling 150 miles across Minnesota with sponsors on my back and a bike under my feet. The line leader gestured. I looked over my shoulder. No one. Just a black ribbon of pavement and one man's trust. Had it really been that long? Grabbing a last swig of water, I tightened my helmet and paused. I touched it again. Changing gears, I surged to the front of the pace-line and faced the winds anew.

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Yale Supplement Essay 1: Of Jumpsuits and Hot Tubs

When I saw it, I knew. One April day I glimpsed the future—well, actually the past. There, folded upon a garage sale table, beckoned a fluorescent orange and pink nylon jumpsuit: size, women's medium. Although immobile, I heard its swishes. Two dollars later, I welcomed in my new track warm-ups. Yale, in this time together, I am loosening up the tie. I have a confession. If you invite me to your New Haven pagoda, you are inviting an all-around character. The stories are true. I like some peculiar things. I snowshoe at night, go to operas, build winter shelters, and pet stingrays before prom night. That said, however, I am dead serious about education. While hopefully conveyed through the rest of my application, I genuinely love learning. My favorite book at age five was a DK rocks and mineral identification guide; at age nine I planned on revolutionizing the world's energy market with hydrogen — I later conducted basement electrolysis much to the concern of my Hindenburg-leery mom; and in fifth grade, I pondered harnessing the power of black holes.

I love ideas and information, but I also relish having fun through them. In short, I like to laugh, especially at myself. This can be accomplished through taping "Krebs-" over the "Bi" in a "Bicycles only" sign or by wearing a sombrero, water-wings, and aviators while hot tubbing with Minnesota's brightest at State Knowledge Bowl. Regardless, I make sure to loosen up with some flair, a theme apparent in the now named "Gym-Class Experiment."

Raising hands and walking in line are second-nature to students. They conform. Frighteningly, many conform without thinking. Curious of how deep this acceptance went, one day I enacted a tongue-in-cheek inquiry. Excusing myself early to gym class, I greeted everyone entering the locker room with a whispered "Hey dude." The class slowly trickled in past my locker and greetings. Soon, a usually boisterous group of boys were not only speaking in whispers but also enforcing the quasi-rule upon each other. I was humored and amazed. Upon lacing up my shoes, I turned around and asked, "Why are you whispering?" I walked out, leaving my peers thinking and watching for lemming syndrome the rest of the day.

Something happened when I wore my 1980's-esque jumpsuit to track. At first, I received a smattering of odd looks, high-fives, and ogling—embarrassingly enough, I soon discovered they were partially see-through—but the next meet I attended, I started seeing similar jumpsuits. In fact, every consecutive meet after my suit's debut, more jumpsuits kept popping up. Eventually, even my entire cross-country team set aside a day to raid local Goodwills and Savers looking for duplicates. If you accept me to Yale, you are getting more than just a hard-working man who loves learning and life's humor. You are getting a true character, an individual, a man who starts Northern Minnesotan track-meet fads with a fluorescent orange and pink nylon jumpsuit: size, women's medium.

Brown Supplement

Essay 1

I clumsily stumble down the hill, trying to avoid the erratic potholes that litter my path. I inhale a combination of smoke from a cooking fire, goat dung and the indescribably fresh air of Botswana. Living with a host family for a month in the small southern town of Mogobane, I had learned how to pluck a chicken, make maguini, wash my clothes in a river, and speak basic Setswana. I was wise with this new knowledge, and proud. Next to me my host sister glides gracefully down the same hill I was having so much trouble with. It was a few nights before I was due to leave, and she was taking me to her favorite path in the surrounding mountains. She raises an arm to grab a tree branch, and I notice a small bracelet on her arm. It was the only thing close to jewelry she owned. It was a bright, vibrant yellow, and stood out against her dark skin. "Refilwe!" I exclaim, "Your bracelet is wonderful." She smiled bashfully. Shyly she looks in my tangled hair and says seriously, "And Keaton, your hair clip is montle." Beautiful. It had been a gift from my father back in England, and although cheap, was one of my most prized possessions. I thank her, touch the silver clasp in my hair and continue walking.

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In the flash of the next days, I am gathering my stuff from the cramped rooms I had shared with my family of eighteen people. With tears in our eyes, we give final hugs and bittersweet goodbyes. I leave the sparse room, my sleeping mat, the grubby door frame, and walk down the dirt road to the edge of the village, taking one last glance at the haphazard tin structure that had been my home. Boarding the bus, I open my bag and see a glimpse of something familiar: the bright yellow bracelet. I remembered when Refilwe had told me, "Never forget the sosologa we share." Sosologa in Setswana, according to her, meant bond. As I now look down at the vivid yellow blur, I knew I had learned something far more important than how to cook. I had learned how to love people who were strangers. I had learned that sometimes the smallest gifts are the ones that mean the most. I had learned that life is about the connections we make, and the impressions we leave. I know, indubitably, that I will live my life to the drum beat of this mantra. As humans, global awareness and the relationships it brings is the most important thing we have. As I put the bracelet over my wrist I smile, knowing that my silver hair clip was on my sister's bed, waiting for her to find it.

Chapter 19: Reflection Essays

Amherst Supplement Essay 1: Hands

Who are those scoundrels? It's a crisp autumn day, and you're in the woods. You're going for a walk, enjoying the smells, breeze, and rustling trees— the tapestry of fall. Maybe you're walking your dog, or who knows, maybe you're one of those iconoclastic cat-walkers. Regardless, you see it: the soda bottles, sandwich wrappers, and plastic bags. Besides the obvious question of who eats a Big Mac in the middle of the woods, who just drops their trash? This selfish act infuriates me.

JFK didn't give his Frost Library speech about littering, but we're describing the same ethos. Squandering your education is selfish. It means taking the convenient route and disregarding what you leave behind. If JFK and I were walking our dogs (or cats) together, I know we would take the time to bend over and clean up the trash we encounter. It concerns me that some people won't.

It's perplexing how "wood trash" is perpetually wet. When I emerge from the woods with milk jugs, candy wrappers, and the occasional T-shirt—all dripping water—people always ask, "Why did you pick that up?" My favorite response is, "I have hands." If you don't pick it up, who will? Amherst's education is top-notch, but if you attend and only use that knowledge to enrich yourself . . . now that's a waste. I want to attend Amherst not only for my B.A., but so I can clean up more than my neighborhood's messes. Someday, when I'm working around the clock on some far-out, low-success probability, but phenomenally important drug or product, and my colleague takes me aside and asks, "Luke, why are you doing this?" I'll smile to myself. This time, instead of saying "I have hands," I want to answer, "Because I went to Amherst."

Harvard Supplement

Essay 2

As I raised my flag and kept my face stern, fans gave disgruntled gestures and the attacking player burst out in protest. I stood firm. After all, I was the referee. The attacker was offsides and it was my job to make the call. Having once been in the cleats of those young soccer players, I understand how important a referee's call is to them. As a child, I chased the black and white object in a shapeless mass of Gatorade-drugged players. Now, I am a whistle-bearing symbol of authority, dedicated to make the right call. As a referee I experience the pressure that comes with power. I make game-altering calls and garner criticism from notorious soccer moms. But at the core, my only goal is to be fair.

My belief in fairness seems be infused in everything I do. Whether I ensure that tryouts for my varsity soccer team give all potential players a fair chance or vote for a "chick-flick" so that my two sisters achieve a majority on movie night, my moral compass is my guide.

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With great enthusiasm, I strive to serve those I represent. As class president, I embrace being the brunt of jokes when conducting random sample surveys of my classmates' preferences for activities. I eagerly have taken on leadership positions where I can act on my potential to positively affect others. But through my fervor to serve, my ideal view of power was corrupted.

Power can be flawed. In my school, in my community, and in the news, I see others in positions of authority, acting unjustly and impacting others. Small, exclusive oligarchies control large, motley factions of people. Why should I have the means to make decisions and be handed a shiny, silver whistle? I can make mistakes. I can make the wrong call. But I can matter. In retrospect, I understand the magnitude of mere moments wherein the course of my life and the lives of those around me was irrefutably, if infinitesimally, altered: a suggestion on a way to analyze The Wasteland in class, a musing over coffee with my friends to organize a charity run for a sports program in Dakar, a mother's judgment that I will finally have my own room, a decision to blow my whistle during a casual soccer game at my local youth center. These moments, similar in that each encompassed a seemingly arbitrary decision, but different in that each decision resulted in some force that sent the future onto a different trajectory, remind me that even the smallest exertions of power have consequences and rewards. And my moments define me.

I think back on the times when I wore an unflattering yellow shirt and ran up and down the same line but never actually got anywhere. As a soccer referee, I learned the importance of accountability and proper use of power. I now recognize that fairness can be achieved one blown whistle at a time, if only I stop and reflect.

Harvard Supplement Essay 3

Had I set up a bank account five years ago and charged twenty dollars every time someone asked me, "Why Chinese?", I probably could have covered all the airfare for my six trips to China. The $24,000 answer: it's a blend of reasons—the direction our world is heading, over 1.3 billion more people with whom I can communicate, a deeper understanding of a 5,000-year history and culture, and a love of the language itself. My studies convinced me that fluent Chinese and an understanding of the culture are imperative for future business success. I've experienced the immediate connection that speaking unaccented Mandarin builds with native speakers and studied the ways an American can unintentionally offend someone purely by her unfamiliarity with the Chinese culture. Living, breathing, thinking, studying, and speaking Chinese non-stop opened so many possibilities.

I never foresaw all the opportunities studying Chinese would provide. For four years, I've been the rare non-Asian employee at a Chinese restaurant. My love of music led me to participate in Chinese karaoke competitions, the finals of which had audiences of over 1,000 people. I also performed at numerous other events in Dallas, Boston, and multiple cities in China. In the summers of 2011 and 2012, I taught English in two Chinese lower schools and took many students on weeklong camps to other cities.

Managing to keep 100 children under control and safe in Beijing, one of the most populous cities in the world, is no small task. Five years ago, I had no clue that I would be "Googleable" (and "Baidu-able") under my legal name and my Chinese name by the time I finished my freshman year.

All of these experiences combined do not equal working as a special news correspondent for China Central Television (CCTV), China's only national TV station. I spent three days interviewing nearly 100 Olympic athletes prior to the London games during my sophomore year. Although I conducted the interviews in English, I introduced each athlete in Chinese and my questions were pertinent to Chinese spectators. Throughout my junior year, I continued to work for CCTV, traveling to Houston for the Rockets' (NBA) weekend home games and some weekday games. In addition to interviewing fans and filming short clips in Chinese about special circumstances surrounding the games, I joined other (mostly male) reporters and marched into the locker room after the games—cameraman in tow—to interview Jeremy Lin, James Harden, and other players.

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The toughest part always came at the end of the night: after the game, my manager would write a paragraph comprised almost entirely of new words and phonetically-translated names, give me about 15 minutes to memorize it, and then shoot a few takes in which I had to say the entire paragraph in Chinese from memory at media speed (which is faster than day-to-day language).

Over the course of these past five years, I have learned so much more than the Chinese language itself. I picked up the idiosyncrasies of Chinese mannerisms. When faced with eating lamb brain, I immersed myself in local cultures and traditions and tried it. I learned to bargain and haggle the price of an item well below the price shopkeepers typically offer Caucasians and discovered that sticking to values, morals, and goals transcends language barriers as readily as a smile. My love of, passion for, and—yes— obsession with China led me to spend 42 weeks in Chinese immersion. While I don't currently have the $24,000 in my pocket, I do have years of Chinese cultural and linguistic experience, and I'm proud that teachers and classmates regard me as a viable source of insight into China.

Pomona Supplement Essay 1

Waking up every morning, I slowly–arguably too slowly–turn off the Mishka Reggae song that is set as my alarm, drag my half asleep bundle of limbs to the kitchen to make a Cuban coffee (American just doesn't cut it anymore), and then get dressed for the day. Then, I have the freedom to choose which shoes I wear, and though this may seem like an inconsequential decision, it is actually instrumental in defining my day. My soccer cleats, muddy, with tape around the sole to counteract the effects of my abnormally wide feet, enable me to do what I love most in the world, besides eating my sister's chocolate chip cookies, and bragging to my brother about a victorious ping pong series. In these cleats, I can run forever (as long as I remain in the lines of a soccer field), and can challenge anyone (as long as they're wearing shinguards).

While wearing my soccer cleats, I sprint to the end line regardless of where the coach's eyes fall and I stay after practice to work on my goal shot, just because I know I can improve. The individual accomplishment that comes with setting personal goals is balanced with the support of teammates who inspire loyalty and are there to fall back on. Paradoxically, my most difficult challenges, playing tough in the summer heat, is rewarded with the camaraderie and friendships that come from sharing hardship.

Then, there are my athletic shoes. In these shoes I have had adventures. From biking through the everglades, to hiking up mountains, to paddle-boarding in the bay, the ripped, dirt-sodden, and hole-infested pair of kicks allows me to meet my natural inclination to explore the world. In these shoes I have learned that intellectual stimulation is not limited to the classroom. While one can learn the atomic makeup of leaves, and the process of photosynthesis, only through first hand experience can one feel the creases and the wrinkles of the plant, and see the leaves in their natural environment.

Sitting next to the athletic shoes, are a valuable, unparalleled, and custom-made pair of flip flops from Gap (bought during the 2 for $10 deal). I have learned that after soccer, chocolate chip cookies and victory in ping pong, the next best feeling in the world is having time. These flip flops remind me that life is not all about assignments and deadlines; it is also about reflection and friendships. When I slip off my flip flops to join a pick up beach volleyball game, the goal is not to win, but to laugh. In my flip flops, I stroll (I don't hike or run), to yoga where I listen to my heartbeat and feel myself breathe.

The good life is having the freedom to choose—to choose which shoes will define the day, knowing that all three have value and purpose. Whether I choose to spend the day feeding my body, my mind or my soul, my shoes will take me there.

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Common App Essay 2

"Order! Order!" the judge screamed, banging his gavel on the wooden panel. "The defendant is guilty! She will share!" It was all very professional...except for the fact that the judge was my little brother, the gavel was a ruler and the wooded panel was the floor of our living room. Regardless, the ruling hurt. After having my own room for a couple years, I was being ordered to share a room again, with my little sister. Living in a small house with four siblings, I knew this was inevitable, but it was still a shock when the news was handed down by the authorities. My siblings gleefully helped move my books, music and bed into my new abode. They painted over my old aquamarine walls, with a pleasant and decidedly masculine beige.

The first few weeks of room sharing didn't go well. My little sister and I argued over mess and floor space. Something had to be done. I bought four doors, and spent a rainy afternoon hinging them together. Their new folding pattern obscured their original purpose and what was left was our new room divider and purveyor of peace and sanity.

My doors have since become a veritable journal. A photo of my best friend and me camping is propped beside a schedule of next month's meteor showers. Schedules of music festivals I've been to are push-pinned next to flyers from protests I have attended and helped plan. A picture of my high school varsity soccer team is next to photo-booth pictures taken when I was one of four chosen to fly to Tallahassee with the Youth Advisory Committee to petition the governor about the importance of education. Notes to myself are written haphazardly across my whiteboard. Commands such as "See" are scribbled above film such as The Bicycle Thief and "Read" hovers over Pirsig's "Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance " and Hawking's "The Grand Design." A picture drawn for me by a disabled camper at Shake-A-Leg Miami where I volunteer, overlaps a picture drawn of me by my friend, an aspiring artist. She drew me bald, but with a big heart. A photo of my host family in Botswana is partially covered by a painting of the autumn leaves done by a young artist from the town where I grew up. A medal from the half marathon I ran last year with my two younger brothers and my scuba diving certification card are tucked beside index cards where I had written SAT words. Though I finished taking the standardized tests months ago, I still rotate the cards often imagining how I will speckle the "erudite" words into tomorrow's conversations. My record player, an old, beat up thing, rests against my doors with the aged vinyls leaning against its wooden cabinet. Amongst the records is my favorite Fleetwood Mac album, the one I listen to every time I need to study. Tucked under the cabinet are my black boots, never worn in public, mind you, but perfect for stomping to the beats of "Go Your Own Way."

As I lie in bed at night, looking at my colorful, life-affirming doors, my sister, lying in her bed just a few feet away, asks me in a voice out of the darkness, how was my day? Though the building of my doors was initially meant to be an act of self-preservation and protection of my privacy, I now understand they served their real purpose so much better than I could have ever hoped. My doors are in fact an opening–to my passions, my mistakes, my accomplishments and my wishes. They connect me to people a thousand miles distant, and to those sitting just a doors width away. "My day was great Syd. How was yours?"

Harvard Supplement Essay 4

In late summer before my Junior year, I nervously arrived with four of my soccer teammates for my debut at my first big high school party. Everyone knew us when we showed up en masse in our team jerseys. As people laughed and joked, the unfamiliar garage loft became friendlier. When beers were passed around, I swallowed hard but took one, hoping I didn't look as inexperienced as I felt. I tried to relax and join in the boisterous storytelling. The joy came to a screeching halt when we heard footsteps on the stairs. I had never really felt despair until hearing 15 half-empty beer bottles collectively hitting the floor. The party had been busted by the police.

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How could I have been so stupid? Poor judgment and curiosity cost me four games of my varsity soccer season, my captainship, the respect of my team, and, perhaps worst of all, the trust of my parents. Until this time, I had always seen myself as someone who tried to make good choices based on my personal values. When the seniors offered to cover up my drinking and take the hit for me, I thanked them but had to face the music myself. I needed to regain my reputation for integrity, and with it, my self-respect.

Despite my desire to hide in my bedroom, I dragged myself to the next practice to speak personally to my coach. I felt like a pariah. Segregated from the practice and alone, since the other suspended players decided not to show up, I faced my teammates' disdainful stares during water breaks, heard their whispers, and feared the difficult meeting with my mentor. Because I had a track record of avoiding drinking and partying, my teammates were disappointed that I had let my selfishness come before the interests of the team. The wrenching conversation with the coach and my apologies to each player as well as to my parents were the first steps towards healing. For two weeks I was demoted to practicing with the second squad, sitting on the bench during games, and wishing I could be of use as we lost four straight. Once I resumed playing, I worked diligently to redeem myself by being a positive voice in spite of a lackluster season, and I used the pain of humiliation as motivation to play harder.

Months later, my zany dentist offered to teach me to juggle following a routine cleaning. I did not expect an epiphany about the soccer incident to come from Dr. Marty's lesson. Yet every time the ball missed my hand, he repeated the same phrase, "Focus on the toss; don't worry about the catch." This metaphor crystallized what I learned about myself that fall: I'm human and that means I'll make mistakes. What counts most is my willingness to repair what I have broken. There is nothing like cleaning up a mess you have made to keep you from making similar ones in the future.

Common App Essay 3

Becoming certified as a youth referee at the age of twelve gave me many things: independence at a time when boundaries seemed tight, a position of authority where I could act justly, and a little bit of cash on the side. All of these newfound benefits enabled me to mature, grow as an individual, yada yada yada. . . Most importantly, though, becoming a certified referee gave me the ability to "card" my four siblings. For nearly three years after I earned my certification, I carried around my yellow card for "cautions" such as reckless behavior (spilling cheerios), dissent by word or action (disagreement about Sunday night television), and entering or reentering the field of play without the referee's permission (they learned to knock). The red card, although rare in my household of somewhat evenly tempered players, was necessary on a few occasions including violent conduct (wrestling matches over shower turns), and receiving a second caution in the same game/day ("I already told you once!"). While the cards were ditched by my fifteenth birthday, I realize that as the middle child in a family of five, those cards have metaphorically allowed me to see the world as a place to achieve balance.

Because I played soccer from an early age, I was able to recognize the weight of my decisions as a referee. Knowing the rules and recalling the power of having the whistle gave me insight. I learned when to bow to another's authority, when to respond with reason and when to react with passionate intensity because justice was not being done. These lessons have translated to my life off of the soccer field. As captain of the school volleyball team, I achieve the balance between team player and team leader. As President of Support our Sports club, I facilitate student involvement at the school's extracurricular events, but recognize the importance of my academic responsibilities. I lead chants and paint faces but spend half time under the bleachers reading Hosseini's The Kite Runner. At home, my family looks to me, the fulcrum between pairs of siblings to determine who rides shotgun, or who empties the dishwasher, while my mom is at work. I have learned the importance of taking turns, embracing various perspectives and bringing my own basketball to the court if I want to take a shot.

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Though there are distinct moments in my life when I feel empowered, I have also learned that blowing the metaphorical whistle too often diminishes authority. Sometimes, everyone just needs to "play on." It is during these moments of restraint that I learn the most. Whether learning from my political theory teacher that our governmental system has a unique way of rewarding those with skewed moral standpoints or from my vegan little sister that my consumer choices can impact the animal industry, I know that when I actively listen, I have the chance to grow. Even the man on the bus bench taught me that, "It always comes if you wait"—a lesson that has served its useful purpose many times. The trick is to know the difference. Mere active listening could not raise over $20,000 to build a fresh-water well in a small village in Senegal or start a school-wide polo shirt drive for students who can't afford school uniforms. It is the learning followed by the action that gets results.

So, I have become a man of balance. A student and an athlete, a curious intellectual and an active doer, one who strives for spiritual peace and one who hopes to make a change in this material world, and of course, a player and a referee. Seeing the world through filters of yellow and red has allowed me to identify need and then act justly. Thankfully, the physical infraction cards are no longer necessary, except of course for real soccer games, and tense games of monopoly.

Harvard Supplement Essay 5

I have known three fathers in my life, and, no, my mother has not been married multiple times. Each of my fathers has fostered my growth in different ways and helped me understand what being a man really means.

My father, Kenny, is a man of vast intelligence and genuine curiosity about the world. He has been my academic role model, encouraging me to set high standards for myself because I strive to emulate his achievements. Along with nurturing my intellectual pursuits, he is largely responsible for my international interests. In the 1980s, he founded an organization that sends high school and college students abroad for intensive community service work. I grew up hearing his tales of exotic countries from his extensive travels, visiting with him some of the villages where students lived, seeing the community centers and school classrooms they left as their legacies, and dreaming of exploring foreign countries on my own. Eventually, I became one of these students myself.

My second father (Papí) is Galo, an Ecuadorian orange-picker by trade, who is master of his own world. Within a ten-mile radius of his town, Rio Blanco, he knows everything. When we walked around, he would greet everyone by name, asking about the well-being of family members or the yield of a certain crop. Galo built his own house, doing the carpentry and construction himself. He could identify almost all the flora in the area, picking berries from bushes and popping them in his mouth or carefully avoiding contact with poisonous plants. Yet there was a vast gap in Galo's knowledge: the farther from his circle, the less he knew. On a map, for example, he could not identify the United States, nor his continent, or even his own country. Galo is a man whose knowledge is a mile wide but twenty miles deep. This type of wisdom contrasts greatly to that of my father, whose wisdom is twenty miles wide but only a few miles deep. Papí schooled me in the value of knowing a lot about a little and the usefulness of mastering specific disciplines.

My third father (Papá) is Carlos, a Peruvian farmer, who is a man of contagious joy. His face is worn from 62 years of strenuous work but wonderfully wrinkled with each kind smile. Basking in the loving comfort of his wise, soft smile for twenty straight days, I relished the moments that made him chuckle: a joke about our pig, Api Senca, or my great struggle to chop a single piece of wood. Instead of my habit of trying to think my way through problems or search for answers in the world around me, Carlos taught me to look within. His ease with his feelings encouraged me to rely more on my emotional signals and to be more conscious of the present. I affectionately recall walking with him early each morning into the cornfields in silence to gather stalks to feed the guinea pigs. Though the work on his farm may have been monotonous, he has a zest for being a part of the cycle of life. Each morning as he plopped the large pile of grass and cornstalks on the floor and the guinea pigs scrambled to eat, he would have a large grin. For as long as I can remember, my dad Kenny has sent me to sleep each night with a Jewish blessing about peace. Paradoxically, I felt the words of that prayer most deeply while strolling in the fields with Carlos. The dad who raised me has taught me about knowing the mind and the importance of broad intellectual pursuits. Galo taught me about being attuned with my environment and the value of swimming deeply in narrow channels. Carlos taught me about knowing the heart and the necessity for passion and compassion in order to be a whole person. One showed me how to go out into the real world, one to focus on the natural world, and one to be open to the inner world.

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Common App Essay 4: Bees, Banjos, and Bus Drivers

Allergic to bees but standing in an industrial bee yard, I reconsidered the wisdom of the deal I had struck. I hoped risking a case of hives to move a block of hives was worth the banjo lessons I had bartered for.

My adventure began on a wet April afternoon just before stepping off the school bus. I turned to the driver, a neighbor but a stranger, noticing for the first time that behind his beard he was missing a tooth. I sheepishly approached. “I heard that you play the banjo; would you be willing to teach me?”

“I’d love to. How do you feel about trading labor for lessons?” Now, I’m the sort of person who loves a deal, and I’ve never shied away from manual labor. Three days later I was sitting in his kitchen. Our conversation got to the reason he needed help: Andrew had Lyme disease. Due to the severity of his sickness, he could not lift heavy objects without his arms becoming numb. We agreed that in return for banjo lessons, I would, in essence, be his arms while working in the bee yards.

Days later, I found myself wading through flooded bee yards carrying fifty pound colonies and pounding T-posts deep into the rocky Vermont soil. Over the hours spent sweating and grunting, Andrew and I would chat. He spoke about his love for dairy farming and the tragedy that he experienced when the Lyme disease forced him to sell out. Along with teaching me about bee husbandry as we worked, he would report on his daughter’s progress as a Scottish dancer and his son’s latest song on the ukulele. All along, I helped the apiary grow by doing what Andrew had trouble with, and when time allowed, Andrew showed me how to pluck a few tunes.

As my summer of bees ended, I thanked myself for having had the courage to ask a complete stranger for lessons. I have gained many things from Andrew: I can jam with an old time band, I know that an Italian queen bee will produce more mild mannered offspring than her Australian counterparts, I know what it looks like when a skunk is eating bees from a hive at night. While valuable, these lessons are not what I cherish most from my experience with Andrew. By learning about Andrew’s struggles with Lyme disease and his passions for beekeeping, I learned that reaching out to a stranger can be unexpectedly rewarding. Recently, I delivered pie pumpkins to Andrew, just to have a conversation with a friend.

Common App Essay 5

Now here I am in the Marquesas, surrounded by droning flies and the scent of washed up sewage. Clumps of dirt inch deeper under my fingernails, while charcoal trickles down my perspiration-slick arms. On my first day, the walls of the pit seemed terrifyingly close to collapsing inward, but now, just a week later, they feel like a muddy embrace. Six weeks into my first-ever archaeological dig, this hole on Hanamiai Valley’s rocky beach in the most remote archipelago in French Polynesia, has become my home, and the cramp in my upper arm has come to feel like an old friend.

Perhaps even more exciting than unearthing archaic pearl-shell fish hooks and urchin spine abraders buried soundly in the earth was discovering the living, breathing history all around me. I was awed by the community and kindred spirit that permeated the village, the rigorous handshakes Marquesans never failed to give one another and the greetings each morning of “Kaoha! Hia Moe?” (“Hello! Still sleepy?”) as warm as the deep tan sand. Our neighbors let themselves freely into our home, exhorting us to do the same, and children chased each other through the back entry and out the front, revealing that doors have no true purpose in a Marquesan home. The barrier between exterior and interior, between personal and communal, between you and me, had none of the rigidity I felt back home. I fell in love with this blurred conception of identity and personal space.

When I was asked to curate our “Treasures of Hanamiai” exhibit at the Tahuata Museum, I wanted to capture that openness and dim the boundaries between spectator and spectacle. I had spent two years working at the Metropolitan Museum but did not want the stiff, Western formality of “Do Not Touch” to pervade this exhibit. I both literally and figuratively removed the glass encasement and replaced it with a “Touchez-moi!” sign. I filled the space with paepae rocks that could provide both tactile stimulation and cultural significance to curious visitors. I wanted the collective consciousness and shared experience that pervades Marquesan culture to seep into the often-constricted space of a museum.

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When I finally arrived home, I tried to bring the Marquesan spirit with me. I thought of how I, as Senior Class President, could instill a rapport among my peers and foster the same close-knit supportive community I saw in the Vaitahu valley. I wondered whether a friendly hello could have the same cathartic power in New York as it did in that tiny Marquesan hamlet of two hundred inhabitants, coincidentally around the size of my senior class. How could I provide an emphasis on the present when the natural tendency for seniors is to look towards the nebulous future?

Admittedly, my goal of bringing a wave of community through an ocean of self-absorption is a great challenge. Just as one illustration, at the start of the year, I attempted to establish a committee to create a "senior statement" to biweekly inform seniors of what their peers were up to. My idea was vetoed because other than me no student was willing to commit his or her time to this community project. Rather than allow myself to get flustered, a reaction that would have been natural only a year ago, I think of what I learned in the Marquesas.

"We on Marquesan time," the locals liked to say to remind us to appreciate the current moment as it was rather than be upset with what it was not. I want to carry that Marquesan attitude with me wherever I go, banish any "ne touchez pas" sign that negative energy can bring, and do whatever I can to build and keep connections with those around me despite time flowing as continuously as the Marquesan ocean.

Chapter 20: Strict Prompt Essays

University of Michigan Supplement Essay 1
Everyone belongs to many different communities and/or groups defined by (among other things) shared geography, religion, ethnicity, income, cuisine, interest, race, ideology, or intellectual heritage. Choose one of the communities to which you belong, and describe that community and your place within it.

"Vota Por Cole Scanlon Para Presidente" was stretched across the cafeteria wall. Campaigning for class president, I made sure to address a population that makes up over 80% of my urban school. I had to learn to assimilate.

I have not always been a part of the Latino culture. Living in England, I was subject to few Latino influences. In Miami, where Cinco de Mayo is more celebrated than the Fourth of July, I had to adapt. I was the English-"gringo" unfamiliar with my community's dominant culture. Whether requiring a translator for my Peruvian soccer coach's halftime speech or not understanding conversation in my school's hallways, I became eager to join the culture of my peers.

During my culture quest I was not graded on my ability to greet my friend's mother in Spanish or tested on my mastery of the "one cheek kiss." I would not pass the AP Spanish test, but does that really matter? I can skillfully order a "café con leche" from the local Cuban restaurant and can shout "¡Pasa la linea!" during my soccer game. Instead of a textbook, the people of "Little Havana" helped me learn. There is a lot of knowledge outside of the classroom, and one way to learn it is to experience it. Each time I become anxious about grades or test scores, I remind myself that some of the most profound lessons come without a sparkling sticker, a red pen, or a pat on the back.

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University of Chicago Supplement Essay 1: Where's Waldo?

These testimonies were acquired from a C.I.A. black base operating in the lower Polochic Valley, Guatemala. Translations provided by Luke Heine.

Jose Joquin (Gang Member, 1990-1998): He was terrible. His eyes were cold moons, hard, lacking soul. When I left, he knew; his eyes knew. They weren't eyes of man but of demon! I remember the things he did... he was a demon (sobbing). You must understand. I grew up in Bogota poor, real poor—ya' know. It was a way out. This day in January, I needed to do it. I knew he was in town. I saw the hats. The men always wear them. He says they offer safety, but they're really just maize sacks. I was young, a different man then. The fields burned in the South. I had to do it. There was no future! They were going to Mexico. Had I known what I do now, I would have never... but I didn't, O.K.! Look, I don't know what he's doing now. But—I'm not sure if you'd want to either.

Pueblo Muri (Street Vendor, 2001) Fools! The man you seek is invisible. He goes by many names, seeing much. His skin is pale and as long as his clothes are banded with the sap of the Bignonia Chica, you'll find rocks talking (local expression) before you find him. The bands protect him. You will never understand (spits).

Alex Quinn (Financier, 1989-1991): Excuse me, but I invest for numerous clients. I should not be punished for doing a successful job. Shorting stocks is not a felony, although, perhaps that escapes your reason. Not shorting Marubeni (a Korean company investing heavily in Columbian fields) would be financial folly. Plus, it was my client's request. Yes, I've heard the controversy, but I didn't know of his involvement with burning. Sir, I assure you, I had no personal connection with the man—trust me. I found him quite repulsive in reality. I invited him to a shareholder meeting—a gesture I do for all clients. Don't overthink that. Anyways, black-tie event mind you, the man showed up wearing jeans. A positive bore at dinner, he said nothing: quite flat, didn't even take off his hat. He simply wore this self-assured smile—like he knew something. He always had that look, like he knew something. . . Anyways, that's where I last saw him. The man even made me pick up the check—probably smiled about that as well.

Testimonies 33-35

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Pancho Walnado, [codename WALDO], is suspected of running Juarez's notorious narcotics gang "Chicos Rayas" or Striped Boys. His location is suspected to be within the city, although his exact location is unknown. WALDO suffers metabolic myopia, a genetic disease, which limits his homeostasis and muscle control. As a result, he has been seen using a cane to assist with walking and frequently wears a sweater and hat to maintain body heat. WALDO follows Mayan superstitions, including striping his upper-garments with Bignonia Chica dye obtained from trees native to the Yucatan. WALDO has been uncontained since the early 80's and is suspected of crop burning, stock fixing, and drug trafficking. He remains at large.

University of Chicago Supplement Essay 2

How does one compare apples and oranges?

"Wait...so we weren't meant to eat the fruit? Maybe next time you should give us objects that are not juicy, delicious and necessary for our survival!" To literally contrast oranges and apples, we must use our most primitive biological needs first. Before we quantify, qualify, and surgically dissect the spherical foods on the lab table, we must first ask an important question: "Is anyone hungry?"

Surely once the intermittent growling of stomachs has ceased, we may dive into realms of inquiry such as "What chemical interaction gives oranges their acidity?" and "Would Newton have also proposed the Laws of Gravity if it was an orange, rather than an apple, that had accelerated downward at 9.81m/s2 and struck him on the head?" I may spend hours wondering about such questions, only until, however, a lack of food overpowers such thoughts. After all, apples and oranges are food and could be initially compared based on their nutritional values. Vitamin C? Fiber? All important, of course. Whether scurvy-stricken sailors on a long ocean voyage or my three-year-old self pleading for a cookie instead of fruit for my afternoon snack, apples and oranges serve a purpose. The nutrients provided by each are literally the fuel for thought processes that allow intellectual inquiry. To better understand the essay question, I decided to philosophize. I took refuge from the tropical Florida sun under the shade of an orange tree and wondered what makes each unique.

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Holding an orange I had carefully plucked from the tree and a Granny Smith Apple I had bought at a local produce market, I realized a shallow contrast. They weigh about the same, but the apple is smooth and waxy while the orange is pimpled and coarse. What I was doing immediately felt unnatural. Food is not meant to be analyzed like colored shapes in kindergarten. The act of eating is so personal, cultural, and meaningful that treating food so objectively is scandalous.

So, I consumed, not one, but both fruits, and the satisfied bliss transcended into wondering: “Why does the apple get all the love?” Adam and Eve were sinfully fond of the fruit, and folklore speech claims that it keeps away those pesky doctors. Apples hoard the spotlight, and isn’t that all people care about nowadays? Maybe people obsess over apples rather than oranges because of their character profile. Apples are rigid, plain yet comfortable, stern, and conservative. The tropical, colorful, energetic, profile of the orange might be too “wild” for many. Or maybe the alphabet dictates people’s preference. We learn the word “apple” before “orange” so this hierarchy of fruit is implanted in our minds at an early age. On that topic, is the orange really so insignificant that it can’t have a more original name? I could even trace the mentioning of apples to Thomas Edison and Abraham Lincoln who both lived amongst apple trees during crisp winters rather than gulping hot, humid air in tropical regions. Was it the apple that provided the inspiration for innovation and courage? Was the absence of the orange somehow prescriptive?

I think it is less about their physical characteristics and cultural implications and more about their symbolic value. My musings had borne fruit. I realized, in fact, that the substance accompanied with the two fruits is evident in my own life. Oranges, with their tropical, bursting flavor, symbolize the fast-paced, vivid, energetic life that I have experienced in Miami since I moved here from England. It’s not better or worse than my prior home, just different. I embrace changes, though, and one must create a balance between apples and oranges, between continental and tropical climates, between needed seriousness and colorful fun. I lived “apple” in England and then “orange” in Miami. I’m ready for a return from the squishy orange to the crunchy apple. Illinois does harvest apples right?

Chapter 21: Short Responses

Harvard Short Response 1
Please briefly elaborate on one of your extracurricular activities or work experiences that was particularly meaningful to you. (About 150 words)

As a Miami Pro Soccer Camp counselor, I did many undesirable jobs such as carrying water coolers and washing neon pinnies. The most rewarding aspect of the camp, however, was coaching a small team of five-year-olds. Eduardo, my most easily distracted player, was enthusiastic about animals but not soccer. To get him interested, I adapted my coaching at the expense of a little self-humiliation. I created a drill in which the kids tried to hit me with a soccer ball. If they did, I would imitate an animal of their choice. That year, The Funny Monkeys, or the team whose coach agreed to wear a tutu if they won the championship, became the soccer camp champions. After the game, Eduardo gave me a dinosaur keychain, my trophy, which still swings from my backpack.

Yale Short Responses 1
What in particular about Yale has influenced your decision to apply? (Please answer in 100 words or less.)

I have always found selecting my curriculum stressful. I feel grief for the alluring classes I have to leave out. To make amends, I took summer courses and explored topics independently. At Yale, I can “shop” for my classes, unbounded by contrived commitment. There, I would also be sparked into intellectual thought in the Bass library and on the Yale soccer field. In each intellectually infused environment, I would be inspired by the Yalies who are fueled by inquiry, ignited by an intense desire to learn, and, like me, carefully choose what to immerse themselves in next.

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Please respond in 150 characters (roughly 25 words) or fewer to each of the questions below:

You have been granted a free weekend next month. How will you spend it?
I would drive to the Florida Keys to scuba dive in the limpid water and to provoke myself into thought reading an issue of The Economist on the beach.

What is something about which you have changed your mind in the last three years?
My SOS Club's Bodypaint Squad messily painted "C-A-V-A-L-I-E-R-S-!-!-!-!" on their stomachs. I now know that you can't have too many characters.

What is the best piece of advice you have received while in high school?
"Don't worry about the grades. Understand what you learn, pursue your passions with energy, and the grades will come."
-Mr. XX

What do you wish you were better at being or doing?
Ironically, I am the Sweethearts Dance Team Captain and a rather awkward dancer. I want to lead with groovy dance moves as well as with my demeanor.

What is a learning experience, in or out of the classroom, that has had a significant impact on you?
Since learning about National Public Radio's podcasts, I listen to Marketplace Money or All Things Considered while riding my bike to and from school.

Brown Short Response 1
It was my friend Arnold's birthday. I had picked him up, and we had spent the day at the mall, playing video games, drinking vanilla milkshakes and watching the latest Disney movie, "Brave." Arnold had just turned 23 years old. As a boy with autism,----- . As I pulled into the trailer that he called home – that he shared with his three brothers and parents, I stepped out of the car to say hello to his family. His mother gave me a hug and then turned. "Family day of birth photos!" she exclaimed, in a thick Spanish accent. I grinned and held out my hands for the camera, ready to take a picture of their entire family together on Arnold's birthday, but she waved my hand away. "You in photo." I bashfully stood next to Arnold and smiled for the picture. She ran inside to get her other sons and her husband, and soon we were taking posed shots on their front porch. She put the timer on self-snap and ran to join us in the picture. The huge lanky boy with autism put his hand on my shoulder as he grinned blissfully into the camera. It flashed once and I felt a wave of love for this family. I had barely known them a few months ago. The next weekend, as I knocked on the door to pick up Arnold for a day at the park, I noticed something new in their living room. A framed photo of the Lopez family, and in the middle was me, grinning widely.

Brown Short Response 2
Tell us where you have lived-and for how long-since you were born; whether you've always lived in the same place, or perhaps in a variety of places.
Born in the boiling humidity of Miami to two American parents, I spent the first three years of my life speaking Spanish before English, thanks to my Cuban nanny who would look after me while my parents were working. By the time I had turned three, I was on a plane to the English countryside. I grew up in the idyllic town of Dorking, Surrey, just 45 minutes outside of London. It was small town, and even though London was a short train ride away, everyone knew each other's name on the street. We were always the American family, the ones who made pancakes and lighted fireworks on the fourth of July. After living in England for 8 years, my mother, my siblings and I packed up and moved back to Miami. Living in America since aged 11, here we are the British ones. The ones who had the accents and said the strange words like "lorry" and "tube." I love being able to connect to two cultures and I know I have a home in both places.

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